

## A DESTINY FULFILLED

By J. C. Laird

Nisa's body molded against Malek's, her head resting on his shoulder, banishing the chill air of the early morning. He needed to wake his concubine soon. He availed himself of many prostitutes in the past, but Nisa was his favorite—now his only. She was young, beautiful, intelligent, and understood his life, its inherent dangers, and willingly accepted them and him. Although given a separate room in his tent, he preferred to be with her the night before he went into battle, and most other nights.

Malek of Gath, the greatest warrior in all Philistia, stared at the ceiling of the large goat-hair tent, the darkness ebbing as the sun threatened to rise in the east. He sighed in the early greyness of the day, brushing his lips against the dark hair of his woman, wishing things could be different. Malek preferred snuggling under the blankets for as long as they desired, loving the day away. But today, he would have to battle the enemy's mightiest warrior.

He drowsed, his mind wandering through childhood memories to his early days in Gath. Skilled with the sword and spear at an early age, Malek had drawn attention to himself. His mother died when he was seven, and he never knew his father—a nameless man who had abandoned them when he was a baby. But Malek survived. His destiny lay elsewhere than in Gath's city because a captain in Gath's militia, Baheen Abaza, adopted and raised him as part of his own family.

As he grew, Baheen trained him to use all the weapons of war: sword, dagger, spear, javelin, bow and arrow, slings, and ox goads, even teaching Malek how to drive a chariot. Malek smiled at the memories, especially those of the ox goads. The metal-tipped ten-foot poles were used to goad oxen but could be a formidable weapon in the hands of someone strong enough to

wield them. And Malek was more than strong enough. As the years passed, his hand-to-hand fighting skills became refined, honed, and ingrained. His strength and prowess on the battlefield became legendary, setting him apart from others. He became Gath's greatest warrior.

Nisa's arm was resting on his chest. He took her delicate hand and moved it to the blanketed swell of her breast and gently tried to extricate his shoulder and arm from beneath her head. He failed and, with a sleepy moan, she opened her dark eyes and slowly focused on his. Seconds passed as she became fully conscious. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"Did you forget today I have a duel—a fight to the death?"

As his comment and its import registered with her, she turned her head away, silent. Several more seconds passed. "No, I didn't forget," she replied, staring at the tent wall. "But I still don't know why someone else couldn't fight today. There are others..." She lapsed into silence as she dismissed the foolish thought.

Malek slipped out from under the blanket and rose from their sleeping mat, picking up and donning his loincloth from the floor where he had discarded it the night prior. Finished with covering his nakedness, he slipped a woolen tunic over his head and shoulders. Malek grimaced and stretched, loosening the aches and pains of a fitful night. But what he couldn't loosen was the burden of the accumulating years upon his body and the injuries inflicted on him by the battles with challengers.

Nisa gazed at him, her dark eyes still troubled. She was from the small village of Ekron by the Great Sea. She still couldn't believe Malek had chosen her to be one of his concubines and, even more unique, had kept her to the exclusion of all others. "Dear Malek, why do you hide your nakedness from me? I have been your woman for over a year now, and you are still as

modest as a young boy courting his first girl. Maybe we should marry and grow old together so that you might relax and wander through your old age with me,” she scolded.

Her master’s eyes flashed at her comments, and Nisa worried she had overstepped her bounds again as she was wont to do, but his flint-like expression, feared by his enemies, softened, as they always did in her presence.

“Too many scars inflicted by my enemies upon my body need not dismay your beautiful eyes, my sweet Nisa,” he replied with a sigh.

She sensed the pain behind his words. “But they are dead, and you are alive, shy Malek. Your scars are but reminders of the great victories over your enemies,” she said.

