

## BOOK I: The Citadel of the Griffins

*Though the fort was taken, we could not stay. The army was stationed nowise less than a week hence, and would arrive anon upon receipt of the news. Our taking of the place had made us known, as per Kern's plan, and the regional governor would not again ignore us. Now we were hunted men. Thereon we took whatsoever we could, and left the fort in ruin.*

*Then Olther was but new-come from the southern mountains, where the occupation was less dense. He claimed knowledge of an ancient mountain fortress, hidden and impervious to attack, and urged us to move our banner hence. In sooth, with no option aside, Kern placed his trust in the man. And thus we followed him thither*

...

*The first sight of the place put truth to Olther's words. The citadel perched aside the mount, overlooking river and forest as an eagle from its aerie, nigh unreachable from below. Verily, the horses could not make the ascent until a path was cleared and the old road rebuilt, it was so treacherous. The walls stood, but within there was naught but rubble. But underneath lay tunnels, of such extensiveness as to allow storage for years of provisions and serve for safe holes ifsoever we were attacked. There we encamped that winter as we cleared the court and built proper buildings.*

*Kern was enchanted by the place straightaway upon laying eyes on it, and would not sleep until he had explored every nook. He asked after its name, but Olther said it had none. Kern wished to name it Griffin Heights for the signs upon the gate, but as we were Kern's Band, Kern Heights it became.*

*From Vanyard Haystorm's "The Life of Roderick Kern"*

## Chapter 1

### A Night on the Watchtower

The 545<sup>th</sup> year by the Norwinese Calendar (1122 A.F.)  
Fastday, the 12<sup>th</sup> of Holy-Month  
About half past the third hour of the morning  
Kern Heights, the Duchy of Silvern, Norwinon

Kedrick Calderson awoke with a start, rubbed his hazy eyes, and peered blearily at the iron brazier in the midst of the small, wood-plank room. For a few moments he sat there, dazed, not quite sure where he was. In the dream there had been wide, blue sky, and rolling hills covered by rows of well-cultured wheat...

Suddenly it came to him, and he groaned aloud. Chiding himself for his weakness, he raised himself onto still sleep-heavy legs, using the rough-hewn planks for support. He'd had no intention of nodding off. He'd merely intended to warm himself by the guardhouse fire for a short span before rejoining the others. How long...? It couldn't have been too long. He hadn't woken to a cup of water in the face courtesy of Arthran, unlike the last time—though this time it would likely be snow, since Arthran had already spent much of the evening scraping what he could off the parapets and throwing it at whoever came into reach.

Kedrick sighed, readjusted his cloak, clapped his knitted cap back onto his head, and pushed aside the heavy woolen flap that covered the entrance. The chill night air hit his face as he stepped outside, blowing flakes of snow against his cheeks. He let the flap fall behind him, cutting off the red glow from the fire within and leaving him standing in darkness, only faintly illuminated by the stars that twinkled beyond the silhouette of the mountains and the sliver of the moon just cresting over the eastern peaks.

“Well, well,” Arthran remarked, “look who’s decided to rejoin the living!”

Kedrick closed his eyes. “How long was I...?” he muttered.

“Asleep?” Arthran asked. “I don’t know. Xavier?”

“A little more than an hour,” the other man answered without turning. “Less than an hour and a quarter though. The moon appeared shortly after you nodded off, and as you can see, it’s already above the shoulders of the Oakencrag.”

“Um, right,” Kedrick said dully. “Sorry.” Despite himself, he broke into a wide-mouthed yawn and raised his hand to cover it, his glove running through the still-sparse whiskers that covered his face and the much fuller moustache adorning his upper lip.

“You stop that now,” Arthran chided. “You’ll pull me into sleep too, and one of us at least has to stay alert. Why, between your dozing and his stargazing, if we were still fighting the Bandit Wars...”

“Yes, yes,” Kedrick answered, trudging over to stand beside his friend. At six and a quarter feet, Kedrick had a good five inches on Arthran, and his long-limbed physique made the difference even more noticeable. He leaned forward, rested his elbows on the low wall, and laid his head on his fists as he looked east, into the valley. “You don’t need to quote Warwick to me again. I know this is important.”

“Terribly,” Xavier noted. “Why, last week I heard Iveran nearly let a raven fly through unheralded.”

Kedrick ignored the comment. “And I really am sorry. I had no intention...”

“Oh come on,” Arthran said, rolling his eyes. “Enough of this. If it were really a problem, one of us would have woken you right off. After all, it’s not like we’re not stuck up here anyway, whether you sleep through it or not. But if it really offends your sense of fairness to let the two of us do all the work while you snooze away like some well-fed newborn, well I suspect I can help you find some way to make it up to us.”

Kedrick sighed. He should have known this was coming. And all because he’d been so eager to give recompense the first time it had happened. He’d set a bad precedent then, no question about it.

