

W SHEPHERD WARRIOR

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A TIME FOR WAR

The bonfire in the courtyard crackled to life as David threw another log on its dying embers. He sat down to soak in the warmth of the flames and to rest his tired body. The hour was late, but everywhere the household was still in a bustle. Servants loaded food supplies onto two-wheeled carts, a small herd of goats milled about bleating, and children shrieked as they played their late-evening games.

David sniffed the good smells of the food being loaded onto the carts. There were rolls of cheese, baskets of fragrant, crusty barley loaves fresh out of the ovens, and sacks of parched grain. Dried fruits were also being packed—raisins, figs, and olives would keep a long time.

David could hear his mother giving last-minute instructions to the servants about preparations for the trip the next day. Their chatter kept up with their busy fingers and hands. David smiled to himself. There was always so much work in the household for women to do, but always David's mother managed to remain cheerful. And right now, staying cheerful might be a very hard thing for her to do, David realized. Tomorrow at dawn, her three oldest sons would be marching off to battle the Philistines. No one really knew how long they would be gone. David knew his mother was probably worrying herself sick at the thought.

David sighed. In some ways he wished he could go with his

brothers. He was tired of always having to stay behind. He was weary of doing all the boring jobs at home that no one else wanted to do. With so many older brothers and sisters, he would never be the boss. Not in his family, and probably not in his lifetime.

David pulled his tunic closer about him. He squinted as he picked up a stick and poked at the logs in the fire. The fire felt warm on his face as a spiral of sparks sailed up into the dark night and disappeared.

What is it like to go away and fight? David wondered. *It seems like it should be exciting, but then again, going into battle must be terribly frightening too.* When he closed his eyes, David could almost see the hundreds of enemy soldiers running toward him shouting their battle cries. He could almost hear the clang of swords on swords during ferocious fighting. He could also imagine what a battlefield would look like with the bodies of dead men lying everywhere.

David glanced across the fire at his oldest brother, Eliab, who was sharpening his sword. Eliab looked like a soldier, with his leather armored vest and his spear stuck into the ground beside him. His jet black eyes looked stern, and his jaw muscles tightened as he gripped his sword in his strong, sinewy hand. As he slid the whetstone down the full length of the blade, it looked like a deadly weapon—and heavy too. Probably not as heavy as the king's sword, though.

David's heart beat faster as he remembered the stories his brothers told every time they came home from one of their military campaigns with the king. Sometimes the stories were about long marches through desert country or climbing up rocky cliffs to take the enemy by surprise. David loved to hear about the gallant king leading his soldiers into battle while astride his noble steed. According to Abinadab, David's second-oldest brother, the king's horse was white, and there was none other like it in the

entire kingdom. Strong, large, and with sinewy muscles, the horse could go all day and catch any fleeing enemy soldier anywhere in the country.

And the king was a big man, too—a head taller than any of his men. David had seen King Saul only once, and then only from a distance. It had been when David was younger, and the family had gone to the tabernacle at Nob to worship during the Passover Feast. The King had looked magnificent in his royal robes. He was handsome and strong, and to David he looked just like a king should look.

But are magnificent robes and horses what being king is all about? David wasn't sure. *Is King Saul really the leader everyone had hoped he would be?* Troubles were brewing once again in the west with the hated Philistines. Earlier in his reign, King Saul had been successful in his ongoing war with the Philistines, but lately rumors were going around that the king had turned against God. That was a scary thought. If the Lord wasn't with King Saul, could the king be trusted? And could Israel ever again win a battle without a godly man at the head of its army?

Eliab stood to his feet and ran his whetstone down the edge of the sharp blade one more time before sliding the sword into its sheath. As Eliab turned to leave, David jumped to his feet.

“Eliab?” David grinned excitedly. He was almost afraid to ask the question. “Do you think I could join the army sometime soon and fight with you and Abinadab and Shammah for the king?” David held his breath. He knew it sounded foolish, but he didn't care. Right now he was nearly bursting with pride at his three oldest brothers and their bravery in going away to fight for their country and their king. David just wanted to be with them, that's all.

Eliab turned and frowned at David. “What are you grinning about, boy? War is a serious thing! One of these days maybe you'll understand that.” Eliab shook his head. “You're not old enough

to fight, anyway, so you can get that notion out of your head! When you're a grown man, then you can sign up."

"But I want to go now!" blurted David, and as soon as he had said the words, he wished that he hadn't. He knew it made him sound like a child.

"Nonsense!" Eliab snapped. "Right now, Father can use you around here. He's not as young as he used to be, you know, and besides, if you leave, who will watch the sheep?"

David winced at his brother's sharp words. He didn't like being called "boy," and he couldn't help it that he grinned a lot. That's just the way he was. It was hard for him to be any other way, and besides, what was wrong with being happy? As far as David was concerned, it was the only way to be.

And why did Eliab have to bring up the sheep at a time like this? Always it was the sheep. The life of a shepherd was the most thankless of all jobs on the farm. David's father assigned him the task of guarding the sheep for days at a time out on the hills surrounding Bethlehem. There was little time for sleep, the food was always the same, and after a while he even began to smell like the sheep. David wrinkled up his nose in disgust. No one else wanted to guard the sheep, but because he was the youngest, the job always fell to him.

David sighed, but there was no use complaining about it. As his mother always said, "It's the faithfulness in doing small tasks that builds character." The thought of these words didn't comfort David much. Not when his three older brothers were marching off the next morning to a great adventure, and he had to stay behind.

Jesse, David's father, stepped into the glow of the warm firelight. The shadows of its flickering flame danced across Jesse's weather-beaten face. The white beard and wrinkles on his face made him appear old and tired, and David noticed how worried he looked. How could he not be worried with

his sons going off to fight yet another battle with the hated Philistines?

Jesse reached for Eliab and hugged him affectionately. David saw his father look long and hard at Eliab, and he knew his father was having a difficult time letting his sons go away this time. David tried to imagine what it would be like to send even one son to fight in a battle. His father was giving up three of his eight sons. A tight knot began to creep into the pit of David's stomach at the thought of it all.