

MIGHTY!

RYAN
GRAY



VOL. I
MOUTHS
OF BABES

By Ryan Gray
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Cover art by Origami Fox

PROLOGUE

976 B.C. The late bronze Age.

Civil War rages in the heart of the country once ruled by a warrior king. Enemies from every side seize the opportunity to pillage and claim borderlands as their own. Trapped between family, traitors, and foreign invaders from both sides of the border, the only thing between the king and his enemies is an elite group of soldiers known only as:

The Mighty!

Left without family or means of support, hunger lures 16-year-old Obed down a dark path of thievery. However, his intended victim falls prey to an even more insidious crime during his debut robbery. Forced into the role of a reluctant hero, Obed must face the consequences of both his heroism and criminal behavior at the highest level.

VOLUME ONE - MOUTHS OF BABES

The underbrush scratched the inside of my knees as I crawled across the warm earth. Only 50 cubits away lay my quarry. Cooling on the wide, red mud window sill were three rye loaves. Fresh aromas filled my nostrils. I licked my lips; my stomach growled hard, begging for nourishment. I inched closer. Only 40 cubits lay between me and my first meal in five days. I froze as a woman's head appeared, wrapped in a shawl. She laid out two more loaves on the window sill and disappeared back into the house. I slithered closer, now only 30 cubits away.

A scratching noise on the far side of the house gave me pause. Someone was raking leaves. I moved closer. The proximity to the home meant that I lost most of my ground cover. I was within 20 cubits, and soon I would need to make a run for the bread. The gnawing in my stomach urged me on. I swallowed hard, readying myself for the mad dash. Breathing deeply, I gripped the ground beneath my chest, reading myself to push up, step and move. At the moment I had finally worked up the courage to sprint, a voice called out, stunning me. I could hardly breathe, not knowing if I had been seen.

“Hello to the house, shalom.”

A lone man walked into the clearing in front of the tiny straw covered brick home, waving his hand. I instantly recognized his attire and the round shape slung across his back. It was a soldier! *Oh, dung! Was I trying to steal from a soldier's home?* My mind raced with speculation.

“Shalom.” The woman of the house answered, stepping forward from the mud-brick home. Each step took her farther from my vantage point. She stepped forward to meet the soldier. A little boy, probably her young son, was

in tow.

As the two parties stepped forward, their voices went down in volume. I was too far away to hear what was being said, and I dare not move. At this point, some might break for the treeline 20 cubits to my rear. Since I had not been discovered, I knew no eyes were scouring the woods, looking for a bread thief. And since movement and sound attracted attention, silence and patience were my best options. Although my face was pasted to the ground, I could see through the weeds of grass just enough to make out the trio drifting back towards the house. I still could not tell whether the woman and child knew the soldier.

For several moments nothing happened, so I slunk back towards the woods. This slow process took me many moments, nearly 1/4 portion of an hour. But just as I re-entered the woods that I had crept from, everything changed. Crashing noises, a breaking pot, then a sickening thud made me hold my breath in fright. It was the sound of a struggle, and the sounds pulsed from the house. After another moment of waiting, a lone thud caught my attention.

“Don’t touch him.” A woman’s voice shouted a defiant command.

I crept back closer to the house and listened as a blood-curdling scream exploded from the home. Adrenaline shot hot blood through my veins, compelling me to the front of the hovel where I located the front entrance. As I stepped in, my eyes slowly adjusted to the darkened interior. A dazed young boy slumped awkwardly on the floor against the wall to my right. Blood trickled from his nose. A lump of armor-clad flesh wrestled on top of flailing arms and kicking legs directly in front of me. The soldier’s shield and armor were within arm’s reach.

“Jehovah-Nissi, Jehovah-Nissi!” The woman begged for God’s salvation.

Starving, covered in twigs and dirt, I reacted out of instinct and adrenaline. “Get off the woman!” I demanded.

The attacker stopped and peered back at me. He looked me up and down, then hissed, “Out of here, runt, or I’ll break you after I’m done with her!”

The woman managed to make eye contact and mouthed the words, “Help.” I balked at her age. She was younger than I, and I was only three

years a man. I growled back at the attacker, "I said get your dung heap off the woman, you Philistine coward." I had yet to meet an Israelite who would let that insult pass.

As he stood, I swallowed hard, regretting being correct. The soldier was almost seven cubits in height! More than a head taller than myself. Arms bigger than my legs dangled from giant shoulders. His head pressed against the ceiling. I gulped again as he lifted his sword and pointed the iron tip at me. "I suppose I can break you first, runt, then I'll finish with her," he took a moment to sneer back at his prey.