“And now that I think about it,” Arthran continued, as if he hadn’t been working out with Xavier what the demands would be the entire time Kedrick had been asleep, “we *are* supposed to clean the stalls on Moonday, and you know how much that makes my throat itch after a while.” That really was true—Arthran had a harder time with the straw

than the rest of them; by the end he was usually coughing and had water running from his eyes. But it was lousy for all of them, and having to do it all by himself was no fun.

“And I really could use the time for my studies,” Xavier piped in. It wasn’t really true—of all of the candidates in their year, Xavier was the least likely to fall behind in his studies—but he probably *would* use the time to scour through their notes nonetheless. And it was often easier to ask Xavier questions than to go to the source.

“You know I don’t mean to take advantage of your somnambulism,” Arthran continued, “but if you wanted to do us just a little favor...”

“Fine,” Kedrick grumbled. “I’ll take care of it.” Taking care of the stalls wasn’t any fun, but it wasn’t all *that* bad, and he did like being with the horses. And the others really were doing him a big favor; if the knights found out he had been sleeping on watch, even just for a little bit, he’d be in big trouble. If only he wasn’t so tired. And having to clean the stalls all by himself would take even more time away from his practice, which would mean cutting into more sleep... But there was no help for it. Not that Arthran and Xavier would ever inform on him, but Arthran had honed giving guilt trips down to perfection, and Kedrick didn’t want to deal with that again.

“You were missing a beautiful night, though,” Xavier noted, still looking out at the sky.

Kedrick smiled. It was a beautiful night. Though it was snowing, the clouds were patchy and the sliver of a moon sent out just enough light to touch them with a faint glow. Add to that the light breeze and the crisp chill in the air that seemed almost to sparkle in his mouth when he breathed, and it was a fine night indeed, even if it did lose some of its luster by the end of a four-hour watch.

The three of them were posted atop the Watchtower, a squat, beehive-shaped building at the crest of a mountain promontory some ways south of the peak of the Giant’s Horn. It was perched on the very edge of the rock, the wall flush with the cliff that dropped sharply from the tower’s base, a plunge of some fifty feet before the first of the branches of the pines beneath was reached. The queasier candidates hated this post, avoiding the edge as best they could or else

clinging to the low wall for dear life, but Kedrick had never been bothered by heights and enjoyed leaning on the edge and looking over the expanse before him. On the other hand, even he didn't think he would be able to sit atop the wall and swing his legs over the edge without his stomach churning.

The Watchtower afforded a clear view not only of the Ferne Valley to the east but also of the rugged western hills and southern mountains, both of which were hidden from the Keep. It was for this reason that candidates were always required to take the nearly 150-yard climb to the Watchtower and spend several hours there exposed to the elements, gazing out into the wilderness lest some enemy approach. Of course, in the two and a half months Kedrick had been at Kern Heights, no one had ever approached from anywhere but the east or north, and to listen to the second-years there was no reason to expect that anyone ever would. In all directions but east lay only wilderness, rock-strewn mountains and endless forest for miles and miles. The only people nearby were between the Keep and the river, the residents of Castlebury and its surrounding fields, and their arrival was recent; the oldest members of the community had hacked down the forest themselves, some forty years ago. One had to travel twenty miles or more to the south along the river before one found another settlement, and that was Keahrkuiliheen, and part of the Empire. Its inhabitants never came this far north, and the Norwinese rarely went to their lands either.

The Keep was Kern Heights. It had been given that name when Roderick Kern had taken up residence there during the Occupation. Though his men had improved upon it, suiting it to their needs, they had not built it. Later, after the Independence War, it had become the focal training academy for the Order of the Griffin, for which Kedrick, Arthran and Xavier were first-year candidates, along with sixty others. The knights of the Order, too, had added improvements. But under the new stonework and buildings lay ancient foundations, colossal blocks of stone hewn from the mountain and fitted together at bewilderingly random angles. No mortar held them, yet the fit was so precise it did not matter. Xavier claimed that not even the thinnest

vellum sheet could be forced between them, though Kedrick doubted he'd actually tested that statement.

The ancient walls had been there from time immemorial. When the first Norwinese came back to the mountains, they was there and already in ruins. Some claimed they had been built by giants, the heroes from scripture that roamed the world before the Flood, but none knew for certain as no legends remained of their origin. Only the silent stones remembered their builders, and they were not relinquishing their secrets.

Here at the Watchtower, the veneer of newness was thinnest, for only the wood floor they stood upon and the rough-hewn guardhouse atop it had been added since ancient days. It was a strange, disquieting feeling to be somewhere so very old and yet treating it like home, if one thought about it too much. Usually, Kedrick did not. The walls of the place might be ancient, but there were things older still all around them—the mountain, for one—and all were just as inscrutable. It was better to let people like Xavier worry about such things; he was here for different reasons.

