

Chapter 3

Edmund Riever

Kedrick groaned loudly into his pillow as the scattered remnants of his dream fled from his mind. There had been a girl, though he couldn't remember what she looked like, and they had been on a mountain...

"'Tis time to awaken from your beauteous slumber, oh Master Ass," came the voice, cutting through his thoughts like a knife—a dull, rough, ragged-cutting knife. "The air dances daintily with the sparkling song of myriad winged birds and the flowers already greet the scattered dew of morn with their brilliantly colored heads."

"God," Kedrick said grumpily. He wasn't in the mood for recitations from some deathly dull play that probably featured ill-fated, star-crossed lovers, as they all seemed to.

"Time waits for no man," Arthran answered sagely. "And for us, our time runs thin."

"Go away."

"Kedrick!" Arthran shouted, doing his best imitation of Chadwick at his most commanding. "Confound it, man, it's almost eight! Get your lazy rear out of bed and your feet into your boots or we'll be late to the meeting!"

"Fine, fine," he said wearily. "I'll be there in just a bit..." His voice trailed off as his eyes closed again despite themselves.

Suddenly, he felt his whole body shaking. His eyes snapped open again and he found himself peering into the face of the demon that had recently taken over Arthran's body, a demon that had the audacity to smile at him with his most innocent-looking grin.

"You should have listened to me. I told you to get some sleep last night before our watch. Now look at you."

Kedrick grumbled and sat up. "You're the Devil himself, you know."

"Come now, don't expect to have me soften my stance because of your flattering blasphemies."

"Do I have time to clean up at least?"

“If you hurry,” he replied. Arthran flopped onto his own bed, feet in the air, as Kedrick clambered down from above, sat on the bunk beside him, and began lacing on his boots.

“So, any news about the meeting that I should know about?”

“No. The knights have been holed up for the past two hours with those two, but they haven’t let anyone even try to listen at the doors.” He flipped onto his back and began to play with his feet against the bottom of Kedrick’s mattress. “Old Warwick caught Mark when we tried, and now he’s got extra duty cleaning the floor after watch next Watersday. And we still didn’t find out anything.”

“You tried the balcony?”

“Of course. What do you take me for? But unless they’re doing speeches those doors muffle too much. And I think there’s a reason they don’t oil them regularly.”

“I wonder what they’re being so secretive about,” Kedrick mused as he finished tying the second knot.

Arthran shrugged. “We’ll find out soon enough, though that won’t comfort Mark any, I’m afraid. The poor fellow did beat me at Wolves and Snakes afterward, so I guess there’s some compensation.”

“Yes, cleaning the floor for a Wolves and Snakes game. That sounds like a fair exchange.”

“Well, there was money riding on it. And I have to be point man the next time we try to eavesdrop, so maybe it will work out for him in the end.”

“At least you’re philosophical about it. Halrick would be proud.” He stood, grabbed his toilet bag from the chest, and walked into the lavatory.

“You see,” Arthran called after him, “I do learn.”

Kedrick shook his head and examined himself in the mirror for a second before opening the spigot and splashing cold water onto his face. He rubbed on some soap, rinsed, dried, and examined the reflection again. Sighing, he grabbed the comb and ran it back through his hair to work out the bed-marks. That finished, he smeared some toothcleaner onto his tooth sponge and scrubbed the chalky substance around his mouth before spitting the residue back into the sink. It tasted bad, but it did make the mouth clean afterwards, and Amalian

was adamant about having everyone use it—better a bad taste than rotten teeth, as she would say. He rinsed his mouth, cleaned out the rest of the sink, then grimaced into the polished bronze mirror. Not bad, though it was still disconcerting the way that the mirror’s surface made him look thinner than he was.

“You look absolutely stunning,” Arthran said as he walked out of the room, “but next time feel free to close the door behind you. It’s just that when you gargle, I can hardly contain my adoration.”

“Oh, come on,” Kedrick grumbled as he threw his cloak over his shoulder and fastened it with the brooch.

Arthran had allowed more time than he had let on, so when they arrived at the front doors of the Great Hall they were still closed and Starlan Danwich, the groundskeeper, was valiantly holding off the crowd that had begun to gather.

“Okay,” he said in his peculiar, overly-accentuated way of speaking, “Halrick says that I’m not to let any in to the Hall, and that means that you will have to wait, okay? So please—please wait, okay?”

Starlan Danwich looked, in many ways, like his father, Sir Warwick Danwich. Both were of medium height, with thick brows, prominent noses, and similar proportions. But Starlan was heavier, with a natural thickness that seemed unrelated to his eating habits, and had a certain look around the eyes that made his particular difficulties obvious even upon first meeting him. He would never be a knight; it was utterly beyond his reach. But he made an excellent groundskeeper, and took his responsibilities very seriously—perhaps too seriously.

“Do you mean to say that they’re still debating in there?” Arthran asked. “It’s been two full hours!”

“I’m not to let anyone in the Hall until Halrick tells me it’s time,” Starlan repeated. “That’s what he told me, and that’s what I’m going to do. So you will have to wait, okay?”

Arthran grimaced, then looked past the man to the side of the building.

“If they’ve got him out here, the other doors will be locked too,” Kedrick noted.

