

Sherilyn Connelly

Philistine

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*Remember, Goli, the river will always be more powerful than you.*

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I was a giant from the day I was born, just like all of my father's sons. I was the fourth, the last of his progeny. His line of strength and malice ended with me, sooner than he wanted.

My mother was the first person I killed. She was not the last.

She'd already given birth to three giants before me, but I was larger than the rest of them combined. I'm told my brothers were born nearly the size of the large black and white cats which used to flock in the Valley of Elah. The midwife said that it was like my mother was giving birth to a sheep. (A small sheep, perhaps, but a sheep all the same.) She was ripped apart as I clawed my way out.

My father was always proud of my mother's ability to withstand the pain of childbirth, especially the agony of birthing giants. When she died, it was a like a personal affront, and attack on *him*.

Her death hung heavy on his soul. Every time he looked at me, his rage was rekindled. Rekindled, then rerouted through me. I was both the source of his anger and the agent of his vengeance. Especially against King Saul.

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My father took another woman. And another, and another. None produced for him children the stature he demanded, like my brothers and I. They all died shortly thereafter, ill-fated mothers and children both, their necks snapped and their bodies thrown down into the valley. I never knew them.

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My uncle, my mother's brother, was fixated on the river. He was always down by it, fishing, watching it flow. My father warned us to stay away from him. My brothers obliged. I did not.

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Somehow, Saul was responsible for everything that was wrong in my father's life. Saul was even more responsible for my mother's death than I was. My father could never quite explain that one, but he didn't feel he had to, either.

Every day, every night, Saul occupies my father's thoughts. He would slam his fist down on the table, rattling our plates and our bones, and pungent streams of bile and vitriol would shoot from his mouth. We would sit and take it all in.

*That Saul, he would say. He was laughing. He was laughing as your mother died horribly. Saul is laughing at me right now.*

My brothers would agree heartily, discussing in vivid detail what they'd like to do Saul, graphic descriptions of ripping him and his armies apart, limb from limb. My father seemed to especially like fantasies of disembowelment, of tearing into stomachs and pulling out insides, splattering them on the ground. Nothing was too much.

During all this, without fail, my father would be looking in my eyes.

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*Let me show you something*, my uncle would say, beckoning me to the water's edge. I approach, showing no fear. We don't show fear. We never show fear. Fear is not allowed.

I am standing in front of the river. It rushes by, cold and harsh, the beginning and the end of so many things. A scuffle of gravel, and the world turns upside down.

I'm in the water. Why am I in the water? My lungs are screaming, limbs flailing, panic like I've never known coursing through my body as the current sucks out the heat and life out of me. I'm rushing towards a fallen tree—

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For many nights now, through a new moon and back, I've gone to the precipice. My father demands it. *Saul and his armies, they're on the other side of the Valley*, he says. *The Israelites mock us. They hate us. We'll teach them. You will teach them, and Saul will learn.*

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I'm gasping on the shore of the river. If not for the tree, I surely would have been swept away and drowned. My uncle is there. He pokes me with the long gnarled stick he uses as a cane. *I hope you understand now, Goli.* Only my uncle ever calls me that. He says it's what his sister would have called me, had she lived. His voice is as calm as collected as ever, as though the fact that I almost just drowned means nothing to him.

And why should it? My death would mean nothing to anyone else, either. My purpose in this life is not avoid my own death. It is to bring death to others. This is what my father has always told me. I was a born warrior. I exist to fight, to wreak. He tells me I am the strongest, most fearsome man in the world. I am power. I am *his* power.

*Understand what?* I ask, barely able to breathe.

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So I shout out across the Valley to the Israelites, challenging them, taunting them. I'm not even suggesting they fight all of us. Just me. Nobody dares.

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I lose track over the years of how many men I kill. It just comes so naturally, part of doing what I'm told, who and what I'm supposed to be.

Once, I ask my father *why*. He makes sure I never ask again.

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After forty nights, I say something new. *If your champion can kill me, we will become your servants. If I kill him, we will enslave you.* This was not something my father asked me to say. But he's not here to stop me. And it wouldn't matter if he was.

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*That you can die*, my uncle says, sitting on the ground next to me. *In spite of what you've been told, what you've been brought up to believe you are, you are not invincible. Your father needs you to believe you are. He wants you to avenge him in his grudge against the world.*

He stands. *But, remember this moment. Remember how you're feeling right now. Just because you've escaped death right now doesn't mean it can never find you.* My uncle pokes me again with his walking stick. Normally, I would find it insulting. *There's nothing wrong with not being the most powerful. There's nothing wrong with dying. Remember, Goli, the river will always be more powerful than you.*

He turns and walks away.

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As I'd suspected might happen, someone rose to this new challenge. A young boy, with slings and rocks and a head filled with his God. Perfect.

All he needs is one good shot. I'll take care of the rest.



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