Today, for example, the most pressing thing seemed to be keeping himself from falling back to sleep. He yawned again, allowing himself the luxury of letting his mouth gape open for a good few seconds as he stretched his back muscles.

“All right,” Arthran said grumpily, “we understand. You’re tired. That’s why I didn’t wake you earlier, though you can thank Xavier more for that than me. But do you have to keep doing that? Why didn’t you go to bed when we did? It’s not like you didn’t know this was going to happen. We go through the same thing every Fastday.”

Kedrick shrugged. “I’ll be fine. I’m getting used to it, I think. This time wasn’t nearly as bad as last week.”

Arthran snorted.

“Besides,” he continued, “I’ll catch some sleep after breakfast.”

“And meanwhile we’re stuck out here watching while you nod off for an hour by the fire.”

“You could have woken me. I wouldn’t have minded.”

Arthran gave him a mock-scowl, though most of it was obscured by the darkness and the shadow of his hood. “You don’t need to keep

trying to impress Chadwick so much. Take one night off, and get some rest.”

“I’m not...”

“Oh yes you are. I know. You want to be the ‘best knight you can be, and the only way to do that is by practice,’ am I right?”

“Well of course.”

“Of course,” Arthran mocked, shaking his head. He stood up straight and puffed out his chest, placing his fists against his sides. From the posturing, he had put on his “authority face”, a lengthening of the jaw and a pursing of the lips that transformed his features into a caricature of the stereotypically stuffy seneschal. It was too dark to get the full effect, but Kedrick had seen it enough that he didn’t need to.

“Remember, my boy,” Arthran said, using one of his “voices”, “you are here to learn, not to *have fun*. No carousing with the others; stay to your studies. Don’t skip classes, ever. Not even if you are sick.”

“If I was *really* sick, I’d stay in bed,” Kedrick protested.

“And even when you’re not at class, act as though you are. And practice, practice, practice. You are an ambassador of this family, and everything you do reflects upon it. Always remember that.”

“My father never said anything like that,” Kedrick said, shaking his head and grinning.

“No,” Arthran said wryly. “Mine neither. That was Old Basil, of course, when he dropped me off. He takes the family honor more seriously than anyone, and he’s not even part of it. Certainly more seriously than he should.”

“What an odd thing to say—‘even if you are sick?’”

Arthran shrugged. “That’s Basil for you. I think somewhere in the process someone forgot to add a sense of humor or a reasonable set of priorities into the man’s makeup. But, speaking of sick, you haven’t been looking so good lately, you know. You’re tired all the time, and kind of drawn-looking.”

“Who’s drawn?”

“I think that it’s about time you took a holiday, from practice at least. Which would, coincidentally, make it so we didn’t have to cover the watch while you’re sleeping quite so often.”

“I’m not drawn. Lean, maybe, but not *drawn*. Xavier, I don’t look drawn to you, do I?”

“Perhaps drawn isn’t the right word,” Xavier said without turning around. “Fragile, maybe, would be better. Arthran’s right about the sleep.”

“Fah!” Kedrick said, grinning. “I’m as healthy as an ox.”

“A starving ox,” Arthran said. “I’ve seen more meat on a cat.”

“Okay, so I’ve lost some weight. I had a little, er, baby fat when I came, and I’ve lost that. So has everyone else.”

“Not me,” Arthran said. “No baby fat here. Not ever.” He looked over at Xavier, who was staring out into space. “Xavier hasn’t lost weight either, have you Xave? You seem to have maintained your figure quite admirably, despite the many challenges to your resolve.”

Xavier shrugged. “You have got to have a goal, Arthran. Otherwise, how will you know where you’re going?”

“And your goal is to sample as much of Yemellian’s stuffed grouse as you can in the time given to you?”

“Cheese pastries, my good man,” he replied, turning. “They’re more portable, and sweeter. Not that I would ever dare to insult her grouse.”

Arthran laughed. “Cheese pastries it is, then. At any rate, I certainly won’t deny their appeal.”

Kedrick couldn’t help but smile. Despite their bantering and traded insults, they had become fast friends in the two months they’d been fortet-mates. He wouldn’t have expected that when they’d first been put together, considering how different they were, and he knew many fortets that hadn’t bonded well. They’d been blessed, he supposed.

To meet them, one would never have expected Arthran Bryce and Xavier Basilson to cross paths, much less become friends. Arthran hailed from a wealthy merchant family from Ayle, the most prosperous city in all the north. Brought up in privilege and luxury, he spoke and looked the part. He was trim, graceful, and, Kedrick was forced to admit, quite handsome; more than one young lady from Castlebury had embarrassed herself ogling him during mass. He had nearly perfect complexion, strikingly blue eyes, excellent teeth, and a winning

smile. And his dark, wavy hair was always, *always*, perfectly groomed, no matter what; he'd once heard a pair of candidates wondering aloud what deal with the Devil made it stay that way. Unlike most others, he had a substantial amount of spending money to wile away during his tenure at the Keep, and when he wasn't losing it gambling he spent it on clothes and other fine things, such as he could get in Castlebury.