“Are my enemies any different from us?” he asked. “They must have wives, concubines, children, hopes and dreams, and fear death as much as me. When I was younger, I was proud of my battle scars, even this one.” His hand went to the side of his face, his fingers tracing the arcing scar, starting at his hairline and ending at his jawbone. “The fierce Moabite, Kadir, did this in our combat. He almost bested me. I am tired, and fear death more with every duel. I wonder what Dagan has written for my ultimate destiny. Is it merely to die in battle after a life of fighting, warring, killing, and maiming? Is that my only purpose? My only end? There must be a reason for my life.”

Nisa could sense Malek’s growing agitation, and she again tried to calm him. “You fight for the glory of our tribes, our country, to defend your people from its enemies. I shall pray to the great god Dagan to protect you and to shine the light of knowledge upon your destiny. You will be victorious, as always, my invincible Malek.”

Malek snorted and walked to the back of the tent and opened the window flap. He returned to the front and did the same to the entrance, pulling back and tying the heavy

sheepskin. “While you’re at it, you can also pray to Astarte, his mistress. I can always use the help, and with the aid of both a god and goddess, I should be back in your arms before the sun is down.” With hands-on his hips, he arched his back again, stretching his massive frame. “There, now we have a little breeze in here. I’ll go out front and start the cooking fire so you can prepare our morning meal.”

The sun was rising over the low mountains to the east, bathing their armed camp in the soft morning light. The tents of almost two-thousand soldiers covered the foothills gathered from the cities of Ashdod, Ekron, Gaza, and Ashkelon. Morning cooking fires already smoldered around the vast tent city, the smoke wafting upward in the early morning air. Across the broad valley to the east, the Semitic encampment also stirred. Malek’s duel would take place in the valley between the two when the sun shone at its zenith.

Malek’s spacious pavilion reflected his stature as the greatest warrior of the tribe and set apart from the others. And, as befitting their custom on the days of single combat, no one, other than his shield-bearer and armorer, would approach or engage Malek in conversation. They would leave him alone as he prepared for his coming battle to the death.

Malek fanned the banked fire and added wood until it burned freely. He filled the iron pot with water, hung it over the cooking spit’s fluttering fire, and returned to the tent. Nisa, standing nude in a corner, had filled a large clay pot with water from a goatskin and washed herself. She was unashamed of her nakedness in front of her master. Malek walked to a wooden bench nearby with silent footsteps, sat, and watched her, admiring her glistening young body.

When Nisa finished, she playfully flicked water out of the bowl at Malek, her face radiant. “Do you like what you see?” she chided.

Without a word, he stood, and with one long stride, was beside her. She squealed with delight as he scooped her up in his muscled arms. He swung her around, a feather in the wind, and held her close, burying his face in her damp hair. “Very much,” Malek answered, his voice muffled by her thick tresses. He pulled back and shook his head in wonder. “I only wish I could spend the rest of my days loving you instead of constantly warring, fighting, and killing.”

Arms around his neck, Nisa pulled herself farther up on his scarred torso and kissed him on the lips. “Do we have time for more loving before you have to go, my champion?”

“I fear not. My shield-bearer, Kabeer, will be here soon to help me with my armor and preparations, and I do not want to chance anyone seeing you like this, except me. Besides, I won’t have any strength left if I again succumb to your feminine treasures.” With a wistful look and thoughts of the coming day intruding into his reverie, he set his woman down on the soft, matted floor. “But now, you need to prepare my breakfast. I need my strength for my coming struggle. Tonight, after I slay my foe, we can be together again,” he added.

Nisa’s smile waned as the thoughts of the coming day overcame her. She feared as any woman would. She grabbed her clothing, and without a word, slipped on a short linen skirt and a sleeveless, knee-length woolen tunic, colorful in its dyed reds and yellows. Malek watched from his seat on the wooden bench. When she finished, she asked, “Am I presentable, my noble Malek of Gath?”

“As beautiful as the moon and the stars on a clear desert night, my beautiful Nisa of Ekron.”