“I know,” Arthran answered with a sigh. “We tried them, remember? It’s just that there if there was a chance they’d open them in time, maybe we wouldn’t have to stand out here in the snow.” It wasn’t snowing hard, but it was certainly more steady than it had been earlier during their watch. “But of course they won’t, not until all of the good seats are taken. You know, I think that making us stand out in the cold must be one of their strategies for ‘toughening us up’. It certainly seems like I’ve spent an awful lot of my time...”

The rest of his rant was drowned out as the crowd suddenly began talking at once. Kedrick turned to see Pastoran Goodhind, their swordsmanship instructor stepping through the now-open doorway and say something to Starlan he couldn’t hear before ducking back inside. And he had left the door open behind him.

Starlan straightened and looked back down at the crowd, waiting for the talking to cease. When he was satisfied that they had quieted sufficiently—which they did pretty quickly, knowing they would get nothing out of him before his desire for silence had been met—he finally spoke. “Okay,” he said, “they are ready for you. You can all come in now. Pastoran says it’s okay now.”

“He could’ve just stepped aside,” one of the candidates nearby grumbled, but not too loudly. They all knew there was no sense complaining about Starlan’s ways. He would do what he had decided to do, and changing his mind was about as easy as persuading an avalanche to change its course. He was annoying at times, certainly, but Reynard and some of the others had told enough gleefully horrific stories about the state of affairs at the Keep before Starlan took over managing the cleaning and maintenance that no one really wanted to cross him.

After his announcement, Starlan finally stepped inside and the rest followed, streaming in behind him like water rushing through a sudden crack in a levy. Beyond the press of people, Kedrick, taller than most, could see that all twenty-one of the knights were already gathered. Halrick Haveshorn, Kr’Telkojn, Warwick Danwich, and Maridon Grownes were at the raised main table with the two newcomers, and the rest were either standing and talking or seated at their tables.

Unfortunately, the huddle around the main table made it impossible to catch more than a glimpse of the newcomers.

Arthran practically threw his cloak on a peg beside the door, then threaded through the close-packed bodies toward the first years' tables, laid end-to-end on the far side of the hall near the kitchen, leaving Kedrick to struggle to keep up. Unmindful of who or what was in his way, Arthran plowed toward the prime seats nearest the great hearth in the center of the hall. He had already sat down and pulled off his gloves by the time that Kedrick reached him.

Kedrick passed the fire, an open blaze set into the floor and bordered by a low stone wall, as one of the wolfhounds that made the Great Hall their winter residence picked himself off the floor and padded over. Kedrick took the seat beside Arthran, who was grinning broadly at him, and reached down to run his fingers through the animal's shaggy gray fur. The dog's name was Gutter, one of the oldest of the pack. He had struck up a friendship with Kedrick from the beginning, one that had been cemented by his tendency to be generous with his victuals.

"Hello, boy," Kedrick said, smiling gently. "Do you know what's up, hmmm? You've been listening in on the whole thing, I'd wager."

Gutter looked at him with his good right eye—the other was blinded by a thin blue film—and thumped his tail on the floor, but said nothing.

"Oh, you're not talking, are you? And I don't have anything with me to loosen your tongue. What if I promise a piece of one of my pastries?"

The dog's tail thumped harder. He recognized the word "pastries".

"I don't know," Arthran said with a grin. "They make good spies, but getting them to reveal what they know, now that's the hard part. You keep bribing them and bribing them... Say, isn't that Lark over there?"

"Where?" Kedrick asked automatically, then caught himself and turned to Arthran in disgust. "God, Arthran, let it rest, will you? One of these days she's going to hear you, and then..."

"And then what? She'll realize that maybe you're sweet on her?"

“Belt it, Arthran,” he muttered as his eyes drifted back toward her and his heart quickened. Lark Hartfell was one of only three current female candidates and the only one in their year—some of the previous years hadn’t had any, or so he’d heard. That meant, of course, that he wasn’t the only one who noticed when she walked through the door. That she was beautiful—at least he thought so—made her even more of a sensation.

His eyes followed as she pulled the hood off her head and unclasped her cloak, revealing a long braid of breathtaking strawberry blonde hair and a sweet, natural smile as she chatted with her fortet-mates. Her sheepskin snow trousers followed, revealing tight-fitted leggings...

Kent Cliff, one of the second-years, called out something from the nearby table as she passed by, and she replied with a laugh and a smile that sent the blood rushing to Kedrick’s face in a flood of jealousy and embarrassment. He had almost convinced himself to look away when she turned to him, caught his eyes across the room, and flashed him a smile that made his heart skip a beat. She began walking in his direction...

And then she turned, following her fortet-mates, and took a seat several yards away, farther from the fire. He watched for a few more moments—she’d stopped looking in his direction some while ago and now was deep in conversation with Brenton, one of the others in her fortet—until another group came in beside her, blocking her from view.

“Hey!” Arthran said, snapping his fingers.

Kedrick turned his startled eyes toward his friend.

“Wow. And you were worried about me embarrassing you?” Arthran asked. “You’re like a ten-year-old schoolboy with his first crush. Next thing I know, you’re going to catch a frog and try to impress her with it.”

“Belt it,” Kedrick grumbled again.

“Well at least that scraggly thing on your cheeks you’re trying to pass off as a beard keeps the blush from blazing across the room like beacon fire.”