Xavier, on the other hand, was a farm boy, much like Kedrick himself. He was taller and softer than Arthran, though not as plump as they chided him for being. If Arthran was a graceful tomcat, Xavier was an oversized puppy. Where Arthran's hair seemed almost sculpted, Xavier was plagued by a cyclone of cowlicks that sent his tresses curling every-which way, no matter how much he tried to tame them. And where Arthran could charm the talons off an eagle, Xavier would sooner mumble something incoherent or go off on one of his long, technical rambles. But for all of his shortcomings Xavier had a mind like a whip, which had been his key into the Order when his physical prowess had just barely passed muster, and he learned practically any subject with gusto. It was he that had kept the other two from falling behind miserably in several classes by patiently explaining and re-explaining course material late into night, after Kedrick had already spent hours slamming his wooden sword against the straw dummies in the Training Hall.

"So," Kedrick asked after a short silence, "what time is it?"

"Shortly after half past the third hour," Xavier replied. "There's only about an hour and a half left. You think you can make it?"

"Yeah, yeah," Kedrick replied. "I'll make it." An hour and a half. It didn't sound like that long until you were standing there, waiting for nothing to happen. Part of him held onto the hope that Xavier had underestimated how much time had passed already, but he knew such hope was utterly unfounded. Xavier was almost never wrong about the time, though Kedrick hadn't figured out how he did it. Xavier claimed he just watched the progression of the stars and sun, but his accuracy didn't seem to be affected by cloud cover or being inside, nor was he put off by the changing length of the day over the course of the year. Xavier had tried to explain it once when Kedrick had foolishly let curiosity get the better of him and asked about it, and after half an

hour had passed (almost exactly, according to Xavier) and his head was swimming, he had decided to cut the man off and give up on trying to understand.

“This watch is too flogging long,” Arthran grumbled.

“You say that every week,” Xavier reminded him.

“Yes, and it’s true every week. When is the last time something interesting happened at half past the third hour anyway?”

“Back home there was a fire...” Xavier began.

“I meant here.”

“What about that time weasels got into the kitchen?”

“Doesn’t count; the watch had nothing to do with that.”

“Just be glad they put all of us up here together,” Kedrick said. “Imagine standing here alone all night.”

“Or sleeping,” Arthran replied.

“Oh, shut it.” He turned back to the direction of the river. Arthran was right about the watch, of course. Nothing ever happened, especially not at night. And where in the daytime you could actually see *something*—he often enjoyed watching the men in the fields or the birds chasing each other through the sky—at night there was only the sky, the silhouettes of the mountains, and a few late-burning fires in the village, often, as tonight, blurred by the frequent fog that rose off the Ferne.

He frowned and blinked, wondering if his eyes or the scattered flakes of falling snow were playing tricks on him. But when he looked again it was still moving.

“Hey,” he said, elbowing Arthran to get his attention, “look over there.”

“What? Where?”

“Down there, by... oh, I guess it must be around the fairgrounds. Do you see it?”

“See what?”

“The light?” Xavier asked.

“Yes.”

“It’s moving pretty fast,” Xavier said after a short while watching. “Must be someone on horseback.”

“Hey,” Arthran said, “I still don’t—oh! Yeah.” He walked a few steps back and grabbed the horn off its hook. “Do you think he’s coming here?” he asked eagerly.

“Could be,” Xavier said. “Or it could just be someone out late. Maybe there’s a medical emergency.”

“I’ll bet the others haven’t even seen him yet,” Arthran said cheerfully.

“Just hold off until we’re sure,” Kedrick warned. “We don’t want a repeat of last time.”

They watched closely as the light moved through the village. It was hard to tell exactly where it was with no clear points of reference, but it was clear that it was coming closer. After a few minutes, Kedrick was more than satisfied that the torchbearer had left Castlebury and was ascending the path.

“Right then,” Arthran said. “Here goes. Looks like we beat the gate watch to it this time, boys.”

Kedrick smiled. “That’s one up for us. Mark’s going to be peeved.”

And then Arthran shattered the night’s calm with a blast from the horn, blown with malicious volume. Before the first bleat had finished echoing through the valley, he followed it with a second and a third, indicating visitors of unknown status.

Arthran chuckled as he hung the instrument back on its hook. He rushed over just in time to see lights flare up in the Keep. A few seconds later, a second series of horn calls sallied forth from the Gatehouse, verifying the sighting.

“I love that,” Arthran said as men appeared in the courtyard bearing lanterns. “And it’s even more satisfying at night.”

“You,” Kedrick said, “are a bad man.”