When they finished eating their roasted lamb, boiled lentils, beans, and chickpeas, the sun was higher in the sky. Cushioned by a small mountain of pillows, they lay in the shade of the tent on soft mats, savoring fresh olives. All the door and window flaps were open, and they stared out

the entrance at the nearby bustling to and fro of the army camp, awaiting Kabeer's dreaded, inevitable coming.

Nisa's expression grew pensive. "I know that when Kabeer arrives, you will become a different man, presenting him and the world with the more acceptable demeanor of a great warrior: fierce, confident, boastful, scornful, and loud. An arrogant man, so unlike the gentle and thoughtful person you are when we are together. The one I have come to know and love. Until you finish your duel, I understand you cannot give me any time or attention. You will wear your mean scowls, and I will be alone."

Although she managed a smile when she spoke, Malek looked away, staring at the floor, knowing the truth of her words.

Nisa raced on, "I want to ask you another question before Kabeer arrives. I think I know the reason for the single, winner-take-all combat, and it is good. It makes sense, but I can't help but hate it because you are the one who must do it. But in the name of Dagan, who came up with this idea?"

Malek looked at her, bemused. "We have used it for over a generation, even before my birth. My adoptive father told me his father told him it came from Asia's distant lands, somewhere near our ancestral home. Legend has it that two armies of equal strength faced each other on the battlefield. Knowing there would be great bloodshed and many deaths, the wise generals decided two warriors, each representing their armies, would meet in single, to-the-death combat. When the battle concluded, the losing army would then retire from the scene and return home with no further bloodshed." His look became pensive. "We have just refined it by adding enslavement as a losing consequence."

Malek drew Nisa closer. "I have been in three wars and fought five one-on-one combats. We have won the wars, and I have slain all my opponents in the single duels. We have enslaved the losing armies. The generals and politicians do whatever they do, and I do my job of fighting and killing. But I am tired, my Nisa. I wonder at my sad, unknown destiny because there is no way out for me. I always win the duels, and I will continue to win until I lose. Then I will be dead. There will be no living, loving, and growing old with you."

Nisa's tears fell on Malek's shoulder, burning with regret and sorrow. Malek's thoughts became jumbled. His words whispered to a halt.

The quiet of late morning continued to blanket the tent until, all too soon, the snorting of horses and the clatter of an iron chariot intruded. Nisa jumped to her feet. "Your shield-bearer is here, Malek. I'll retire to the other room now."

Malek grabbed her arm to stop her and rose as well. "Wait." He kissed her hard before letting her go. "I'll be back as soon as I have finished my duty. And my destiny, whatever it may be, will continue. Pray to Dagan that it will be with you."

"I shall wait for you, my sweet Malek."

He watched as she disappeared without a sound, slipping behind the curtain dividing her room from his.

Seconds later, a booming voice came from the tent entrance. "Malek of Gath, it is I, Kabeer of Ashdon, your friend and shield-bearer."

Malek laughed with feigned mirth and raised his voice to match his visitor's. "You may enter my tent, Kabeer of Ashdon. I have been waiting for you!"

His shield-bearer strode in, tall and dark, his face creased by an uneven smile. “I have brought your iron chariot to deliver you to the battlefield. But first, I will aid you with your armor.”

“Thank you, my friend. I will make short work of my foe this day. Then we can make merry.”

“Yes, King Achish has declared a huge feast for tonight to celebrate your upcoming victory,” Kabeer confided.

“Achish was the Seranim of Gath. I do not follow the shifting winds of politics. How did he become a king?” Malek asked.

“Nor do I follow those winds or know the answer for sure,” answered Kabeer. “But I heard it was because he was the Seranim of Gath, our largest city, furnished the most soldiers and, of course, the world’s greatest warrior.” He grinned at Malek knowingly. “All the other city mayors conceded the title to him.”

“Well, I shall continue to make him a popular king by delivering a thousand or more new slaves, compliments of those Semitic dogs after I slay their fighter, boasted Malek. “Do we know who my opponent is, yet?”