Kedrick scowled and turned away, watching the people file into the Hall. There were 155 residents in the Keep, though eight were on watch duty and would not come: twenty-one knights, 123 candidates, and eleven others: wives, children, and Fastred and Starlan. But during the day there were quite a few more present, workers of various kinds who came up from the village to clean, cook, take care of the grounds, and care for the animals. How many were present at any one time depended on the day, the time of day, and the time of year, but today it seemed like more than usual so that the Great Hall was nearly half-full. The only time he'd ever seen it fuller was when they'd been inducted into the Order upon his first arrival, when many Griffins from far and wide had returned to Kern Heights to see the new class of candidates sworn in and the second years from the year before return for one last time to be fully inducted into the knighthood. Then there had been people crowded along the balcony to watch the proceedings, the press was so tight.

Even that crowd did not represent the entire Order. Each year, a maximum of sixty-four candidates graduated, and afterwards one was a member for life, whether active or not, unless by some disgrace one managed to get oneself expelled. Xavier had once asked Halrick how many there were, but Halrick didn't know for sure since they did not have accurate records of who had died and those who lived far away rarely came to the yearly ceremonies, or even the General Assembly, typically held in Holdfast over the summer, which was more accessible for most than Kern Heights. Everyone who passed through the academy was in the rolls, however, and there were well over two thousand names there. The Order had been officially recognized for 44 years, since 501 by the Norwinese Calendar, though it had been in existence since Kern founded it in 415. Most knights were on reserve duty, in charge of local militias through much of the south and west of Norwinon, though in time of battle they could form a full regiment of specially-trained wilderness fighters, units of which had been used to good effect during the Bandit Wars.

"Where's Xavier?" Kedrick asked as the flow began to lessen. "It isn't like him to be late."

“Blamed if I know,” Arthran answered with a shrug. “But you can bet that if he’s late it’s because he and Fastred have their noses stuck in some dusty old tome or another. Maybe they found something new that Fastred had completely forgotten about, buried underneath one of those rocks with the leaf-shapes on them that he likes to collect.”

Kedrick grinned. It would be just like Fastred to have laid one of his rocks on top of something important and then forget entirely about it. He remembered the one time the priest had come to class empty-handed, having misplaced his notes somewhere, only to learn later from Xavier that they had been stuffed in a drawer with the cloths for cleaning the sacred chalice because he’d been distracted by some theological question or another while trying to do too many things at once. The notes had only shown up a week later when the lady in charge of the chapel laundry had been cleaning out the drawer. Fortunately for the class (or unfortunately, depending on your point of view), he had committed the entire contents of his notes to memory and was able to give a complete lesson without them, with only a little fretting in the beginning.

Arthran continued to crack jokes about what Xavier and the priest might be up to while Kedrick returned his attention to the crowd, now thinning as more and more took their seats. Moments later, the chapel bells began to ring, sounding the eighth hour.

Almost immediately, three young children raced through the door like spooked hares, charging past a bewildered Starlan to run gleefully into the gathering crowd. They were the only children living at Kern Heights, since most of the knights were either childless or had adult children like Starlan. Two, Toland and Bethany, belonged to Amalian and Barton, while Jon Valviline was the son of Guy, the wilderness training instructor, and Yemellian, the head cook. He was cousin to the other two, since Yemellian was Barton’s sister. As Yemellian was not yet present and their fathers were engaged in conversation, they rushed to Amalian, buzzed around her for a few seconds, then ran off toward Arthran and Kedrick.

“This,” Kedrick said as the three children streamed toward them, “is what we get for sitting here. You’ll notice that the other candidates are giving us berth.”

“And I thought that it was because of your intimidating scowls,” Arthran replied with a grin.

Kedrick favored him with one such scowl as the boys rushed past, barreling toward the fire. There they were greeted by several enthusiastic canines, many of whom stood well above the boys even on all fours, with much licking and fur-rubbing.

Instead of following the boys, Bethany trotted over to Arthran and inserted herself on the bench beside him, nudging Kedrick over without so much as an acknowledgement that he was there. Gutter crouched under the table and poked his head onto her lap, giving her a look that made her giggle as she began to pet him.

“Hi Awthran,” she said, smiling cheerfully. She had taken a shine to Arthran almost immediately upon meeting him and followed him around whenever she could. Of course she was four, and could thus be forgiven for her questionable taste.

“Hello, Miss Bethany,” Arthran said, pretending to be very serious. “How goes the mission today?”

“Um,” she sat and thought for a moment, “I finded thwee mowe. You wanna see?”

“Sure—no, we’d better wait. You’re Mom’s coming.”

“Oh!” She giggled and dropped something back into the oversized pouch she had strapped to her belt.

“What’s this all about?” Kedrick whispered sternly. “You’re not corrupting...”

Arthran held up an open hand for him to keep silent. “Shhh,” he hissed, with a conspiring grin. Bethany giggled again.

“Hello Arthran, Kedrick,” Amalian Fasearn said. “You’re not bothering them, are you Beth?”

“No, Mommy.”

“We don’t mind,” Arthran said with a shrug, before giving a sidelong glance toward Bethany as Amalian took a seat at the table.

“Thanks. I’m sorry about the kids. But if they don’t play with the dogs, they’re going to bother everyone. I’ve no doubt they have already put the cooking staff behind schedule.” She gave the boys an exasperated look, then sighed and absently pushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

Amalian Fasearn was, in many ways, the opposite of her husband Barton: tall and willowy, with long, honey-brown hair surrounding a narrow face with thin features. She talked much more softly than her husband, except in class or when reprimanding the children, and moved about with a quiet grace. Kedrick had thought her meek when he first met her, until she had substituted for Pastoran at sword practice for a week when the other knight was out on an errand. Kedrick had quickly learned that she was faster and more agile than he ever would have guessed, and was still bewildered by the fact that the same hands that had administered balm to his bruises had inflicted them not long before.

