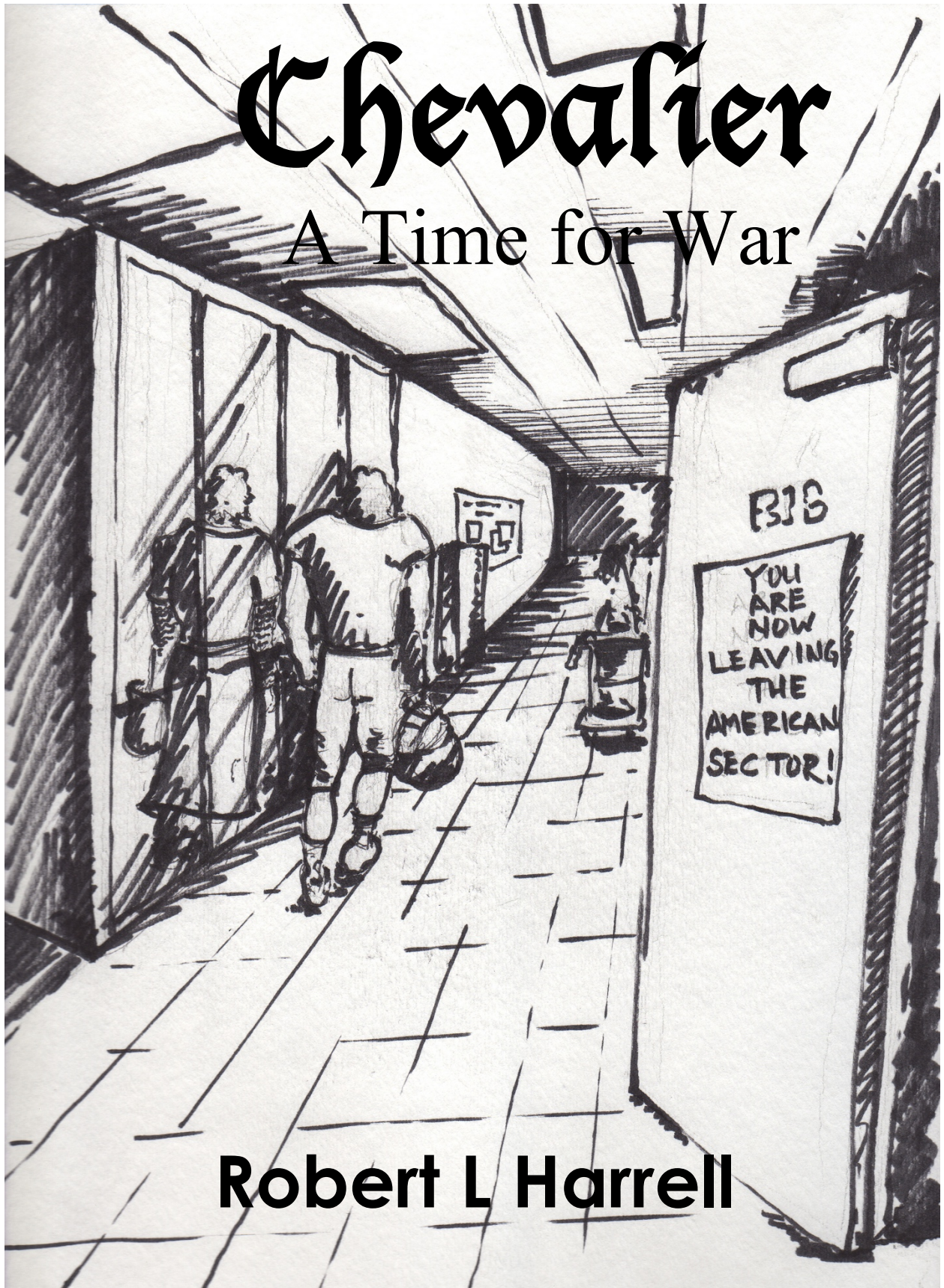


Chevalier

A Time for War



Robert L Harrell

Chevalier

A Time for War

Book One in the Lightstone Series

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Courage

One

Featherly Regional Park Saturday

Sir Geoffrey strode onto the tournament field, sword in hand. The Marshal of the Lists, who oversaw the combat for the medieval re-creation club, checked his armor and gave him a thumbs up.