Kabeer roared with laughter. “After the way you’ve delivered your loud, lengthy, and scornful challenges these past weeks, I’m surprised their whole army has not turned tail and run for the hills. I would dread having you angry with me. But no, I have no word of their champion. I would think it might be Captain Abner, the leader of the army. He seems a capable soldier. He was the one who finally acknowledged your challenge and agreed to deliver it, and the terms, to their king.”

“I remember him. He looked to be an experienced warrior.”

“It will make no difference; it will be his death. Now, let’s get your armor on,” Kabeer said. He glanced around the room, spied the pile of armor on a table in one corner of the tent, and retrieved it.

Several minutes passed in silence as Malek donned the thick leather and bronze armor: breast and back plates, shoulders, upper and lower arms, thighs and shins, until the leather and metal protected his entire body, the exceptions being his elbows and the backs of his knees. The final touch was the bronze helmet. Covering the sides and back, it also had a piece extending down over the bridge of his nose.

Kabeer stepped back and surveyed the dull gleam of the bronze figure before him. “I’m thinking that concubine of yours, Nisa, has spent time buffing your armor. It looks good.”

“It is true, my friend. The woman has spent hours rubbing it with a mixture of sand and oils. She said she wanted me to look good in victory,” Malek replied, trying to conceal the pride in his voice.

Kabeer laughed. “You always look good in victory, standing over your defeated foe. No matter who they send against you, they all end up dead.” He continued chuckling before adding, “I think your woman wanted to blind the enemy with reflected sunlight.” He looked around again. “What weapons are we taking today?” he asked.

“I should only need the shield, sword, and spear, but we’ll also take the bow, arrow, and javelin just in case. What weapons do these people have? They don’t know the art of metalworking, do they? Their armament cannot be as modern as ours, can it?” Malek asked.

“You need to pay more attention to the world around you, Malek, and—” Kabeer glanced at the curtained back room— “less to that woman of yours. You need to expand your knowledge, although it is hard to fault you; she is a delectable whore. I wouldn’t mind exploring under her

skirt myself.” He stared at the dividing curtain as if he could see through to the other room, licking his lower lip, his expression lecherous.

Malek managed to keep his smile from entirely dissolving, but it had turned cold. “There are plenty of women to go around, Kabeer; best to keep your eyes and thoughts elsewhere than in my tent.”

Kabeer’s head jerked back toward Malek as he realized he was dangerously close to somehow offending the greatest warrior in all the land, most certainly in all of their country’s history. “I am sorry mighty Malek. Forgive me, I forgot my place,” he said, looking at the floor. He swallowed convulsively. Fear clutched at his throat.

Kabeer continued to avoid Malek’s steely eyes and quickly backtracked, clearing his throat before continuing. “As I was saying, these Semitic dogs have been here for years, their villages all to the north of us. I believe they were originally nomads and came from the east somewhere, settling near our borders. They still do not know about metal making but have traded with some of our greedy tradesmen for a few swords, spears, and farming implements over the years. But nothing in quantity, and certainly no iron chariots. There is nothing to concern you.”

“So why did we go to war with them?” asked Malek, regaining his composure.

Kabeer shrugged. “These mangy dogs have been creeping south into our lands. Our spies have said they are aggressive people, believing that the country south to the Anakim’s ancient lands is theirs. We, of course, are in their way.” He laughed without humor. “King Achish is using this war as an excuse to eliminate the problems these people are causing while expanding our borders to the north and east.

Malek was staring at him, shaking his head in disbelief. “Are those people all suffering from a strange malady? Has the desert sun burned the sense from their minds? It is suicide for

them to stand against us. Let us go, Kabeer. I will seal their fate with this duel and deliver their people into slavery. Their destiny is to fade away with the sands of time.”

He strapped on his sword and dagger and scooped up the rest of his weapons. Kabeer hefted the large bronze shield with the iron edging, and they both strode out of the tent. Malek gave one final over-the-shoulder glance at Nisa’s curtained room.