Arthran glanced over at the boys, who had already started making growling noises as they half-petted, half-wrestled the hounds, then turned back to Amalian. “So,” he began, “who is he and what’s his story?”

“You can’t even wait a few moments to find out?”

“Of course not,” Kedrick said dryly. “Think of Arthran as being the same age as Toland, except that he can reach the sweets on top of the cabinet.”

“Hey,” Arthran protested, “I could reach the sweets then too. I just needed a chair.”

“Well,” Amalian replied, smiling, “I am afraid that you’ll just have to wait like everyone else. Halrick will say what needs to be said, and I wouldn’t want to second-guess him.”

“Second-guess him? Now you’re making it sound like some sort of plot.”

“Well, I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just...”

“She’s worried that you have some sort of bet going on with the Goatsmen about weaseling out the information first,” Kedrick said.

“Oh!” Arthran exclaimed, feigning being affronted. “Is that what you think?”

“Do you?” she asked in reply.

“Well, no...”

“Regardless, you’re getting nothing from me.”

“Hmmp.”

Kedrick shook his head and turned to the door. “Where is Xavier?”

“I told you, they probably found some hidden book or some such.”

“But it isn’t like him to be late. He’s *always* on time.”

“I bet it’s like that time he was looking at those old maps and found the river had shifted. He was late to Field Medicine after that.”

“I remember,” Amalian said, chuckling. She was the instructor for that class. “He was so disappointed.”

Kedrick smiled. Xavier had been poring over old maps, which was one of the inexplicable things he did for fun, when he realized that the Ferne had changed course near Lake Harne since the time the map had been drawn, and in so doing had passed over the official border, meaning that there was a small swath of territory on the Arcadrian side that officially belonged to Norwinon. He’d thought it this great discovery until Reynard had to explain exactly how useful twenty square feet of riverbank was.

“It’s something more than that,” Kedrick noted. “Father seemed so excited...”

“True. Maybe it’s a new kind of rock that he found. One that, oh I don’t know, maybe it chimes a different note when you strike it. Rocks can do that, right?”

Kedrick shrugged. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Oh, come on you two,” Amalian chided them, “you’re being mean. Granted, it may be somewhat deserved, but mean nonetheless. And in case you’re wondering rather than just using the opportunity to poke fun, they think that they may have found a new passage in the catacombs, and frankly I think that *is* interesting.”

“Really?” Kedrick said. “I mean the passage part, not that you find it interesting.”

“Yes. They had Barton down there prying at the thing all through breakfast.”

“Now that is something,” Arthran said. “Not what I would expect from Xavier at all. Do you think that this means that he has turned a new leaf and will become a repository for *useful* information?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go *that far*,” Kedrick replied.

“Arthran Bryce,” Amalian admonished, shaking her head with mock-seriousness, “you are absolutely abominable. I shall have to remember to keep my children away from you.”

Kedrick laughed. “I think it may be too late for that.” He looked down at Bethany.

“Oh Guttewe,” she was mumbling, her face buried in the dog’s fur, “you sweet little—what?” She looked up, suddenly realizing that everyone was staring at her. Arthran began to laugh, and Amalian soon joined in.

“What is it?” she asked, annoyed. “What’s funny?”

“Oh, nothing, honey,” Amalian said. “It was just the look on your face, after Kedrick was talking about...”

“About what, Mommy?”

“Oh, nothing Honey. Just children.”

She gave them all a stern look, then returned to the dog. “I’m not childwen,” she told the dog firmly.

“Anyway,” Arthran said, “I’ll bet that they found a secret treasure chamber,” Arthran said. “Any self-respecting bunch of caves has to have one.”

“Really,” Kedrick said, arching an eyebrow.

“Sure. It’s in all of the stories.”

“Okay, Arthran.”

“You don’t believe the stories?”

“Most of the ones I know have the caves occupied by trolls.”

“Ah, but the trolls are there to guard the *treasure*.”

“Speaking of trolls...” Amalian muttered.

“Now who’s being mean?” Arthran asked.

Kedrick looked up to see Xavier standing in the doorway looking around. He waved his hand to catch his friend’s eye and was rewarded with a grin as the other man began striding toward them. His trousers were covered in dust, Kedrick noted, and his attempts to sweep it off had merely spread it farther.

“So,” Arthran asked as he neared, “what kind of treasure did you find?”

“Tweasure?” Bethany asked, suddenly interested. “What tweasure?”

“Xavier and Father Fastred were looking for buried treasure,” Arthran explained.

“We most certainly were not,” Xavier protested.

“Amalian said you were digging around in the catacombs, trying to open a secret passage. And if I know anything, it’s that secret passages conceal treasure.”

“Or ways for the hero—or villain—to escape undetected,” Kedrick added unhelpfully.

Arthran gave him a sidelong glance. “No heroes or villains in *this* story,” he noted. “At least not until there’s a treasure to fight over.”

“There is no treasure,” Xavier replied, “or at least not yet. We haven’t even opened the panel up. But there is something behind it. It will just take time to get through.”

“Say, if I help out with the excavation, can I get first pick of any baubles?”