I did my best to hide my fear, "Come and get it, fat boy." I backed out of the mud-brick house, coaxing the invader back into the sunlight. He followed. I half-closed my eyes, hoping that I would quickly adjust to the outside sunlight, giving me a slight advantage. When the giant coward ducked through the doorway, I dropped to the ground to pick up a weapon. As he looked up, his eyes were slightly shocked by the sunlight. I knew I had only moments to attack. The soldier was nearly twice my size and age. He was a professional soldier, and I was an underfed kid with dirt and sticks on my tunic and hair. I appeared to be no threat, as he had left his shield and helmet inside.

I stood as the attacker stepped into the sunlight. His hand instantly went to shield his eyes. I slid forward to within six cubits. Just as his hand came down from his face, I slung my weapon at his eyes: A handful of dirt.

"Aye." He moaned aloud, struggling and screaming, swinging his sword wildly.

I was ready for this; I let him swing wide right, then back left. As his blade passed by me, I took two big steps to my left side so I was next to his right leg. I lifted my foot and stomped my heel through the side of his knee as hard as I could. I was rewarded with a small but definite crack. However, my attack also gave away my location. The soldier chopped his sword at me. I dodged back, rolling to the ground on the right, coming up to a defensive crouch. He came straight at me: he could see again.

"I was gonna just spank you, brat, but now I'll gut you - slow!" Drool slobbered from the soldier's mouth, dripping down a graying unkempt beard. He swung hard, then stabbed; I dodged, took a chance, and side-stepped left.

It paid off; his stab was angry and unhinged, his blade stuck in the ground. I kicked the blade with all my weight. The alloy bowed, making it almost useless. The big man swung a backhand at me; I ducked and attacked the same leg again. Again I was rewarded with a crack. But, this time, the coward dropped to a knee in pain. I seized the opportunity to encircle my enemy and attack from the rear. I wrapped an arm around the soldier's throat and leaned back with all my might, my forearm crushing at his windpipe.

However, I had become overly confident and forgot this old soldier had survived much worse attacks than a desperate, starving sixteen-year-old. He snapped his giant head back, catching me in the cheek. It did minor damage but stunned me, so my grip loosened. That was all the attacker needed to grab a hand full of my hair and take me for a ride. He threw me to the ground in front of him. Massive hands clamped around my neck, squeezing the life out of me. Beet red eyes glared into mine as he screamed. "Now you die, son of a donkey!"

"What's going on here?" A man's voice shouted. A neighing horse chased the question.

The attacker continued to squeeze; darkness enveloped my eyesight.

I made out a figure atop a large horse barking an order, "Get off of him, Sergeant!"

Still, the hands squeezed, and I blacked out.

"Wow, that's a compelling folk-tale coming from a thief!" The massive graying warrior paced back and forth in the large command tent, glaring at a small youngster whose hands were tied behind his back. The pacing warrior then glared back at the officer who had come across the chaotic scene: a lean, wiry soldier, not much taller than the teenager.

The bigger graying warrior continued, "I find it convenient, Captain, that when you are making a play for command of the lead element of the king's forces, one of MY sergeants is conveniently accused of a capital crime."

"General, sir. With *all due respect*, come off it, would you? I made one suggestion to help you and serve the king as I always do. Right now, we only

need to figure out your sergeant's punishment. Lashings for failure to follow an order or death for attempted rape of a young woman!"

"Or don't you mean the death of one of my family members?" The general hissed.

"What?" The smaller soldier waved a dismissive hand in the general's direction and rolled his eyes.

The big general flipped a thumb in the boy's direction, just as a leaf dislodged from the youngster's hair and drifted down to the floor. "You are just trying to disgrace me by backing this transient's claims against my own blood."

"What are you on about Joab? The sergeant's your third cousin, not even in the same clan. You don't like him and barely know him!"

"Yes, but we share the same great uncle and...."

"Enough!" A quiet but strong voice silenced both men. They turned to look at a figure resting in the shadows of the big tent. "Call in Nathan, now!"

The teen gulped hard. With his hands still bound, the prisoner dropped to his knees, repenting of every sin he could remember, begging for Jehovah's forgiveness.

The wiry captain grinned down at the boy, eyeing him up and down with quick eyes that didn't miss much. "So, I see the lad has heard of Nathan."