After checking Sir Kazimierz's armor, the Marshal regarded the two knights. "My lords, do you agree to abide by the rules of the lists, to fight with honor, and to heed the words of the marshals?"

Both knights indicated their agreement.

"My lords, salute Their Majesties, the King and Queen."

Both knights turned and saluted. Their majesties nodded and smiled.

"Salute the lady whose favor you bear."

Sir Geoffrey turned to salute his mother. He bore her favor today. She made a heart shape with her hands and mouthed the words, "I love you, son."

"Salute your noble opponent."

Sir Geoffrey raised his sword in salute and grinned at the knight in front of him. Sir Kazimierz — Will — was his best friend both inside and outside the medieval club. The two knights donned their helmets and assumed a fighting stance.

The Marshal held his staff horizontal between the two knights. He raised it and stepped back.

"Lay on!"

The two knights circled, each seeking an opening or weak spot in the other's defense. Sir Kazimierz struck at Sir Geoffrey's shoulder, but Sir Geoffrey blocked it with his shield and counter-attacked. Sir Kazimierz parried that blow. The two knights withdrew and circled.

Next, Sir Kazimierz swung at Sir Geoffrey's legs and followed up with a blow to Sir Geoffrey's head. Sir Geoffrey parried both blows. Sir Kazimierz was testing his opponent's reflexes and reactions.

"Don't give your opponent a pattern. Don't fall into a habit. That's how you lose in combat." His father's words echoed in Sir Geoffrey's head. If Dad wasn't satisfied, Geoff would practice different blocks, parries, and ripostes until he dropped. Time to concentrate.

After testing one another and checking for habits or carelessness, the two knights stepped back. Both were breathing hard.

Suddenly, Sir Kazimierz charged. Sir Geoffrey stepped to the side. Sir Kazimierz tripped. His momentum carried him to the ground, and he dropped his sword. Sir Geoffrey smirked at his best friend sprawled on the ground. He strode to the fallen knight and held out his hand. Sir Kazimierz rolled over, took the hand, and let himself be pulled to his feet.

Once Sir Kazimierz had retrieved his sword, the two knights faced each other again. This time, Sir Geoffrey charged and forced Sir Kazimierz backward.

"Hold!"

Sir Geoffrey stopped with his sword poised to strike a blow. Why the hold?

The attack had taken him and his opponent to the edge of the field.

The Marshal motioned for them to return to the center. He turned to the half dozen boys pushing on the rope that defined the lists. Dropping to one knee, he spoke to them. Wide-eyed, the boys nodded and stepped back.

Ah, the Marshal had stopped combat so that they wouldn't hurt one of the boys eager to be a fighter someday. Sir Geoffrey smiled. He had once been one of those eager young boys.

The two knights returned to the center of the lists. Once again, the Marshal placed his staff horizontal between them. He gave the command to lay on.

Both knights' attacks slowed, Sir Kazimierz's more than Sir Geoffrey's.

The corners of Sir Geoffrey's mouth curved up. It was now a matter of time.

Sir Geoffrey pressed his attacks. At last, Sir Kazimierz dropped his shield a fraction. Sir Geoffrey brought his sword in through the opening and struck Sir Kazimierz in the neck.

Sir Geoffrey smirked at the expression of surprise on his opponent's face. He watched as the knight dropped his sword, fell to his knees, sprawled on the ground, twitched, and lay still.

The victorious knight stood over his fallen opponent and held out his hand. Sir Kazimierz grasped it and stood. Both knights removed their helmets and grinned at each other.

"Well done, Sir Geoffrey!" said the Marshal. "Sir Kazimierz, you died rather well. My lords and ladies! I present to you the winner of today's combat, Sir Geoffrey the Fair!"

Each knight tucked his helmet under one arm and put the other arm around his opponent's shoulder, dangling his sword from his free hand. Together, they strolled off the combat field, laughing and discussing the fight.

Sir Geoffrey and Sir Kazimierz helped each other out of their armor. Sir Geoffrey laid his friend's breastplate on the ground.

"Hey, Kaz —"

"That's Sir Kaz to you, you foul slayer of the flower of Polish chivalry." He unbuckled his leg armor and placed it next to his breastplate.

“You? The flower of Polish chivalry?” Sir Geoffrey chuckled. “Only if you mean that really stinky flower.”

“The corpse flower?” Sir Kazimierz smiled, leaned toward Sir Geoffrey, and sniffed. “You’re no spring bouquet yourself. Fortunate for you, Staci doesn’t play. She’d never get past the stench.”

