

The Giant Slayer

The Giant Slayer

First Kings / Book One

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For Will,

*I started writing this just for you, but I hope you don't
mind that I've shared it with the world.*

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I. Bethlehem. Late summer, 1028 bce

David carried himself as stiff and straight as a dried stalk of white squill—at least until he was out of Father’s sight, when he kicked first one stone, then another, and then ran all over the path like a crazed goat, attacking every pebble larger than his thumb pad. All his brothers had gotten to spend their twelfth year at Father’s side. This was supposed to be *his* year.

The trip to Uncle Jonathan’s took twice as long as usual.

Once there, he searched around and found his uncle on his haunches, repairing a section of wall.

His mother’s brother looked up and grinned. He pushed himself upright and David endured the usual kiss on each cheek. “I was glad to hear that Jesse is finally looking into expanding his flocks. This way we get to spend...”

David glanced up when his uncle paused.

“You’re not as pleased as I am, I take it?”

Uncle Jonathan’s kind smile wasn’t helping. David had to look away and grit his teeth.

“I see.” Uncle Jonathan crouched back down and pointed at a low section of the wall. “I’m filling in this hole where some creature managed to dig under the stones.”

David knelt beside him and peered at the hole, because that was clearly what his uncle expected.

“I like to mix thorns in with the mud. Make it less pleasant for whatever dug this in the first place.” Uncle Jonathan pointed at a pile of thornbush several paces away. “Your first job is to break off the thorns, and then gather them and put them in this slurry. Use the fat end of my staff and your feet.” He turned back to the wall.

Was that really necessary? Or was it just his uncle’s way of letting him work out his anger? That was David’s mother’s method, and with eight boys, someone was always losing his temper. He dragged the staff to the pile.

“Tamp it down a bit before you go at it,” Uncle Jonathan called.

David held the staff upright and used the knot end to compact the tangled branches. When that didn’t work, he stomped on the pile and a thorn got him in the ankle. He was twelve now, so he tried not to yell, but the thorn had gone in all the way. Blood ran down his foot.

“Looks ready,” Uncle Jonathan yelled.

David wiped his foot against the hem of his tunic, stepped back, swung the staff over his head, and brought the knot down, hard. Over and over and over. Each time he made contact with the ground, his arms shuddered. With every swing, something his father said to him rose up like bile.

“You’re the youngest of eight sons. Stop acting like you’ll ever have anything of your own.”

He’d only asked for two lambs so he could experiment with some methods he’d heard about from other shepherds. He hadn’t meant Father to think he was planning to go off with a herd of his own.

“Stop trying to prove that you’re better than your brothers. After I’m gone, you’ll be in one of their households.”

He wouldn’t join Eliab’s household. He wouldn’t!

“If you don’t stop showing off, I wouldn’t blame them for pulling a Joseph on you and selling you to slave traders.”

Sweat clouded his vision until he wasn’t sure he was hitting the thornbush anymore, but he kept bashing away.

“That’s enough.”

David whirled around and it all came billowing out: how he didn’t expect any kind of feast, but all his brothers got to start their training with their father on their twelfth birthday, and how nobody, not even his mother, had mentioned his birthday until the next new moon.

It was shameful to criticize his father like this, so he couldn’t look at his uncle, but he couldn’t stop his complaints, either. And then he felt worse because Jonathan was his favorite uncle, and here he was, resenting spending time with him. Tears and snot mixed with the grit on his skin every time he ran his forearm over his face. “The

twelfth year is supposed to be a blessing from father to son. And what did I get?"

"Hold on, there." Uncle Jonathan held his hands up, palms out, as if David were a wild-eyed donkey.

David stared at the ground. If he looked up, would his uncle be pitying or disapproving? He didn't want to risk seeing either one.

"I'm going to tell you this once." Uncle Jonathan's voice was just above a whisper, so David had to shuffle closer to hear. "If you speak one word of it to Jesse, I'll deny it. But he is wrong. You do not lord it over your brothers. You do not show off for the village."

Finally, someone saw David's situation like he did.

"The Lord has blessed you. Nobody should deny that."

David squeezed his eyes shut. He'd cried enough already.

"But Jesse is also right."

"What?" David's eyes flew open.