“Arthran...” Amalian began.

“Well, I guess I don’t have much of a story to tell anymore,” Xavier said, sitting down. “And as for treasure, I suppose it’s possible. Fastred thinks they might be tombs—it’s the only thing that makes sense with all the space down there. He figures the rest of it was probably tombs at one time too, but it was plundered long ago.”

“Plunder,” Arthran said, nodding. “That makes sense. And the only reason to hide tombs, of course, is because they are stuffed to the brim with treasure.”

“You know that plundering tombs is grave-robbing, right?” Kedrick reminded him. “Not the best idea, from what I’ve heard.”

“You’re expecting vengeful spirits?”

“Would you like to have your grave plundered?”

“I don’t expect to be buried with anything of worth anyway. I’d like to think I’m a generous enough fellow that I would pass anything of mine along to my descendents.”

“Anyway,” Xavier said, “what we *did* find is that there are actually three different possible places, not just one...”

“Shhh,” Kedrick hissed, rather pleased that he’d be able to cut Xavier off before the theorizing started, “I think Halrick’s about to open the meeting.”

“People!” Halrick called out, raising his hand. Halrick Haveshorn, headmaster of Kern Heights, was imposing when he wished to be, and today he was able to catch everyone’s attention (except the children’s) within a few seconds. He was nearing sixty, but still stood straight and proud. As always, he looked rather grim, his full beard trimmed to a point under an angular, weather-worn face. Once his hair had been near-black, but now it was streaked with gray, especially on the edges of his high forehead and in the beard.

“Thank you,” he continued, a little more softly as the room fell into quiet. “I apologize for taking you from your classes and other duties. I’m sure you are all terribly disappointed.”

There were some remarks about this, most disagreeing.

“Nonetheless, this is a matter which, indirectly at least, affects every one of you, and it is important for you to be here to witness it.

“As you well know, early this morning we received two visitors. They sit here before you now. They are Kestrel Dynfordshire,” he indicated the older man, who rose and nodded before reseating himself, “and Edmund Riever.”

For the first time, Kedrick was able to get a good look at the newcomers. Kestrel looked to be in his mid-twenties, of medium height and with a warrior’s body. His hair was reddish-brown and cropped short and his face was clean-shaven. He wore a black tunic inlaid with the gray emblem of a raven in flight and matching trousers. To that time Kedrick had only been familiar with the Ravens through military history lessons with Maridon, but the heraldry was unmistakable. But was a long way to Northguard Keep.

As for Edmund, Eustan had been on the mark about him. He looked fourteen, possibly sixteen if he was a very late bloomer, but no more than that. Certainly, he was younger than any of the other candidates, and looked to have several inches left to grow. He was skinny, with straight, blonde hair, a rounded face, and large eyes. His garments were unremarkable—brown working clothes—but seemed overlarge, as if they had been made to be grown into.

Both newcomers looked worn, not surprising after having ridden through the night, and their clothes were stained with the mud of the

road. From the circles under Edmund's eyes, visible even across the room, it appeared they had not slept for some time. Whatever their reasons for coming to Kern Heights, they had been urgent enough to make them push themselves more than most travelers would. Still, they appeared to have been given some opportunity to wash up, for their faces and hair seemed clean.

"Edmund's father," Halrick continued, "was a good friend of mine. I have known him since the Independence War. He passed more than a month ago, and Edmund has no living relatives. As a close friend of the family, it was his father's wish that I should take up guardianship, and I will do so. Kestrel has been kind enough to deliver him here, but his duties prevent him from doing more. So, for the time being, Edmund will be living here at the Keep."

There was some murmuring at that statement, but there was no clear cause for argument. If Halrick wanted to take a youth under his wing, that was his business.

"Well, that's not a big deal," Arthran said quietly.

"I doubt that's the half of it," Xavier replied. "He wouldn't have said that the matter concerns us all if that were it."

Halrick raised his hand again, and the murmuring died away. "That is not all," he began. "I have spoken with the other instructors, and although it is highly irregular, we have reached an agreement."

Kedrick saw a dour look appear briefly on Warwick's face before he regained his stony composure. Likely, whatever they had decided, some among the knights had needed considerable convincing to agree to it. Warwick was always strictly by-the-rules, so whatever it was, "irregular" was an apt term.

"We have decided that, given his age and the fact that he will be living amongst us for some time, Edmund will be offered the opportunity to join the Order as a first-year candidate. This morning we were able to verify that he can pass the Ten Tasks, through Kestrel's experiences with him or through demonstration, although the swimming requirement I have had to take on faith."

A few in the audience chuckled at that.

"Thus, it is our agreed intention that he become a first-year candidate for the Order of the Griffin, upon completion of the oath.

A new candidate requires a sponsor. Who will act as the sponsor of Edmund Riever?”

“I will,” Kestrel said, standing again. A sponsor could be a knight from any of the Royal Orders—Kedrick’s had been Sir Donald Bowlderdon, the District Sheriff and resident Griffin at his hometown of Disseton—but having one from another Order was very unusual, to say the least.

“And I will act as his second,” Halrick said. “Edmund, please stand. Edmund Riever, do you understand the responsibilities incumbent upon a candidate for the Order of the Griffin?”

“Yes sir, I do.” Edmund’s voice had not yet completely matured, Kedrick noted.