“Thank you.”

Shortly before the fifth hour, a spot of light began winding its way up the path to the Watchtower, and a few minutes later Eustan Druisman, Iveran Townes, Lucan Barhelm, and Jon Mortland appeared on the stairs.

“Hello there!” Kedrick cried down as they ascended. “Did you fellows see who came in this morning?”

“Was that you blowing the horn, Kedrick?” Lucan called back.

“No. Arthran.”

“It figures. I ought to wring his scrawny neck, getting me out of bed like that.” Kedrick heard Arthran chuckle from behind him. “You could have blown half as loud and it would have been just as good.”

“If it had been an invading army, you would have thanked me,” Arthran said, walking over. The light of Jon’s torch revealed him grinning like a cat in a dovecote.

“If it had been an invading army,” Lucan grumbled, “I’d hope they’d have the sense to take you out first.”

“Or capture you,” Jon added. “Spread the punishment around, I say.”

“By which you mean punish them, I presume?” Kedrick said.

Arthran shrugged, still smiling.

“So,” Kedrick asked as Eustan stepped onto the wood floor, “what news?”

“Two riders,” Eustan replied. “One’s wearing a uniform—black with silver, a Raven, I think, though I didn’t get a good look at him. The other was a young fellow, couldn’t have been more than fifteen by the look of him, though he rode like an old hand. Halrick seemed to recognize the knight, and shuffled them off before anyone could really talk to them. I saw the horses though.”

“They were pretty beat up,” Iveran said, walking over to the guardhouse and lifting the flap to check on the fire before rejoining them. “From the way they were sweating, I’d say that they’d been ridden all night, though the newcomers know their horses. A little faster, and the beasts would have been dead, but as it is they’ll be fine after a couple day’s rest. Not the hardiest of animals, but they’re a good pair all the same.” Iveran had come from a family of breeders.

“This is an awfully long way for a Raven,” Xavier said, shaking his head. “It’s six hundred miles at least from Northguard Keep. I wonder what they’re doing all the way out here?”

“Blamed if I know,” Eustan replied. “If you find out, though, let us know. I’d bet they make an announcement after mass, and we’re stuck up here until eight.”

“Just quiz Starlan when he comes up with your breakfast,” Arthran said. “He’ll know everything, if you can pry it out of him. Probably more than we’d catch, at any rate.”

“Speaking of mass,” Kedrick said, “we’d better hurry or we’ll be late. See you later.”

“See you,” Jon called after them.

“Enjoy the watch and the snow,” Arthran called out as he followed Kedrick and Xavier down the stairs.

The bell was already ringing as they ducked through the postern gate, the stone wall of the chapel to their left and Main Tower to their right. They walked hurriedly past the buildings and joined the back of the crowd filing inside.

“You see,” Xavier said as they entered and took their places on the floor, “we aren’t late, just as I said. The bells are always a few minutes early—Fastred’s got to get back down, after all—so we had just enough time. I don’t understand why you never believe me about these things.”

“Oh all right already,” Kedrick grumbled. “You’re right. Fine. Say,” he added, looking around, “do you see the two riders that Eustan was talking about?”

“No,” Xavier replied after a moment.

“Me neither.” Kedrick sighed, disappointed. It was hard to be sure about individuals since everyone was standing, but both he and Xavier were tall enough to see reasonably well, and a flash of black would probably stand out in the midst of the Griffins’ grays and greens. Not to mention that they’d probably be standing at the front with the knights, since they didn’t have assigned places among the candidates.

“Halrick’s not here either,” Arthran noted in a whisper, and then was silenced as the doors were closed, and Father Fastred stood up in front of the altar to begin services.

With the newcomers clearly absent, Kedrick found his curiosity fading and fatigue rushing into its place. He caught himself nodding

off several times during the reading and short sermon, and during the final song he was stumbling along so badly that he stopped trying to voice it altogether.

After Fastred finished the final benediction, but before the congregation could begin to file out, Kr'Telkojn, the burly old Selkan who was Halrick's second, climbed up to the altar and raised his hand for their attention.

"Before you all go," he said, his rumbling voice filling the room and silencing the scattered conversations, "a quick announcement. There is a meeting in the Great Hall for all knights, immediately following breakfast. That will be followed by a general meeting on the eighth hour, to discuss recent developments. This means that the beginning of the first rotation of classes will be delayed for as long as the meeting takes. Starlan, make sure you let the watches know when you bring them breakfast."

"A shortened archery practice," Arthran said with a smile. "I think I can manage to contain my disappointment."

"Also," Kr'Telkojn continued, "I shall be taking over Halrick's morning Leadership classes. That is all."

With that he stepped down, leaving a somewhat bewildered assembly to begin moving toward the doors.

"I'm going to see if I can corner Reynard," Xavier said decisively. "Maybe he knows more about what's going on. You two want to come?"