The man in the shadows snapped. "Enough, Jash; if you don't still get a little nervous when Nathan prays, then you're a fool."

The grin melted from Jash's face as bowed slightly. "Yes, sire."

Before anyone actually called for the prophet, a robed figure slipped through tent flaps, letting momentary sunlight into the room. Nathan did not wait to be informed of what was happening. "Where is the accused?" Nathan stated rather than asked. "I see he is not here."

Joab cleared his throat and spoke at the ground. "Yeah, Nathan, um, hi.... So, he was not being cooperative. We had to tie him to a tree."

Nathan furrowed his brow, digesting the news, for several ominous, tense moments, no one spoke. "General, don't you mean you had to incapacitate him, then tie him to a tree, and even now, three men must guard him? If that is so, shouldn't his actions answer your question as to his guilt?"

Now it was Jash who came to the sergeant's aid, "Maybe so, prophet, but if we killed everyone who had a bad day, we'd have no army. Besides, is it not better to be humble and ask Jehovah rather than to assume?"

Nathan sighed, "Yes, Jash, you are correct and becoming so much wiser than when we first met."

Jash grinned, "Have to grow up sometime."

"Indeed." Nathan snickered, then rested his eyes on the cowering figure. "Who is this?"

"The accuser of my brethren," Joab sneered, "A transient welp, trying to steal from a poor girl and her brother. My sergeant stopped him, and a struggle forced our soldier to take drastic measures."

Nathan bent down in front of the boy and lifted his head with one hand; for several moments, the prophet stared into the boy's eyes, then closed his own eyes and exhaled. Waves of tension and tingling friction flooded the tent as no one spoke, but all heads were bowed. Jash dropped to one knee out of respect.

After what felt like an eternity, Nathan's eyes snapped open; he fixed his gaze on the boy, then spoke. "Hello, Obed. Your parents named you 'Bonded to God in worship.' No matter how you feel, you are not alone. Jehovah is now your caretaker. Next time you are hungry, Abba, in heaven will feed you; if you only ask."

Obed whimpered in response, sobbing quietly and nodding his head.

Nathan smiled, "Don't fear me, boy. I can do nothing that God has not allowed." After another moment of eye contact, the prophet raised a hand, "Blade." He demanded.

Joab stepped forward to protest but thought better of it as the man in the shadow's grunted a soft, "No."

Jash handed Nathan his blade. Nathan cut Obed free, stood with him, and helped the young man onto a stool. A bronze cup sat on a small side table, half-filled with water. The prophet handed it to Obed, who gulped the liquid down. Nathan continued, "This young man is a hero." The seer spoke with his back turned to the three other men, "Although this morning he began the treacherous road as a thief, Jehovah intervened and used him to stop your man, General." Nathan turned and stuffed a finger in Joab's face, "When

he was forcing himself upon a young girl after he assaulted her very young brother.” Nathan turned back and looked down at Obed, “After he is fed and given water, he will gather and cut firewood for the young lady until sundown to settle his debt of attempted theft. And every year, until the young lady is wed, or you wed her yourself, young Obed, you will check on them. This will be worship and remembrance to the day you were brought back onto the path Jehovah has laid out for your life.”

Obed nodded his head very quickly, his eyes opened wide.

Nathan smiled and patted Obed on the cheek, “You’re a good boy; your parents would be very proud. I know your Abba in Heaven is.”

Obed managed a sheepish smile.

Nathan turned and moved to the tent’s doorway.

Joab stepped forward and grabbed him by the shoulder, “But what about my man?”

Nathan, nearly a head shorter than the big general, glared daggers back at him, staggering Joab back half a step, “What do you think? Do your job!” He paused for two moments, glaring through the nervous soldier’s soul, “*General!*” Nathan hissed before storming out of the tent.

The man in the shadows stepped into the light. A gold medal strip adorned his head. His graying reddish beard matched his hair which stood shoulder-length, stopping at a dark striped robe over a purple tunic: a tunic held into place by a thick lion-skinned belt. The king looked Obed over, then spoke with an ominous tone, “The three of you, do what the prophet orders or there will be consequences far worse than any mortal king’s punishment.”

“Yes, sire.” Joab growled, “I’ll be outside gathering stones.” The brooding hulk stormed out of the tent.

David turned to the wiry soldier with quick eyes, “Jash leave us. I wish to speak to Obed alone, but wait outside.”

“Aye, sire.” Jash acknowledged before he slid through tent entrance into the sunlight.