“Yeah, well, I’m looking forward to a steaming shower and a soak in the hot tub before our date tonight.”

Sir Kazimierz removed his gambeson and spread it across his armor to dry.

“So, what did you want to say before I so rudely interrupted you?”

Sir Geoffrey stood and gestured toward the judging area for arts and sciences.

“I need to check in for my arts entry.”

The two knights filled their mugs with a sports drink and headed for the judging table.

“So, Sir Kaz.” Sir Geoffrey grinned. “Have you ever thought about what it would be like to do this for real?”

“What? This isn’t real?” Sir Kazimierz gestured to the event around them.

“I mean in the Middle Ages. What would it be like to be a real noble? A real troubadour? A real knight? You know, be there.” Sir Geoffrey took a deep swallow of his sports drink.

“Are you talking about time-traveling?”

“Sure. Why not?”

They arrived at the arts table, and Sir Geoffrey seated himself on a bench next to a thin, dark-haired woman in a wheelchair.

“Good morrow, Dame Maedb. May I serve as your scribe?”

The woman peered at him over her bifocals. Her smile lit up her grey eyes.

“Ah, Sir Geoffrey. Your assistance is most welcome. My lupus flared up today, and I can barely hold a pen, let alone write so you can read it.”

Sir Geoffrey chuckled.

“My writing is no better, and I don’t have lupus.”

Dame Maedb patted his hand.

“You have the most meticulous handwriting I’ve ever seen.”

Sir Geoffrey reddened. Dame Maedb complimented and encouraged others. Not once had he ever heard her complain about her health problems. She epitomized grace and courage.

“What are you judging?”

Holding up the object in her hand, Dame Maedb showed it to Sir Geoffrey. “Another of your father’s excellent daggers. Why don’t you ever enter metalwork in an arts competition?”

At a temporary loss for words, Sir Geoffrey turned redder.

“Well, um, you see. He doesn’t trust me at the forge.”

“What?” Dame Maedb’s eyes widened. “That is the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard.”

“When I was little, I tried to help but always made a mess of things. I never did anything right and put myself, him, and the house in danger. Finally, Dad just sort of banished me from the forge without actually saying those words.”

“Hmpf. I am going to have a serious talk with that man. Now, where were we? Oh, yes. Notice the way the folded layers of metal create a pattern like flowing water. The number of layers ...”

Sir Geoffrey picked up a pen and judging form and wrote as Dame Maedb dictated. After judging several entries, she retrieved the forms.

“Thank you for your assistance, Sir Geoffrey.” Dame Maedb extended her hand.

Sir Geoffrey bent at the waist, took her hand, and kissed it. “My pleasure, my lady. Thank you for explaining your judging as we went.”

“I love teaching and want you to be a judge soon. Now, don’t you have a bardic entry for us? Let me gather the other judges.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Geoffrey rose and assumed his station in front of four chairs.

Dame Maedb rolled her wheelchair into place and motioned for Sir Kazimierz to sit beside her. She handed him her judging form and a pen. The other judges took their seats.

Dame Aiofe smiled at Sir Geoffrey and folded her hands in her lap. Sir Rhys picked up his pen and gave his son a piercing look. Sir Geoffrey’s heart sank. Dad would never give him a decent score — and certainly not a masterwork rating. Sir Peter, who played a troubadour in the club, served as the last judge. His opinion was the one Sir Geoffrey prized; he was the expert on Occitan.

“What do you have for us today?” Dame Maedb’s smile radiated encouragement.

Sir Geoffrey tugged on the hair at the back of his head.

“I’ll be reciting a portion of the Occitan *Song of Roland*. This part deals with the death of Roland at Roncesvalles or Ronzesbals.”

“Impressive. Do you have your documentation?”

“I submitted it this morning. A copy for each of you is on the table.” Sir Geoffrey indicated a stack of three-ring binders.

“We’ll read those later. Now, let’s hear your recitation.”

Sir Geoffrey touched the hair at the back of his head and struck what he considered an appropriate pose for a troubadour. He took a deep breath.

“Rollan esta de la mort estonies, e connoc ben que non pot vieure ges, car fort li falh la foss e.l poders.”