Kedrick shrugged and followed his friend through the crowd. "Sounds fine to me."

"And after that and breakfast, to bed with you," Arthran added. "I thought that you were going to start snoring on your feet a couple of times there."

"Was I that conspicuous?"

"Let's just say that a tall man like yourself is easily visible through the crowd."

"God, I hope none of the instructors noticed."

"If you're lucky, they were paying attention to mass, like you were supposed to be. You should thank the stars that we don't have Religion class on Fastdays. Fastred would never..."

“Reynard?” Xavier called.

Reynard Delwin turned from the door, looked around until he saw Xavier, then smiled. At thirty, he was the youngest of the teachers, the archery instructor for all of the first-years, and their fortet’s foray leader and advisor. He was slightly taller than Arthran, with rusty brown hair swept back from his forehead, a rakish moustache and a neatly-trimmed beard that covered just his chin. His sheepskin overtunic was dyed a faint blue, bordered with yellow embroidery, and he sported a long crimson cloak. Both were badges from his years with the Candrians, with whom he’d served before returning to Kern Heights to teach.

“Hello fellows,” he said cheerfully. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“We were wondering,” Xavier began, “we missed when the newcomers came...”

“We were on watch,” Arthran supplied. “Eustan filled us in on some of the basics, but nothing much really.”

“And we were wondering if you might be able to tell us what’s going on,” Xavier finished.

“I’m afraid not,” Reynard answered. “Halrick pulled them aside before I could do more than catch the Raven’s name—it’s Kestrel Dynfordshire. I’d never heard of him, but I think he and Halrick must be friends.” He shrugged. “I’d place him around my age, so they can’t go too far back; some of the other knights may know him.”

“And the boy?” Arthran asked.

“He couldn’t be a new candidate, could he?” Kedrick asked. “I mean, not this late in the year. He would have already missed so much of the instruction. Do they allow that?”

“I’m afraid that I don’t know the answer to that one. Certainly it doesn’t happen often—I’ve never seen it—but that doesn’t mean it can’t happen.” He shrugged. “It’s really up to the older knights; they know the rules. I’ll just go along with what they decide.”

“Eustan said he’s awfully young,” Arthran mused. “I thought you had to be old enough to turn seventeen in your first year, and even then it’s very rare for candidates to come in that young. That’s how it worked for Galden, at least.”

“That’s usually true,” Reynard replied,” but there have been exceptions. Me, for instance.”

“Really?” Kedrick asked. Despite his penchant for stories—and he’d seen a lot in life that Kedrick could only dream of—Reynard rarely spoke of events that had happened before he graduated from Kern Heights.

“Yes. I didn’t turn seventeen until the summer after my first year...”

“Oh, Xavier!”

Startled, Kedrick was surprised to see Father Fastred Coreline rushing toward them, his stole still hanging over his rough brown robes and his face split by a wide grin.

“I’m glad I caught you,” the priest continued, then noticed Reynard, who smiled back patiently. “Um, sorry Reynard, I just...”

“It’s quite all right Fastred.”

“Yes, well... Anyway, I wanted to catch you before you went to breakfast, Xavier. There’s something... Well I just know you’ll find it as astonishing as I did. If it means what I think it means... We’ll have a go at it as soon as I’m done here, if that’s okay—you don’t have any other plans do you?”

“No,” Xavier replied slowly, looking rather nonplussed.

“Excellent! I’ve already taken the liberty of securing us breakfast—I hope you don’t mind—and I want Barton to take a look too, before he runs off to this meeting. I wish that this whole thing hadn’t happened today,” he waved his hand around vaguely, “but there’s nothing to be done for it I suppose. Anyway, I’ll be in the back room when you’re ready, okay?”

“Um, okay.”

“Right.” He stood there for a moment, looking a little confused as though he’d just forgotten something. The he shrugged. “Well,” he added, his grin returning, “I’ll see you in a couple of minutes then. Carry on.”

“Right,” Xavier said slowly, as Fastred rushed back off toward the altar and the sacristy behind.

“What was that all about?” Arthran asked.

Reynard laughed and shook his head.

Xavier shrugged. “Blamed if I know. But it looks like I’ll be missing out on breakfast.”

“My guess is that a chunk of rock crumbled off the wall somewhere down in the catacombs and he found a new carving,” Reynard said with a smile.

“You think so?” Xavier asked, suddenly excited.

“Maybe,” Reynard replied with a shrug.

“So you were saying that you came in even younger than Galden,” Kedrick reminded him.

“Were you the youngest?” Arthran asked.

“No, at least not the youngest ever—during the War they took whoever they could get, though I’m not sure when you count the Order as having started officially so maybe that doesn’t count. I was certainly the youngest in my year, though there were special circumstances for that.”

“What kind of circumstances?” Kedrick asked.