“And is it your intention to join this Order, should you be found worthy?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then I ask that you speak the Oath, the last of the Ten Tasks and the one that signifies your acceptance as a candidate.”

Edmund stood perfectly still and his eyes fixed on a point against the far wall. Speaking slowly and carefully, he began.

“I, Edmund Riever, do solemnly pledge my service to God, who is my Lord and above all things. I shall follow his commands, and my actions shall forever be a tribute to Him. I pledge service to my King, the honorable Cameron Palatine, and to his successors, who are my lords upon this earth. I pledge to defend the Kingdom and the Faith, to protect the weak from those who would do them harm, to protect the powerless from those who aggress against them, and to give my aid to all those who are righteously in need. I pledge to uphold the honor of the Order, and to perform all of my actions such that they add to its honor. These things I do solemnly swear, to uphold to the end of my days, with the Lord God as my witness.”

“Well said,” Amalian said quietly, and Kedrick had to grudgingly agree. He himself had stumbled over the “perform all my actions” part and nearly had to start over from the beginning.

“He’s likely been practicing all the way here,” Arthran noted.

“Belt it,” Kedrick whispered.

“Father Fastred?” Halrick called.

The priest mounted the stage and to stand before the new candidate. He extended the first two fingers of his right hand, touched them to Edmund's head, and then moved them down through the air to the boy's waist. "May the Father, creator of all, bless you." He moved his hand to touch Edmund's left shoulder, then traced again before his chest to the right. "May the Son, our Lord Jarod Druis, who came to our world and saved us through his death and resurrection, bless you." A third time he touched Edmund's right shoulder and traced across. "And may the Spirit, who resides within us all, bless you."

"His will be done," Edmund replied.

"Lord," Fastred said, "this young man is seeking entrance into Your service. Accept him and guide him toward righteousness all the days of his life."

"Edmund Riever," Halrick began again, "you have been sworn into the Order of the Griffin. From this day forth, you must abide by our rules, obey your superiors, and serve your God and King above all things. May you do us proud.

"Friends, I am pleased to present to you our newest candidate, Edmund Riever!"

With many of the others, Kedrick hesitated a little before clapping. Such a thing... He noticed that several did not clap at all, or joined in late, and then half-heartedly.

"I've never heard of *anything* like this," Xavier said, awed, as the applause died away. "Have you?" he turned to Amalian.

"No," she replied, "but there isn't anything to prevent it. And we do have an open spot, since the candidate who was supposed to be in your fortet fell ill and couldn't come."

"He's missed two months of classes and more," Xavier said. "How could he possibly catch up?"

"Halrick thinks he can," Amalian said firmly. "And from what he did at the meeting, he's been learning on his own. He may be behind in the history courses, but he'll hold his own in the training; you'll see."

"A little piece of nothing like that?" Arthran scoffed. "The kid will be seeing you every day to be fixed up."

"You may be surprised, Arthran."

“That is all,” Halrick said again, his voice cutting through the conversations that had sprung up around the hall. “Those of you who have classes to attend should do so now. Edmund, you and Kestrel will stay in guest quarters in Main Tower today, and you will be assigned permanent living quarters and a schedule by Sunday. That is all.”

Many of the candidates were talking amongst themselves as they filed out, some bewildered, a few even hostile. Kedrick himself didn’t know what to think. On the one hand, it was exciting to have a fourth member of the quartet, finally, always assuming that he was reasonably easy to get along with. On the other hand, he couldn’t help feeling a little annoyed that the newcomer could just jump into the middle of the program without having to do all of the work that had led to this point. It was some consolation, though, that Edmund would be sleeping over Xavier, who snored like an angry wasp trapped in a bottle.

“Kedrick, Arthran, Xavier,” Halrick said sharply, approaching, and Kedrick was overcome with a sudden sinking feeling that the knight had noted his reservations about the newcomer and was going to have words with them about it.

“Yes?” Xavier asked.

“Could you three stay? I would like to talk to you. Don’t worry; Reynard is aware that you will be late.”

“Um, okay,” Kedrick said, feeling a little sick to his stomach. After all, it was highly unusual. Why shouldn’t he be surprised, even a little put off? It wasn’t like he was going to give Edmund hell because he’d come late and probably at too young an age, not like some people would. Come to think of it, the first few weeks were almost certain to be miserable for the poor fellow. Maybe Halrick wanted to enlist them to help the boy out?

Sighing, he sat down with his friends at one of the now-empty tables as the other knights and candidates filed out past them.

At last, the candidates, knights, and workers had gone back to their respective duties and only Amalian remained from those who had been sitting at the tables—she was still trying to coax the children into letting

the dogs be. Halrick strode to them from where he had been talking to Warwick by the door.

“So,” he began, “how do you three feel about another roommate?”

Kedrick raised his eyebrows and blinked. He hadn’t been expecting that question.

“Well,” he began.

“Well I can’t say it’s an *exciting* prospect,” Arthran said. “I mean, we do have room of course, and unless he’s the sort who yells out in his sleep...”

“But you’ll have to readjust quite a bit,” Halrick finished for him. “I understand. It’s not like at the beginning of the year, when none of you had settled in yet. And it will be difficult for Edmund too, I must imagine. He’s a good boy, and I’m sure he’ll do fine, but to dive into all of this at once, the classes and routine, and the living arrangements as well; he’s got so much catching up to do already, I wish there was some way of making at least the one transition easier for him. If there were another way...”