The sun was high in the sky and their army began the march to the Valley of Elah to watch the great battle. The chariot horses, tethered nearby, pawed the ground in anticipation. Malek set his weapons inside the chariot while Kabeer struggled slightly in getting the heavy shield in the back. “This thing must weigh two-thousand shekels,” he grunted. “Why can’t you use the smaller shields like the rest of us?”

Malek gave him a sarcastic look. “Two thousand shekels? I think not, maybe a thousand, certainly no more than the iron anvils the metal workers use to make our weapons.”

His friend grumbled something unintelligible.

Malek laughed. “I wouldn’t want you to tire yourself. I’ll drive the chariot down to the valley. Besides, you’re as slow as water coming to a boil. You can relax and occupy yourself by double checking all of my weapons.”

With that, they were off, Malek guiding the iron chariot down to the valley below, clouds of dust veiling the path behind them. Kabeer held the sides in a white-knuckled grip as they bounced over the rough terrain. They passed many descending soldiers, the armored warriors raising their swords high in a silent salute to Malek and the speeding chariot. Their fate and the fate of their country rested in his capable and lethal hands.

The land soon leveled as they entered the broad valley. The opposing Semite army arrayed themselves along the edge of the valley to the east, but the center of the treeless plain

was still unoccupied. Malek had arrived before his opponent. He jumped to the ground and tethered the horses to one of the chariot wheels. “Kabeer, hand me my spear and shield. I will carry them myself to the field of battle.”

“But what of the javelin and the bow and arrows?” asked Kabeer.

“I think shield, spear, and sword shall be enough,” he sighed, his voice low, almost a whisper. Sadness had crept into his voice. “I’ll probably be fighting a farmer armed only with an ox goad or plowshare.” He adjusted his helmet, slipped his forearm through the leather straps on the back of the shield, and gripped the metal handhold. With his spear in the opposite hand, Malek began his walk towards the unofficial arena. He looked back once and yelled to Kabeer, “When I have slain our enemy, you may come and retrieve me. Then again, with this armor and the risen sun, my foe may delay this fight until I sweat into a faint from the heat.” They both laughed.

In the center of the valley, Malek stopped, standing like a rock in the noonday sun, awaiting another chapter in his life’s destiny to unfold. Minutes passed, and Malek was becoming impatient with the delay. It was hot inside the armor, and he was becoming angry. His metal shield was growing heavy, even for him. He wondered if a mighty heave of his bronze tipped spear might draw blood from the nearest ranks of the Semites. He was sure the arrows from his bow would make—

His reverie came to a halt as his attention latched onto a brown, tunic clad figure that detached himself from the distant group before him and approached. Malek watched with interest as the person neared and tensed with anticipation. He relaxed when he realized it was just a young Semite boy stopping thirty paces from him.

“Where is your people’s chosen champion?” Malek roared. “Abner agreed to my challenge on behalf of your King Saul. I have been awaiting your warrior’s arrival. Is your king bringing dishonor to your people, your army, and your gods by breaking our agreement? Or is your champion but a mangy cur slinking away in fear? By so doing, much blood will spill upon this valley, most of it belonging to your soldiers. The god Dagan will avenge this cowardice. He will—”

“I am your challenger, Goliath,” interrupted the youth facing him. “My name is David, son of Jesse. I am but a shepherd, but this day I will slay you with the help of God, and the Hebrew nation will rejoice.”

Malek gaped at the boy, stunned, not only by this utterance but by his use of the name Goliath. He had not heard it used since his mother had called him that when he was very young. She told him stories of his father, a giant of a man, from the lands of the Anakim, far to the south by the sea. He hated the name Goliath, for it represented the man who had abandoned him and his mother. The Hebrew Semite, Joshua, defeated and slew the Anakim. They were no more, except for a few scattered descendants such as Malek. She had always used the words Goliath and giant, as if they were the same.