“I never told you about that, did I? Well, I guess that’s not too surprising.” He sighed. “When I was a child,” he began, “my family lived along upper reaches of the Swent.”

“That’s about seventy miles or so west of here,” Xavier supplied at Arthran’s blank look. “You really should study your geography more thoroughly.”

“Anyway, when I was ten, our hamlet was sacked by bandits. Only my uncle Guthran, my younger brother Jaspard, and I survived from our family, and we and a few others fled to the woods. Those were hard times, the Bandit Wars. The Arcadrians couldn’t afford to try to retake Norwinon, but that didn’t stop them from paying off any strongman they could to do their dirty work for them. The bandits practically ruled that part of the country, until the king finally sent enough troops in to mop things up.” He grimaced.

“Guthran was slain when I was fourteen—they caught him while he was out foraging—and Jas and I were on our own. Those were hard times...” He sighed. “When the army finally came just a few months later, we were taken in by one of the commanders, Sir Ulfred Brexonwood, who happened to be a Griffin. Later, he adopted us, though I still use my original name.” He smiled sadly. “Ulfred died

three years ago—he was pretty old, even when we met him. He was a good—he was a *great* man, and I respected him more than anyone I'd ever met. I still do. I'll have to tell you some of the stories about him someday. He was amazing. Anyway, he came here to teach after the Bandit Wars were finally over, and I came with him.

"I joined the year we arrived, though I'd just turned sixteen. With the years of fighting, the tasks were easy, and I was living at the Keep anyway. There was a bit of a fight all the same, but Halrick took Ulfged's side—even then he had a lot of influence—and I got in. So Halrick, at least, doesn't worry overmuch about age."

"Oh," Kedrick replied.

"I'm sorry," Xavier said awkwardly, "about your family, I mean."

Reynard shrugged and turned away. "It was a long time ago. I miss them, sometimes, of course, but I don't think about it as often anymore."

"And Jaspard?" Kedrick asked. "What happened to him?"

Reynard laughed. "Oh Jas? Jas is just fine. I should have mentioned that right away, I suppose. He's two years younger than me, so he couldn't join right away, though of course he wanted to—No one could be persuaded to let a fourteen-year-old in. By the time he *was* ready, he'd fallen in love with Estreilla, Halrick's niece, who was living here at the time, and he wasn't interested in the Order anymore. He moved north with her—she has family there—and now he's a farmer in Wolfham, and the father of three children, with another due in Spring-month. Frankly, I don't know which of us fared better in the end.

"Anyway, that's my story, boys. And as far as learning about those two, you'll have to wait until the eighth hour, just like everyone else. Meanwhile, I'd better get something to eat before this meeting starts. And you'd better too."

"That," Arthran said emphatically, "sounds like a good idea. Kedrick?"

Kedrick nodded. "Yeah, I'll grab something, and then go take a nap."

"I'll see you later, then," Xavier called out after them, and turned to the sacristy.

The Great Hall was abuzz with talk, but Kedrick was too tired to pay attention. He grabbed his meal and plunked down beside Arthran, but it was all he could do to keep his head from dipping into his porridge.

Arthran, having beaten him there, had taken a seat alongside the four men from the fortet that had been stationed at the Main Gate. They were referred to jokingly as the Four Goatsmen, a name coined by Arthran in their first week, comparing them to a less ruinous version of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse after they wiped out the first month of his allowance, though as the name spread others had assumed they were referring to satyrs, or possibly shepherds, neither of which were very good descriptions of the four of them. For their part, the Goatsmen, Mark Lentfield, Fredran Tallman, Warwick Shropler—usually known as Warro to distinguish himself from the knight of the same name—and Harred Fisher, had taken the name and run with it, enjoying the questions it produced.

All of the fortets had had the opportunity to name themselves at the beginning of the year. The Goatsmen had named themselves the North Aceley Defenders after the village they all hailed from before the new and more interesting name had taken over the old. Kedrick's own fortet was officially the Stalwarts, his invention. All three of them had had their own ideas, though Xavier's had been discarded first—neither he nor Arthran was willing to be called Sir Bruin's Band after some half-bear character from a children's story they'd never heard of. He and Arthran had contested over whether the Stalwarts or Arthran's choice, the Golden Lances, would be their choice, but in the end Xavier had fallen on his side when the raunchily metaphorical possibilities of Arthran's choice had been brought to light (something of which Arthran was undoubtedly well aware of already). As it turned out, the Stalwarts turned out not to be memorable at all and no one used the name anymore, not even Kedrick himself. If asked, Arthran just pretended that they were too multi-faceted to be beholden to a single name.

Currently, Arthran was bragging to the Goatsmen about beating them to the horn and they, predictably, were having none of it.

“Okay,” Arthran said as Kedrick dipped his spoon into the steaming mush, “so that time I sounded the alert for a deer counts against us. But we’re still up by one.”