He forged ahead, shifting his gaze between Dame Maedb and Dame Aiofe. Both nodded and beamed reassurance. Not daring to look directly at his father or Sir Peter, Sir Geoffrey tried to interpret their reactions, mentally kicking himself for every unplanned pause and perceived mispronunciation. The tightness in his chest interfered with his breathing. Why did he ever think he could do this?

“E Falceron comensa lo a benezir: ‘Rollan, fay cel, non vos puesc al re dir. Cel dieu que volc ton cors tant gent bastir ti salvi t’arma e ti gart de perilh; plus non vos puesc far e coven m’a fugir.’ De mantenent e el s’en va partir, car ben sentia la ost de Karle venir; tendas e draps en layssat sens mentir.”

Sir Geoffrey exhaled with relief. The recitation was over. He excused himself and headed for the archery area. Sir Kazimierz joined him.

“Excellent job, dude.”

“Mediocre at best. I made so many mistakes in rhythm, pronunciation, intonation, and everything else that I’ll be lucky if it counts at all.”

“Dude! You’re too hard on yourself. I thought it was fantastic. So did Dame Maedb. I was her scribe.”

“I wish you had judged instead of Dad. He didn’t seem pleased by any of it.”

“Just think of him as the Russian judge. They never give anyone decent ratings, so those scores get tossed. He was the alternate judge anyway.”

At the archery range, the two knights took their places for the bowman level. Each shot five arrows. Sir Kazimierz placed four in the center and one in the ring next to the bullseye. Sir

Geoffrey scored two arrows in the bullseye, two in the ring next to it, and one in the outermost ring.

“You beat me on that one, Kaz. Congratulations.”

Sir Kazimierz grinned.

“I have to give you some competition on being the youngest knight to achieve top-level knighthood in all four disciplines.”

“You’re certainly doing that. I’m starved. Let’s eat.”

The two friends strolled to the lunch table, filled their plates, and seated themselves at another table. After saying grace, Sir Kazimierz picked up the thread of conversation.

“You did great in combat today. You’ve been practicing.”

Sir Geoffrey smiled.

“Don’t get cocky, Geoff ...”

Geoff grinned.

“That’s Sir Geoff to you, you stinking corpse flower.” He pulled on the hair at the back of his head. “It won’t be enough for Dad, though. And archery? Ugh! I need to practice. A lot.”

Sir Kazimierz chuckled. “Better practice your death throes while you’re at it. Next month’s tournament includes a prize for the best death.”

“Too bad I won’t be in the running since I don’t plan to die.”

“The best-laid plans of mice and men ...”

At that moment, Geoff’s father strode to the table. He held two wooden practice swords in his hand.

“Come with me, son. You’ll excuse us, Will. I mean, Sir Kazimierz.”

Geoff glanced at Will and shrugged an apology.

“Yes, sir.”

“Sure, Mr. Lightstone, uh, Sir Rhys. See you in a bit, Geoff.”

Geoff and his father walked to an area away from the rest of the activities. Dad handed his son one of the swords.

“Now, Geoff, some of your parries came late. You became sloppy and nearly got yourself killed or maimed. You might have lost the combat. Can you identify what you did wrong?”

“Um, I got tired?”

“In combat, you can’t afford to let tired affect performance. Do you think I would have survived Afghanistan if I’d allowed being tired to make me sloppy?”

Geoff hung his head. “No, sir.”

Geoff’s father grabbed Geoff’s shoulders. “Look at me when you talk to me!”

Geoff raised his head and gazed at his father. “Yes, sir. No, sir.”

“No, what?”

“No, you wouldn’t have survived Afghanistan.”

“Exactly. Sometimes, it still gives me nightmares. I don’t care how tired you think you are, we’re going to practice those parries and ripostes until you learn control.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sword at the ready.”

An hour later, Geoff felt ready to drop. His legs trembled. The tip of the sword drooped.

“All right, Geoff. We’re done for now. Put these swords with your armor. Then join me at the archery range.”

At the archery range, Geoff shot until the bow trembled in his hand. His bow arm was bright red. The Range Master marched over to them.

“Your pardon, good sirs. I need to put everything away.”

“Right,” said Geoff’s father. “Son, help the Range Master clean up. We’ll be leaving right after closing court. I expect you to be ready.”

“Yes, sir.”

At last, Geoff rejoined Will. He flopped onto the bench, crossed his arms on the table, laid his head in his arms, and groaned.

Will put his hand on his friend’s shoulder for a moment. “Brutal, dude! You won, and your dad still wasn’t satisfied.”