Uncle Jonathan shrugged. "You *are* an eighth son. When Jesse dies you will live in one of your brothers' households and all your work will be for someone else's glory. That is the way it has always been."

That his uncle was speaking the truth made it worse.

"Your father sending you to me is a sign that he notices and appreciates your value to the family." Uncle Jonathan took his staff and used the narrow end to hook the de-

thorned branches and toss them to the side. “Your brothers are such horrible shepherds.”

That was true. It was also true that David loved being in the hills where he was free to sing as loudly and as often as he wanted. He even liked the animals. So why did it still feel like an insult?

Uncle Jonathan scooped the thorns into a pile and they worked together to mix the mud plaster and fill the hole in the wall. His uncle explained each step in the process and demonstrated it before letting David try his hand at it, as patient as Jesse was critical.

“So.” Uncle Jonathan clapped his hands together and stood. “This year will be good, yes?”

David rose and nodded seriously, like a man would. Because that’s what this year was about: becoming a man. If his own father turned his back on him, he should thank the Lord that someone was willing to take him on.

He *should*, but he couldn’t quite do it.

Spring, 1027 BCE

The hills were the one place David was supposed to be free from his older brother. Eliab always said he’d go to Sheol before he’d set foot there again. But here he was, in the middle of the day, with the second youngest, Ozem, yelling, “Where are you, baby cheeks?”

David almost wished they were rustlers. At least then he could fight back without getting in trouble.

It was never smart to keep Eliab waiting, so he tore down the hill, leaping over rocks and skidding on loose sand and gravel, his tunic flapping between his legs.

“Don’t get your loincloth in a bunch,” Eliab said.

David gulped for air. “What is it?”

Eliab ignored him and shoved Ozem toward the animals. “You remember them, don’t you?”

Ozem jerked his shoulder away. “Don’t have to rub it in.” He snatched the thick, knotted end of David’s staff.

David tightened his grip. “What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is there’s a feast but Father stuck me with the flock.” Ozem yanked the staff away and stalked up the hill. “Did you fat tails miss me? I didn’t miss you!”

“Yelling makes them nervous,” David called up.

Ozem made a rude gesture.

“There are lions.”

“I know,” Ozem said. “I heard all about it yesterday.”

David scowled at his brother’s back, but since he had no say over anything, he turned to Eliab. “There’s a feast?”

Eliab nodded. “And for some reason, they want you.” His long arm shot forward and he twisted the top of David’s ear, pulling him along a few steps. “Come on.”

When Eliab finally let go, David clenched his fists at his sides to keep from giving his brother the satisfaction of watching him rub his aching ear.

“Move it, baby cheeks,” Eliab called over his shoulder. “I’m not missing anything because I had to play nursemaid to you.”

David scrambled to catch up. “This isn’t a designated day. What’s the feast for?”

“Samuel’s here.”

“The prophet?”

“That’s what I said.”

David whistled. No prophet had ever stopped in Bethlehem before.

“Came in this morning. Scared Father and the elders half to death.” Eliab snorted. “You should’ve seen them, wringing their hands, worrying like old women. My wife’s father piled dirt on his head.”

“Again?”

“You don’t get to talk about him like that.”

David flinched, but Eliab only used words this time. “Does he seem different from other men?” It took so long for Eliab to speak that David resigned himself to not getting an answer.

“Remember when Grandfather Obed would tell the old stories?”

Shivers ran across David’s skin.

“Imagine that tenfold and you have an idea of Samuel’s power.”

“Were you scared?” David wished he could take those words back the second they left his mouth. Father was

right; he needed to stop asking every question that came to his mind. Eliab's fist rose and David braced himself.

"I was proud." Eliab pounded his own chest twice. "Not every farmer's son in Judah gets the privilege of watching the voice of God slice into the neck of a heifer and drain the blood off. This is a great day for Bethlehem."

They walked on in silence. David had to run now and then to keep up. "I still don't get why I'm needed."

"I don't either."

"Gue—"

Eliab cut him off with a glare and walked past the well.

David stopped to wash himself, but Eliab grabbed him by the upper arm and hauled him away.