“You’ll have to keep the lead until Lordsmass,” Fredran reminded him, “otherwise it means nothing. And one isn’t much.” At only five and a half feet, he was the shortest from his fortet, and his bushy brown hair, thick eyebrows, wide nose and mischievous eyes were reminiscent of tales about temperamental house-spirits—a comparison that wasn’t entirely unjustified. He was also the most gregarious of the group, and the one who had been the prime mover on their side for this particular bet.

“It’ll be enough. You’ll see.”

Kedrick swallowed another bite. He was so weary that even eating was a chore.

“Maybe I’ll just have to have one of the others set a rabbit loose on your watch next time,” Mark threatened with a grin. He was lighter-haired, a few inches taller, and even more youthful-looking than Fredran, who also happened to be his second cousin. He was also the closest thing the foursome had to a leader, and had been for years. Uniquely among the fortets, Mark and his friends had known each other long before coming to Kern Heights and had all signed up together. Calling Mark a “leader” was only a very loose statement, however since it mostly meant he was most likely to decide what they did when they had time off.

“You’re just sore because I beat you at Wolves and Snakes for five games straight last week,” Arthran accused.

“You’re still all fired up about that?” Mark asked incredulously. “And how many times have you lost since then? One lucky streak in two months isn’t much to go on about, if you ask me.”

“When is the last time you won five games in a row?” Arthran countered.

“Let him keep bragging,” Fredran said, waving his spoon in the air. “Maybe he’ll get overconfident and start betting reasonable amounts of money, instead of a few coppers here and there.”

“True, true,” Mark noted. “That’s right Arthran, you *are* the greatest. Come, fleece us all with your amazing skill.”

It was well-known that only the regular infusion of Arthran's cash kept the Keep's gambling going at any level of intensity. The others just couldn't have afforded it without winning off him.

Kedrick looked down at his still half-full bowl and sighed. He knew he should eat more, but he just wasn't up to it now.

"Listen fellows," he broke in, standing. "I don't want to seem rude, but I can barely keep my eyes open. I'll see you at the meeting later."

"Don't worry," Mark replied with a grin, "there isn't much you could do to change our opinion of your rudeness."

"I'd bet against that," Fredran said with a grin.

"Belt it, Fred," Mark replied.

"See you later, Kedrick," Warro said. He stood at nearly six feet, but seemed to have grown too quickly, his large nose and cocked smile often making him look rather goofy. He wore his hair long, though this morning he'd tied it back to keep it out of his face during the watch, and he clearly hadn't shaved since the day before since his vigorous facial hair had already darkened his cheeks and chin with stubble. Kedrick had always envied him that; it had taken him weeks to grow in what little beard he had.

"Up late again practicing, eh?" Fredran called after him as Kedrick turned to go. "You know, I say keep doing it. We'll stage a tournament right after your watch some week; see how well you do. I'd bet I could get some serious odds on that."

"Don't listen to him, Kedrick," Harred said softly. He was about Kedrick's own height, with curly red-gold hair that swept back from his handsome face like a mane. Quieter than the others, he was also more serious, though he was still quite happy to joke around with his friends. It had been his father's connections to the Order that had gotten the others interested.

"Unless of course," Harred noted, "you want to take him in the ring Fred?"

"Hey now," Arthran said, "Fred still owes me twenty coppers. Don't go getting him killed on me, eh?"

"We could wait until after he'd paid you back," Harred suggested mildly.

Kedrick grunted noncommittally and trudged between the tables to dump his soiled dishes on the table with the others. Then he made his way across the room to the peg where his cloak and cap hung, fastening his overtunic and slipping on his gloves as he walked. Finishing his dressing, he gritted his teeth and pushed out through the door.

It was still cold and dark outside. The sun wouldn't show itself for another hour at least, and it stayed cold here all day, perched as they were on the mountain, even though it was not yet Midwinter. He threw his hood over his face, braced himself, and began the fifty-odd foot walk across the courtyard to Roper's Hall, the barracks where they slept.

There were four barracks—Dirk's, Roper's, St. Hessaed's, and Strockland's Halls—and Roper's Hall was the third from the Gates. Each was essentially identical, with two floors divided into four sleeping rooms, one to a fortet, and a lavatory at the end. His room, reached by passing through the other three on the first floor, directly adjoined the lavatory. In it were two bunk beds, one that he shared with Arthran and the other for Xavier, two large trunks, two shelves, and a few hooks on the wall for hanging things. Everything was pushed against the walls, where shuttered windows opened over the trunks, and a clean corridor ran through the center.

He drew the curtain between himself and the rest of the building, more to keep out noise than for privacy. After quickly using the lavatory, he unlaced his boots and dropped them to the floor, threw his cloak, cap, and gloves onto the chest, and climbed into bed. Within seconds, his head hit the pillow and he was drifting off to sleep.