The boy was still speaking. “Don’t be so surprised, Goliath, or should I say Malek of Gath. We are related, you know. Your mother, Orpah, was the sister-in-law of Ruth, my great grandmother. Today, I will slay you and deliver your lands into the hands of the Israelites.”

Malek continued to stare, wide-eyed. The boy’s age could not have spanned more than sixteen seasons. He wore a loose brown tunic, had no shield or spear, and the sword strapped to his waist was too big for him, the scabbard almost dragging the ground. In one hand, he carried a simple sling, in the other, what he assumed were pebbles. He looked to be a little over three

cubits tall, more than a full cubit less than Malek. His head was on a line somewhere between Malek's waist and his chest. "I will not fight a boy," Malek said. "Is there no other Semite, Hebrew or otherwise, who will face me?"

"Goliath, son of the prostitute Orpah," the boy said, "this day I will deliver your head to Jerusalem. The Philistine people will scatter like the leaves of autumn, their tribes disappearing from history, and all of Canaan as ordained by our covenant with God."

Malek swallowed his rising bile, unclenching his teeth enough to speak. "And who is this God who would allow the slaughter of a boy?" he growled. "Certainly not Dagan, he—"

Again, the boy interrupted him. "He is Yahweh, the God of Abraham, the one and only true God. You have blasphemed him for weeks with your challenges. I will be the deliverer of his punishments. It is my destiny to be the instrument causing the defeat of your people. Therefore, your destiny is to die today and open the door, the way, for the downfall of the Philistine tribes. Your people will be no more, vanishing as have your ancestors, the Anakim. And Israel will flourish as ordained by God."

Malek threw back his head and roared—a cry heard throughout the valley. The enormity and injustice of the boy's words almost choked him. He screamed again at the cloudless sky, his roars echoed by the rumblings of the armies to either side. He heard Kabeer, standing next to the chariot and nearer than the rest, yelling something at him—

Malek looked down in time to see the shepherd boy running at him, his long sling a whirling blur in the air over his head. He tried to raise the heavy shield, which had dipped low in his anguish, but was much too slow. The smooth pebble was launched, and on its way before he could bring the shield to bear.

Straight and true, the stone flew, striking him in the forehead, between the eyes. The only thing that saved Malek from the blow was his helmet and the brass piece extending down from his forehead, covering his nose. The pebble caromed off the bronze surface, but the force of the hit stunned him. He lost the grip on his spear, his hand coming to his head to ease the pain. He staggered back several steps, half turning away.

The second rock also struck his helmet, this time just above his left temple, again ricocheting off the metal. Malek's eyes blurred, and his knees almost buckled, but somehow he remained upright. Disorientated, he staggered several more steps, his back now to the young shepherd. The Philistine army blurred before his eyes in the distance. Malek shook his head, trying to refocus. He could make out Kabeer, slack-jawed, wide-eyed, his face etched with disbelief.

The third rock slammed into the back of Malek's right knee, covered by neither armor nor leather. The pain was immediate and excruciating, followed rapidly by numbness in his lower leg. He faltered another step before his leg gave way and he toppled over backward, his bruised head striking the ground with a thud. Instinct took over as, dazed, he fumbled with his scabbard in a feeble attempt to free his sword.

Malek's tearing eyes flicked up as a shadow cast over him, and he stopped groping for his sword. It was the young shepherd boy, with blade drawn. Malek stopped his fumbling. "Where did you get that sword, boy?" he asked, trying to steady his voice.

"It belongs to Saul, my King. He gave it to me to use when nobody else volunteered to fight you. And now, Goliath of Anakim, Malek of Gath, and son of the whore Orpah, I will use it to seal your fate and fulfill your destiny. Through you, Philistia will disappear, and Israel will flourish." David raised the gleaming sword high above his head.

As the blade cleaved the air and arced downward, Goliath finally understood his purpose.