The king drifted around the table, then looked the boy up and down.

Obed stared at the floor nervously, unsure if he should speak, bow, or run.

“Look at me, son.” The king demanded.

“Obed met his gaze, he was met by kind eyes and a smile. The king’s famous red hair was graying from the crown of his head down through his thick beard. Although he was not a tall man, all Obed had heard of his appearance was understated. His massive broad shoulders and big hands made him look almost as wide as he was tall. Most striking of all was his presence. Obed instantly sensed his strength and confidence, even before he had known who this man was.

“I am David, the king,” He smiled to himself, looked down at the ground, and chuckled, “Well, actually, I’m kind of half a king right now.”

“Yes, sire.” Obed acknowledged while moving quickly to kneel.

“Stop!” David demanded, “There has been enough pride leading to needless death, mostly my pride.” The king growled at himself as he turned away. He took off his thin crown, and ran a giant paw through his thick ruddy hair. Suddenly deep in thought, he winced and sighed, “And it’s my pride that has led to this mess.” He emphasized his point by flipping his fingers through military parchments strewn about the table. David turned and stood up straight, “No matter. What is important is this.” He held his hands behind his back and closed his eyes, *“It is better to be the doorkeeper in God’s house,”* He opened his eyes and grinned, *“Then king forever...in the tents of the wicked.”*

“But, sire, you are MY king!”

“Yes, yes, but I only require kneeling when I feel it absolutely necessary; otherwise....”

Obed diverted his eyes, shaking his head, “No, sire, what I meant was - who dare take your throne? You are God’s chosen: the warrior king!”

“Oh, yes, I see.” David shook his head and laughed aloud. He leaned against the table as his face became serious for a moment. “I suppose news has not traveled to every corner of Jehovah’s kingdom.” The king swallowed hard, as he still could not believe the news himself. “My beloved son, Absalom, has decided to make a move for the throne.” David chided, “Apparently, he’s been spending much time learning from Egyptian gossip and Assyrian intrigue. It has poisoned his mind.” David shook his head. “You see, my young friend, I ignored the law and tried to spare his life after he murdered his brother. That was my fault because I had spared his brother’s

life after he had lain with Absalom's sister.

David shook his head, slumping to the ground, "No! No more dancing around truth! My son forced himself on my little girl, his half-sister! And instead of stoning my son to death, as the law of Moses demanded, I hid from the problem." He looked at Obed, tears in the old king's eyes, "I tell you these things, young man so that you and your brothers who run Jehovah's nation after we old fools are gone will learn from our mistakes." The king paused, staring through the ground into a lifetime of memories and regrets, "All my mistakes." David suddenly shook his head trying to escape the clutches of his memories but shrugged his shoulders in defeat. "Now, I run from my son, and it is all my fault because I am a coward."

Obed's jaw dropped in disbelief, "No, my king." He slunk to the ground and lowered his head to get below his highness. Obed didn't know much about royal protocol, but this little bit, he learned from his childhood Levite, who taught him the ten commandments and the basics of the Law of Moses. "You are the slayer of giants and the only man the Philistines will obey." Obed kept his eyes down; tears dripped into the tent's dirt floor, "I have been on my own, with no means for a living after Philistines killed my father and burned our crops."

"Where is your eema?" David asked.

"My mother died when I was young. So, for years, when my father and I were without hope, fighting off the Philistines to protect our crops and workers, we always asked what the mighty would do? What would God's anointed do? What would the king do? And we'd pray, your prayer, *'Lord fight against those who fight against me. Though ten thousand fall at my side, no harm will come to me.'* You were my abba's inspiration to trust in Jehovah through battle."

After speaking so boldly, Obed went silent. It was rare that his mouth moved quicker than his brain, and he hated that this was one of those rare moments.

Only silence filled the emptiness of the big tent. What seemed to be a lifetime passed. "I was brave once," David finally spoke, "When I was your age, I fought bears and lions with nothing more than a sling and a large stick for fun! I could do anything, as long as I knew where my strength came

from.” The king paused and looked up but continued as his gaze fell back down into his lap, “But my fame, money, many wives, and many blessings of children and victories were too much temptation for me.” He sniffed and wiped his nose. David propped his hand atop a raised knee, then reached over and gently hooked a finger under Obed’s chin. The king lifted his head, forcing eye contact. “See, boy, success is a cruel mistress. The more it gives you, the more of you it requires. Somewhere along the way, I forgot that *I had* accomplished nothing.” He cocked his head to one side, smiled, and grinned. “Nothing that Jehovah had not allowed.”