"But I need to—"

"I'll make sure you're purified, alright." Eliab's smile was mean. "Who knows what you've been touching out there by yourself all day. We need moving water. Burak Spring still has some runoff." He kept hold of David long enough that David knew he'd have a cuff of bruises around his arm. When they got there, Eliab tripped him, smushing his face into the wet grass. "Run the water over your hands three times and be quick about it. Samuel won't let anyone sit down and eat until you're there."

David hurried through the ritual and then scrubbed his wet hands over his face and arms. "What? Why?"

Eliab pulled David up by the neck of his tunic, which

tightened like a noose across his throat, making him cough.

“All I know is that Father called me in from the fields. Samuel took one look at me and asked about the rest of you. I had to stand there, in front of the elders and everyone else, while each stupid brother came and the prophet kept asking whether there were any more.” He pushed David along. “Father almost forgot about you. Don’t humiliate us more than we already are.”

“Did he do that for any other family?”

Eliab made a growling noise in his throat, and David heeded the warning: no more questions.

This definitely topped the excitement of driving off that mountain lion yesterday. David had been summoned by the prophet who’d brought Israel and Judah back to good standing with the Lord. Everyone was waiting for him. Him. A youngest son.

A snippet he’d been working on in the hills came to him and he could finish the third line:

We’re only a little lower than angels,
yet You crown us with glory and honor.

When they were within sight of the threshing floor at the edge of town, Eliab squared his shoulders and stuck out his chest. He dug his thumb between David’s shoulder blades. “Make an effort.”

But David barely heard him. The entire village was

there, sitting on the ground in small groups, staring at him as if he'd grown extra arms. Wisps of smoke still rose from the ashes on the altar and the scent of burned fat and boiling meat made him dizzy. His father stood and waved from under the big tamarisk tree. The stranger next to him must be the prophet.

It wasn't merely duty that drew David forward. From twenty paces away, he could sense the authority coming from Samuel, but it was more than that. The prophet didn't glance around to make sure people were watching him, or hold himself stiffly, or sneer to prove his superiority. He just...was.

David smiled.

Samuel smiled back. "Here you are."

Nobody had taught him how to address a prophet. A bow was always appropriate, but he bent all the way over, because a dip of the head didn't feel like enough. In the middle of David's bow, the prophet removed an ox horn from his belt. David straightened. "I've washed in the spring, my lord."

"Hush." Samuel raised the horn above David's head and tipped it.

It wasn't water; it was oil.

The oil was warm, and surprisingly heavy. It smelled like cinnamon and tree sap. David closed his eyes as something he couldn't explain seeped through him. It uncoiled from the top of his head, down through the cen-

ter of his body to every finger, every toe, through every hair. He flexed his hands.

Samuel put his hand on David's head and mumbled.

David exhaled and opened his eyes. He tipped his head up and met Samuel's solemn gaze.

The village was buzzing. David could hear everyone asking each other, "What?" "Why?"

The prophet had to hear it, too, but he merely blinked down at David before tucking the horn in his belt, walking to the middle of the threshing floor, raising his hands to the heavens and chanting a blessing, turning slowly. After the "amen and amen," he clapped his hands together and declared, "Let's eat!"

Oil dripped from David's hair into his eyes, making tracks down his cheeks and splotches on his tunic. What was he supposed to do now? When a prophet anointed you with oil, could you wipe it off? Or would that cancel the blessing or whatever it was? Drops of oil flew from the tips of his hair when he gave an experimental shake. Could his mother get angry that he got oil on his tunic when it was a prophet's fault?

His father rose to greet him with open arms. "That's my boy! I always knew he'd find favor."

David could hardly swallow past the lump in his throat.

Even more astonishing, Jesse made a big show of holding David's shoulders and kissing each cheek. David was almost relieved when his father returned to his usual

form, kicking Eliab and snapping at his sons. “Everyone’s watching.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Eliab muttered.

“Act pleased for your brother.”

His brothers lined up in age order and took turns making appropriate congratulatory gestures and saying expected words with their full voices, but they shied away from him as if the anointing oil were on fire.

Then the village elders crowded too close, clapping his shoulders and squeezing his arms as if the anointing would rub off on them.

“What an honor for our village.”

“A feast and an anointing. We are blessed.”

The fringe from Elder Maacah’s mantle tickled David’s cheek when the puffed-up man dipped his head to David’s father. “You are blessed today, Jesse.”