“There are plenty of other rooms,” Arthran offered eagerly. He in particular liked the freedom of being able to store his stuff on the empty bunk—probably because he had more stuff than Kedrick and Xavier combined. “Main Tower, North Tower... We could clear something out pretty quick if we had to. We’d all pitch in.”

“Hmm, yes. Yes, that’s true. But I wouldn’t want him to be too far out of the barracks, since he’ll have to transition in at some point. And Main Tower’s out of the question, of course. But—of course! South Tower. There’s plenty of room there; we just need to clean out one of the store rooms.”

“In with the girls, sir?” Xavier asked.

“Well, no, of course not. I was thinking of the first floor. There’s a storage room there. It’s not very big, but it’ll do, and it’s practically in the barracks, without actually being there.” He sighed with a smile. “That’s a load off my back there. He’s very dear to me, Edmund is, and I don’t want to show him any special treatment, but you understand how these things go sometimes.”

“I guess...” Kedrick replied. He was still trying to figure out how they had managed to keep their free space. Not that he was

complaining, of course, but wasn't learning to deal with sudden upheavals part of their training?

"He'll still be in your fortet, of course," Halrick continued. "Which means that I'll expect you to look out for him. He'll be behind in a lot of things, so I want you to help him catch up. Plus, he's been through a lot lately, and this place is all he has left. I know I can count on you to make him feel welcome, and to help convince the others to do the same." He looked out the door for a moment. "I suspect there are those who might feel a bit resentful that we let him in late and they will want to give him a hard time about it. I would take it as a personal favor if you would try to minimize that."

"But..." Kedrick began.

"I know," Halrick said with a sigh. "There's only so much you can do. But if you would try, I would be truly grateful."

"Of course," Xavier said while the others nodded.

"Good," Halrick said with a smile. "Well, you had best be getting off. Reynard will be waiting."

"Right," Xavier said, but he didn't move, even after Halrick turned away and made for the door.

"What was that all about?" Arthran asked. "I feel like I missed something, but I know that I was here the whole time. I mean, did I convince him that Edmund shouldn't live with us, or did he convince me?"

"I don't know," Xavier replied. "Maybe he read some of those reports about you and decided that it would be best to keep Edmund away from you as much as possible. Seeing how young and, probably, impressionable, he is, Halrick wouldn't want him being around the wrong sort of people for any more time than necessary."

"What are you saying?" Arthran asked, pretending to be offended.

"I don't know," Kedrick mused. "It's just weird."

"Anyway," Xavier said, "we'd better get going."

Kedrick nodded and followed Xavier out, still trying to make sense of it all.

They did not see Edmund again that day until Noctals, even though Xavier and Kedrick had been recruited to help clear out the

South Tower storage room and one might have thought the boy would have shown up to help arrange things to his liking. Arthran, somehow, despite having been the first to offer assistance, had managed to make himself scarce immediately after Wilderness Training, so Aleck Orslet didn't find him when he was rounding up "volunteers". Arthran would hear about *that* later. But Aleck had roped Lark's fortet—her, Brenton Claves, Cormald Hunter, and Galden Jonson—into the work as well, so he didn't mind too much. Kedrick did feel a little bad for them—the only reason they'd been nabbed was because he'd stopped to ask Galden a question in the hopes of maybe getting a chance to talk to Lark that didn't feel too awkward. And of course that hadn't even worked out, since Aleck had shown up before they got anywhere. And of course there wasn't much chance to talk with her now, since they were carting furniture and equipment to rooms in both other floors of the tower and only occasionally passed along the way. But at least he got to be near her—or close enough—and that was something.

Besides, even when he had the opportunity to talk to her he found his mind rarely capable of producing reasonable conversation and did little more than smile awkwardly. He wondered why she had such an effect on him. He'd been okay with other girls—well, maybe not *all* other girls. There had been Cassie... But he preferred not to think about that.

They had barely finished setting up the bed by the time the Noctals bell rang, so they trudged wearily across the courtyard to the chapel, leaving the final touches until after supper. With an hour and a half of archery practice, two of sword training, and three with Guy climbing the cliff-face outside the Keep, followed by two hours of moving heavy objects up and down stairs, Kedrick was exhausted.

He found himself sagging at several points during mass. That Arthran, who stood beside him through it all, was rested and cheerful—having, he explained, beaten Fredran in a particularly well-fought game of Wolves and Snakes—just made matters worse. By the time he sat down for supper in the Great Hall, he wasn't in the mood to do much more than sit and pick at his food.

"Hi."

Edmund was standing there, plate in hand, offering him a shy but friendly smile.

“You’re Kedrick, right? Calderson?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m Edmund. Do—do you mind if I sit here? Halrick said that I’m going to be the fourth member of your fortet.”

Kedrick sighed and scooted over.

“Sure,” Arthran said with a flourish. “I’m Arthran, by the way, Arthran Bryce.” He extended his hand and Edmund took it. “And this is Xavier Basilson...”

“Hi,” Xavier said, taking the hand in turn.

“Hello,” Edmund said, then shook Arthran’s hand, followed by Xavier’s. Warily, Kedrick turned from his stew to take the hand extended to him. Although Kedrick’s hand engulfed Edmund’s, the boy’s grip was firm.

“So,” Arthran said without further ado as Edmund put his bowl on the table and sat behind it, “what’s your story?”

“My story?”