“And that won’t be the end of it. When we get home, he’ll tell me everything I did wrong with the bardic. We’ll analyze each mistake. Oof!”

Will chuckled. “Plus, you have a date with Staci.”

Geoff raised his head and frowned at Will. “We’re going to this movie she’s been raving about. Some chick flick. Watch me fall asleep in the middle of it — again. Staci’ll be upset with me — again.”

Will smiled in sympathy. “You just can’t win, can you? Why not cancel the date?”

“No way! I promised Staci we’d watch the movie. I won’t stand her up. That would be worse.”

“Don’t fall asleep in the hot tub.”

“Wouldn’t that be great? Fall asleep and miss our date. I’d be better off drowning.” Geoff reached up and grabbed the hair at the back of his head. He played with it for a moment. He sighed. “I’ll skip the hot tub. If I mess up too many times, I’ll lose her. I don’t know what she sees in me in the first place. She probably dates me out of pity.”

Will put both hands on his friend's shoulders and gazed into his eyes. "You genuinely believe that, don't you?"

Geoff nodded.

Will grinned. "Well, then, I won't disabuse you of the notion. Humility becomes you, mister junior starting quarterback and fighter *par excellence*."

The two friends spent the rest of the event talking.

Two

Saint Michael's Episcopal Sunday

The next day in church, Geoff sat in the pew before the service began and glanced through the bulletin. He nudged Will in the ribs.

“Take a look at Pastor Justin’s sermon title and text. ‘Heroes of the Bible.’ Second Timothy 1:7. ‘For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.’ That must be the theme verse for the sermon series.”

Will opened his bulletin to the Order of Service.

“Yeah. Who do you think he’ll include? Daniel and David have to be in there.”

“Let’s see. Ehud. Definitely Ehud.”

“Ehud? Who’s that?”

“What? Don’t read the Old Testament much?” Geoff reached into the rack in front of him and pulled out a Bible. He opened to the Book of Judges. “Ehud was a judge. According to the story, he sneaked a sword into the palace of Eglon, king of Moab. Ehud was left-handed and wore the sword on the ‘wrong’ side.”

Geoff made air quotes when he said the word ‘wrong.’ He reached across his body with his left hand and mimicked drawing a sword from his right hip.

“So, Eglon’s guards didn’t find it when they searched him. Ehud could talk people into doing what he wanted. He tells the attendants that he has a private message for King Eglon, so they leave him alone with the king. Ehud’s message is, ‘God wants you dead, and I’m here to make it happen.’ He kills the king, closes the doors, and tells everyone the king’s on the toilet

and shouldn't be disturbed. After Ehud makes his escape they check and find the king dead.

Cool, huh?"

Will smirked, "You like him because he was left-handed like you."

Geoff smiled and shrugged.

"That doesn't hurt. He was a hero and brave to walk alone into the enemy king's palace and kill him. Escaping gives him bonus cool points."

"Okay, who else?"

"Jonathan."

"You mean King Saul's son? See, I'm not utterly ignorant. Wait. Don't tell me." Will brought his hands to his head like a stage mind reader. "Left-handed."

Geoff chuckled. "Of course. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, after all."

"Right." The word dripped with irony. "Benjamin means 'son of the right hand' ..." Will held up his right hand. "... so he was left-handed." Will raised his left hand. "Sorry, dude, it makes no sense whatsoever."

"What? Don't you listen in Sunday School? Left-handedness was a predominant trait for Benjamites. Ehud and Jonathan were Benjamites. God has a sense of humor."

"Okay, what's so cool about Jonathan?"

"In addition to being left-handed, the king's son, and a prince of Israel?" Geoff ticked off the points with his fingers. "Well, one time, Israel fought against the Philistines ..."

Will held up his hand.

"Stop. Didn't Israel fight against the Philistines just about all the time?"

Geoff nodded.

“Pretty much. Anyway, Jonathan grabs his armor-bearer and heads out for the Philistines’ garrison — just the two of them. The armor-bearer wants to know what’s up, and Jonathan says, ‘Let’s trust the Lord and see what happens.’ The armor-bearer is totally down with this and tells Jonathan, ‘Do whatever you want. I’m with you all the way.’”

Geoff returned the Bible to the rack.