“Settle down, settle down,” Jesse said once the elders were gone. He pointed an accusing finger at David. “Let’s enjoy the feast without being pestered by questions.”

The back of David’s neck burned, and not from the mid-day sun.

“I can see them building up,” Jesse said. “And don’t get full of yourself, either. This doesn’t mean you’ve earned a choice cut.”

“Yes, Father.” Of all the questions swirling in David like a sand devil, whether he’d get a better piece of meat wasn’t one of them. His legs prickled. He couldn’t sit still.

Soon, he couldn't sit at all. He popped up before he'd gotten his portion.

Eliab hissed at him to sit down and stop showing off, but he dodged his brother's reach and kept moving.

Without planning on it, he found himself walking to Samuel. "Excuse me, my lord."

Samuel turned around and clucked at him. He took the cloth that covered the bread platter and sopped up the oil still pooled on David's hair. "Adonai himself will tell you when the time is right." He wiped David's face and neck more tenderly than his own mother ever had.

"Does this mean I'm a prophet? I mean, that I'll be a prophet when I'm grown?"

"No, son. Adonai will reveal all in His own timing." Samuel leaned close and spoke into David's ear. "Enjoy His spirit. Learn to recognize it." He tapped his fist on the center of David's chest. "Lodge it in your heart. You're going to need it." With that, he turned back to his plate.

Need it for what? To endure decades of tending the flocks? To survive Eliab? To go out and...

For once, his imagination failed him.

How long would it take? A few days? Until the new moon? Could Adonai keep him in suspense for a whole season?

2. Gibeah. One year later. Early summer 1026 bce

Saul slouched on what passed for his throne: a pile of skins draped over a barely glorified stone bench. He picked at the lone ruby in the crown that sat on his lap.

It wasn't much of a crown, but it was the only one he had, taken from the bounty of his first defeat of the Ammonites, back in the days when *He* was happy. If *He* had let Saul keep the bounty from King Agag, he wouldn't be stuck with Nahash's battle back-up; he'd have the most impressive solid gold, jewel-encrusted crown. Not thin gold hammered over copper and dotted with gems like this piece of second-rate metalwork.

He held it up and looked through the center. It wasn't even properly round. No wonder it dug into his right temple. Saul tossed it and watched it scuttle across the plastered center of the floor until it passed a group of people at the other end of the room.

Why were they in such a tight group with their heads all together? And so far away? And whispering?

He had chosen Saul. Out of all of Israel, *He* had made Saul their first king. When was that going to be enough?

People with honorable intentions did not huddle and

act furtive. How dare they come into his receiving room and plot against him? Where was the respect for their king? The reverence? The fear?

One of his armor bearers was in the group; he didn't even flinch when the crown clattered past him. What if someone had crept in and cut off Saul's head while they were gossiping? What if they were conspiring to make that happen?

"What are you doing?"

They broke apart and looked anywhere but at him.

Saul reached to his right and brought his spear closer to him. To make them sweat, he toyed with it.

"What are you doing?" He liked to talk in a too-quiet voice. It was more threatening than shouting.

They migrated as a group to his throne.

"Stop that or I'll give you something to cry about."

Abner stepped out and bowed. "Our apologies, my lord. We didn't mean any disrespect." He straightened and pushed forward a youth whose beard was yet very short. "Your servant, Ba—"

"I don't care what his name is," Saul said.

"He's been working as your—"

"Why are you bothering me with details?" Saul leapt to his feet with his spear still in hand and loomed over the young man. "State your business and be done." He plunked back down. "I don't have time for this."

The servant ducked his head and apologized.

“Now.”

The servant opened his mouth and no sound came out until Abner slugged his shoulder. “In Bethlehem, where I’m from, we have this boy. He doesn’t look like much next to his brothers, but—”

Abner nudged him again.

“My lord, I know who can soothe you.”

Saul lifted one eyebrow. “Who says I need soothing?”

“Forgive me, my lord, I didn’t mean to imply that you needed anything, it was, I mean, I was told—”

Abner shushed him and got down on one knee.

This must be serious.

“Permit me, your humble servant, to speak freely.”

Saul dug his thumbnail into the spear shaft. “You are not humble and you are not my servant, you’re my cousin. Get up.”