“Why are you telling me this, sire?” Obed chanced a question.

“Now that, young man, is a wise question. A question these old fools,” David flipped a thumb at the door, “I call family, have stopped asking of me years ago. But maybe that’s why I am telling you this; because no one else will listen.”

Obed said nothing, but his confused look was more than enough of a question.

Still sitting on the ground facing one another, David tapped the back of his head against the war table as a slight self-imposed punishment, “Every time I try to unburden my soul to my *friends*, they only remind me of my position and my fame, and how none of this can be my fault.”

“Even the prophet Nathan?” The question just popped from Obed’s mouth, imprudent but pure.

David ate it up. He cocked his head back, laughing long and hard, “Son, you don’t miss a thing, do you? Wow, if I didn’t know better, I’d make you my new senior advisor.” David paused long enough to tap Obed on the knee teasingly, “Don’t worry, I’m not that cruel.” He took a deep breath to get serious, “The fact is, I just wanted someone to speak my mind to. Nathan is there to advise before these things happen and help after they are over, but only when I am ready.... Ah, who am I kidding.” David pounded the ground with his fist, sniffed, and peered around the tent’s roof in search of something he knew wasn’t there, “I am terrified of the answers Nathan will give.”

Obed’s mouth, again, began to work before his mind could make it stop. A sudden compulsion drove him to speak at the warrior king, “Like you, I failed my family and Jehovah, I planned to steal to feed my hunger, and I was

too proud to ask for help. Yet, Nathan told me how I can now make it right for my family and my God. Is there any way you can do the same?”

David raised an eyebrow. Obed's eyes nearly bulged out of his skull as the presumptuous comment hung in the air. The young man once again buried his face into the dirt, “I apologize, highness; I do not know what came over me.”

David cleared his throat and placed a big hand on the young man's small back, “Well, I do know Who came over you, and far be it from me to ignore a message from the Almighty.” The king paused, then broke into a melodious tenor voice, a voice which in years past had spread music and glory to Jehovah, even halfway around the known world. “*Out of the mouths of babes, you have ordained your praise.....oh Lord....*” With his hand still on the back of the little man, the king repeated the line over and over again. Obed didn't know what to do, so he stayed humbly low and breathed only as much as necessary.

“Nathan, get in here!” David suddenly shouted.

The prophet stepped in even before the king could finish his demand.

“You wily fox, did you know this young man would be used like this?”

Nathan shrugged, “Someone had to talk sense into you, but since you have been wallowing in a nasty combination of self-pity and denial, it had to be someone disarming.”

“Jehovah took my flank,” David chuckled, “As always, He is too merciful.”

“That He is.” Nathan agreed.

David began stripping off his royal robes as he spoke, “Ready a sacrifice, ashes, and sackcloth for me, my generals, and every officer. Except for this young man and our new friends, the young lady and her brother, the entire camp will fast and pray until sun up tomorrow. Anyone not complying will be executed; that includes my generals and those who dine at my table!”

“It's already being prepared,” Nathan stated stoically.

“Of course, it is,” the king took a quick break from stripping, bent down, and whispered at Obed. “Do you see what I have to put up with? The only guy in my staff who is compelled to speak the harsh truth, or he is struck dead by God - And yet, the prophet withholds from me.”

“I relay only what I am told, David. I also obey my orders, Highness. And, if I may, sire, it’s good to have you back.” Nathan paused for effect, “In spirit and truth.” The seer turned and exited left.

David continued stripping, “Now, young man, sometimes being called king can be fun! Watch this.” He cleared his throat, then snapped! “Jash, front and center!”

Jash popped into the tent. He had been poised outside the tent, waiting the entire time, ready for orders. “Yes, sire.”

David turned and looked Obed over, pondering. “From now on, young Obed is my ward. He will eat at my table. And you, Jash, being my brother, will act as his uncle.”

Jash smiled graciously. “Yes, sire.” He took Obed’s arm to guide him from the tent.

David lifted a finger, “And, Jashobeam....” The king reserved using the old soldier’s full name to get his attention.

Jash turned and faced David, “Sire?”

Jashobeam’s stately face gave birth to an ominous grin, and Obed swallowed hard as they both digested the king’s command.

“Make Obed - **MIGHTY!**”

Gray Family Missions

grayfamilymissions.com

ryantgray2@gmail.com