“They take a narrow path across the valley to the garrison.” Geoff brought his hands down in a V shape, palms facing inward, until they were about an inch apart to indicate the valley. “Jonathan has a plan, but what he’ll do depends on how the Philistines react.”

“Are you sure he had a plan?” Will wanted to know.

“Definitely. They’re down in the valley.” Geoff held his left hand at knee level.

“The Philistines are on a hill.” Geoff held his right hand at shoulder height.

“Before they reveal themselves to the Philistines, Jonathan tells his armor-bearer, ‘If the Philistines tell us to stay here, ...’ Geoff moved his left hand back and forth. “... we will. That means God doesn’t want us to attack right now. But if they invite us to come up to them, ...” Geoff moved his right hand back and forth. “... we’ll know God gave us the battle.”

“Doesn’t sound like much of a plan to me.” Will put his bulletin in the rack in front of him.

Geoff spread his hands.

“Oh, I don’t know. The Philistines invite them up. Jonathan attacks. God sends an earthquake and confuses the Philistines. Israel wins a big battle.”

“How big?”

“It was so huge that the people made King Saul back off a vow he made forbidding everyone from eating anything until they won. Jonathan tasted some honey, and his father

wanted to kill him.” Geoff exhaled with a ‘puh’ and continued. “How messed up is that? Your son wins a huge battle, and you’re ready to kill him for tasting some honey when he didn’t even hear your stupid vow.”

Geoff turned in his seat to face Will.

“Jonathan was ready to die rather than disobey his father. He was going to just stand there and let his father do whatever he wanted.”

Geoff paused and shook his head. He couldn’t believe Jonathan’s submissiveness to his father after his bravery against the Philistines. The perfect son.

“The people saved Jonathan from his own father. After that, Jonathan never did anything right according to Saul.”

Will frowned.

“That is messed up. What else happened to Jonathan?”

“Later, Saul gets so mad at Jonathan for being David’s friend that he says the guy’s not his son and tries to kill him with a spear. What makes a father do that?”

Geoff gripped the back of the pew in front of him. His knuckles turned white.

“I mean, Jonathan’s a hero. Everybody likes him.”

His voice grew softer. “He’s friends with the guy who will be king instead of him.”

Geoff’s voice became as soft as the rustle of Bible pages in light air. “And ... and his ... dad ... can’t even say... that he’s proud of me.”

Geoff leaned forward, put his forehead on the back of the pew in front of him, grasped the hair at the back of his head with both hands, cleared his throat, and murmured, “I mean that Saul’s proud of Jonathan.”

Will put his hand on Geoff's shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze. He kept his voice soft.
"I know your dad's demanding, but I didn't realize it's that bad."

"What do you mean?"

"Seriously? We've been friends for how long? You grab the hair at the back of your head when you're stressed. Now you're taking double handfuls. Talking about Jonathan and Saul reminds you of you and your dad. Does he beat you?"

"No!" The denial came, swift and definite but muted. Geoff remained bent forward, staring at the floor. "He grabs my shoulders so I look at him while he tells me everything I did wrong, but that's it. I wish I could be good enough for him, make him proud of me."

"Hey! At least your dad never tried to kill your best friend, which is why I'm still around."

Will grinned, then turned sober.

"You are good enough, dude. Your father loves you and will remember it ere the end."

"So, now I'm Faramir and Dad's Denethor?" Geoff sat up and considered his friend.
"That one didn't work out so well, either, you know."

"You caught my *Lord of the Rings* reference though," Will replied with a grin. "Things don't have to end in tragedy for you. Denethor did remember he loved Faramir before the end. I doubt your dad is likely to go crazy like Denethor and Saul in any case. How did things end for Jonathan?"

"In spite of everything, Jonathan stayed with his dad and died in an epic battle with the Philistines."

"Ah, I understand. You like the heroics." Will removed his hand from Geoff's shoulder and grinned. "I'd rather be David. He lived to a ripe old age."

Geoff gave Will a wry smile.

“Since David and Jonathan were best friends, like us, you can be David, and I’ll be Jonathan.”

Will stuck out his hand. “Deal. How was the movie?”

Geoff shook his friend’s hand. “What movie?”

“Don’t tell me you fell asleep.”

Geoff chuckled. “No. I watched Staci and have no idea what the movie was about. She enjoyed the movie, though.”

Will snickered. “Should I tell Staci her boyfriend is a stalker?”

Before Geoff could answer, the worship leader announced the first song to begin the service.