He didn’t.

“Now.” Saul banged the wooden end on the ground.

Abner looked pointedly at the spear, his face clearly communicating the thought, “Are you serious?”

It *was* pointless to try to intimidate the head of his army with a show of strength. Saul was taller, but Abner was wider and he trained more. Saul wasn’t about to kill his general, and everyone there knew it, so he handed the spear to his idiot armor bearer and waved his cousin close enough for a private conversation.

“You’re not yourself, lately,” Abner said.

Saul would describe his state more forcefully: he was tormented day and night.

“You don’t sleep. You kick over your food. Your women don’t please you. This servant is convinced he knows someone who can help.” Abner spread his arms in a wide shrug. “What does it hurt to hear him out?”

When Saul didn’t reply, Abner leaned closer. “They’re saying it’s an evil spirit.”

Saul clenched his fists until his knuckles were white. He’d been found out. He took a deep breath to give them the impression that he was calm and nodded at the servant to continue.

“In my village, there’s a young man—”

“How young?”

The servant squinted. “Thirteen or fourteen.”

“What position in the family?”

“Youngest of eight sons.”

Saul smirked. “So the father will be happy to palm him off on someone else.”

A few people in the room gave him a pity laugh, but the servant shook his head earnestly. “No. He cares for his father’s flock.”

His flock? “You think a shepherd is what I need?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“A shepherd.”

Abner hurried to whisper to the servant.

“Not, not his shepherding, my lord. He plays the lyre and sings.”

A musician. All this buildup for a lousy musician? Not a witch or a healer who knew of some rare herbs nobody had tried yet? “A singing shepherd?”

The servant’s face was transformed. “My lord, when he sings, you forget all your troubles. Every new moon feast, he sings songs of praise that get the old men leaping up and raising their hands. His songs of lament get everyone weeping.”

“How?” Saul leaned farther back on his throne and slit his eyes at the servant. “Beautiful voice?”

“Yes.” But he made it sound like that wasn’t quite it.

“Skillful playing?”

“Certainly.”

Saul was losing patience. He surged forward. “I have that already. By the dozens. Tell me you haven’t wasted my time. Tell me this Bethlehemite has something else.”

The servant bowed his head and whispered. “The Lord.”

Saul put his hand behind his ear.

Abner prodded the servant, who flushed deep red and spoke up. “The Lord is with him. I can’t explain how I know, but it’s so clear...”

The servant kept babbling, but Saul no longer heard him.

The Lord.

It was all His fault. *He* had deserted Saul. *His* absence

was causing all Saul's problems. If He was with this boy from Bethlehem, Saul might have a chance.

Saul made a show of seeming casual. "Fine. We'll see what he has."

"Thank you, my lord. Thank you." The servant bowed a half dozen times. "You won't regret it. He's brave and strong and will serve the king well."

"If the singing doesn't work out, we can always put him in the army." Saul smirked and anticipated the laughter he'd get, but everyone nodded. "That was a joke. Israel is not so desperate as to put boys on the battlefield."

The next day, long after the midday meal, Saul stood by a window in the receiving room watching an eagle ride the winds high in the sky, half-listening to his live-stock manager going on about the oxen, when he became aware that the receiving room was silent. There were dozens of people there, none of them making a sound. He narrowed his eyes and did a slow scan.

Everyone was watching Abner lead a boy through the room. His tunic was of the plainest brown wool, stained, rough, and threadbare in spots, as if it had been handed down through many sons. He did not act like a servant, and he definitely did not look like a tribal visitor, but Abner was leading him.

And then it dawned on him: the boy was the singing shepherd.

Saul's eyes narrowed further. That's why the room was crushed with advisers and hangers-on. The entire city must be talking about him, gossiping about the king's problems. After avoiding him for days, now they crowded near to see whether this scheme would work. Meddlesome fools.

When the shepherd was within several steps of Saul, he dropped to his knees and bowed so low that his forehead touched the floor. "It's an honor to be called by Adonai's Anointed."

At least the boy was raised well. He knew how to pay the proper respect. "Who is your father?"

The shepherd stayed on his knees, but he straightened his upper body. "Jesse." His head remained bowed. "Of Obed, of Boaz."

"You say that as if it meant something to me." Saul strolled closer and rapped him on the top of the head with his knuckle. He played to the crowd. "Sons of the tribe of Judah are always such show-offs." To the boy, he offered a terse, "Get up."

Saul strode over to his throne and lowered himself with a flourish of his cloak. His crown wasn't the best, but his clothes were the finest that could be woven in Israel. He splayed the tassels and smoothed the lapels down to show off the blue embroidery.

The boy seemed like an average young man. Saul twisted the ends of his beard around his fingers. What

had he been expecting? Beams of light shooting out of the boy's eyes? Wings like a heavenly being?

Sure, he was ruddy and handsome, and he had enough hair on his face to produce a shadow, which was good. Saul couldn't take a smooth-skinned child seriously.

The whispering in the room that had started up as soon as Saul returned to his throne swirled in his head like dry leaves. He itched to pull at his hair to get it to stop. But there was an easier solution. "It is time for you to leave the king alone."

The whispering stopped, but nobody left, so he repeated his words a little louder.

Still nobody moved.

"Out! Get out!" He lunged at a group of soldiers. "This is not a public entertainment. All of you, out. Now!"

They fled, even the singing shepherd. He had to send his oldest son, Jonathan, to run after the boy and bring him back.

The boy dropped to his knees and studied the floor as if he had never seen stones and plaster before.

"You're the reason they were all standing around in the middle of the day." Saul rubbed his fingertips against his royal mantle. "Did they tell you why you're here?"

"To sing for Adonai's Anointed."

Saul didn't hear any undercurrents of pity or mockery in the boy's answer. "Nothing else?"

"My lord?"

So he probably didn't know the whole story. His advisers felt free within Gibeah, but at least they were discreet enough not to blab about the king's spiritual condition to a nobody from nowhere. "Show me what you've got."

The boy took his lyre out of his bag and tested the strings—still on his knees.

"Your piety is noted, but you can get up now."

The shepherd blushed as he wobbled to his feet. "I'm not sure—" He looked from Saul to Jonathan, and back. "Where would Adonai's Anointed like me to play?"

Saul flicked his right hand. "Over here, over there, walk around, whatever you need. Start before I lose interest and," he muttered the end, "you lose your head."

The shepherd closed his eyes. His fingers hovered above the strings.

Saul gripped Jonathan's forearm. If this didn't work, his only alternative was to hope someone attacked them soon. On the battlefield, there was no time to be tormented by spirits.

But then the first notes hummed, soft and sweet. Saul leaned his head back against the wall, closed his eyes and breathed evenly for the first time in days.

"Father," Jonathan whispered.

Saul let go of Jonathan's arm and waved away whatever else his son was going to say. Whether *He* was with the boy, Saul had no idea, but this shepherd was no average musician.

“The earth is Adonai’s and everything in it,” the shepherd sang. “The world and all its people belong to Him.”

The boy sang about *Him*, but it didn’t bother Saul like it usually did. First, his jaw unclenched, then his shoulders.

We praise You, Lord, for all Your glorious power.
With singing we salute Your mighty acts.
Some nations boast of armies and weapons.
We boast in Adonai our God.
Yes, we boast in Adonai our God.

Yes, mighty acts. There were mighty acts. Those were good times.

Saul angled his head nearer to Jonathan. “Remember what the Lord did to the Philistines at Micmash?”

“Made them panic until they were swinging their swords like blind men trying to kill bees.” Jonathan laughed quietly. “How could I forget?”

Saul settled back and let the music wash over him.

Honor Adonai for His glory and strength.
Worship Adonai in the splendor of His holiness.

Saul motioned for the shepherd to come closer. The playing got louder as the boy approached.

“You will stay here and sing for me when I request it, except when I go to war.” Saul opened his eyes. The boy was so young. “You don’t belong on the front lines.” And he didn’t need soothing there. He closed his eyes again.

“Your father can take you back then. But for now, play. Play.”

Saul hadn't felt this at peace since right after the first time Samuel anointed him, in the hills of Zuph, before anyone else knew, when it was just him and Adonai. This was the first time in moons he'd even been able to think, “Adonai,” instead of “*Him*.”

It wouldn't last. It never did.

So he enjoyed it while he could.