“The story of why you’re here. We all have some sort of story, though some are more interesting than others. Mine, for example, is that I’m from Ayle, prodigal scion of the great Bryce merchant empire.” He smiled bitterly. He never spoke much about his family, but from what little he had said Kedrick knew there were deep wounds there, deeper than Arthran ever admitted. “My parents and I weren’t getting along, and when they couldn’t stand having me around anymore,” he shrugged, “they sent me away, first to Lindswall Academy in Norsmouth, and then here. It was lucky for me that I passed the tasks, else I would have been sent into the regular army, or maybe even a monastery. But my teachers would never have stood for that—have to do the academy proud and all—and so they made certain that I was absolutely prepared, no matter what it took. And so, here I am.”

Edmund blinked, taken aback.

“Hey, if we’re going to be fortet-mates, we’d better start off with truth, right? And maybe when we get to know each other better I’ll even fill in some of the more sordid details.

“But take Kedrick here. He’s an example of one of the less interesting tales. He’s a farm boy from Disseton—you probably remember the place since unless you went through the trackless wilderness you pretty much had to pass through it in order to get here; it’s the last real town on the road, if you can call it that, though there are a couple of smaller villages past it. It’s the last one with a real inn, at any rate. Anyway, I guess it was always a dream to send someone from his family out here, and Kedrick was the one. That’s about the size of it, right?”

“Yeah,” Kedrick said, “pretty much.” He hadn’t told anyone about his other reasons for coming, and considering how much guff Arthran gave him about Lark he had decided that such matters were better kept to himself. “It took me two trials to get in, though,” he added as a way of explaining his last comment. “I passed all the tasks last year, but I didn’t do well enough on the archery to make the cut.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Edmund said uncomfortably.

Kedrick shrugged. “It was probably a good thing. If I’d come in last year... Well, this year is better company, let’s just say that. Plus I was much more prepared when I finally did join. It would have been much more of a struggle last year.”

“If he’d come last year he wouldn’t have had the pleasure of nearly as much of my company is what he’s saying,” Arthran noted.

Kedrick rolled his eyes. That wasn’t what he’d meant at all. Sure, there were great people in this year—and despite his obnoxiousness, Arthran really was a lot of fun—but he’d really been thinking about some of the second-years, one in particular. He wondered if he should warn the kid about Petran now, before Edmund met him in person. Not that it would really matter...

“I do remember Disseton,” Edmund continued. “We didn’t stay long, but it seemed nice. They had good food at the inn.”

“I suppose,” Kedrick replied. He had rarely eaten there himself. It was too expensive, and his father always preferred to eat at home.

“Now Xavier,” Arthran continued, turning the discussion away before Kedrick could make a final decision about issuing any warnings, “he’s a farm boy too, it’s true, but...”

“I think I’ll tell my own story, if you don’t mind,” Xavier cut in.

“Oh!”

“He always starts exaggerating,” Xavier explained. “Why just me and not Kedrick I don’t know.”

“You’re more fun,” Arthran said.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “He had some of the other first-years convinced that I slew some sort of horrible beast with my bare hands before coming here.”

“It was a wild boar,” Arthran said.

“When I heard it, the boar was as big as a house,” Kedrick noted.

“Horse,” Arthran corrected. “I had to keep it believable.”

“It was believable that I could kill a horse-sized boar with my bare hands?”

“Believable enough that they still shy away from you in unarmed combat,” Arthran said proudly.

“Watch out for him,” Xavier said. “Seriously.”

“Anyway, the real story is that I’m from Stavham and my family owns a farm outside of town. It’s not a big farm, but we make ends meet well enough, better than many, I suppose. But my grandfather—my mother’s father—was a resistance fighter, and he always encouraged us toward the military. My family has always been in the militias when needed, and I had a couple of uncles who became actual soldiers for a time. But I always wanted to be a knight. I’ve been working toward this since I was ten, since my mother realized I was interested and did all she could to get me ready. But there weren’t any spectacular deeds that got me here, I’m afraid, just a lot of training and hard work.”

“You really don’t know how to tell a good story,” Arthran complained.

“But you made it,” Edmund said. “Your mother must be very proud.”

“I’d like to think so,” he answered. “Sadly, she never got to see it. She died a year and a half ago, before I got my application in.”

“Oh. I—I’m so sorry.”

Xavier nodded.

“My mother...” Edmund began, then stopped. A troubled look crossed his face, and he lowered his eyes to the floor. “She passed when I was eight.”

Kedrick took a deep breath. Things had taken a much grimmer tone than he had expected.

“Anyway,” Arthran said awkwardly, “back to you, Edmund. I’m sure there’s more to your story than what Halrick told, and I’m betting it’s a whole lot more interesting than ours.”

“Not really. As Sir Halrick said, he and my father had been close friends since the war, though I’d only met Halrick before once or twice that I can remember. But I don’t have any other close relatives, and I—I was the only child. So when Father died—it was the fever, you know—it was his wish that I come here. Father had been enlisted, but he always hoped that I could join Halrick’s Order, and he had been training me since I was a kid...”

“Since you were a kid?” Arthran laughed. “You mean since last year? I hate to be the one to tell you this Edmund, but you’re still a kid by my reckoning.”

“I’m old enough.”

“And how old is that, exactly?”

“Seventeen.”

“Right. And I’m thirty-five.”

“Truly, I am.”

“Okay kid, if that’s the way you want it to be. But I’d place money on reality shaving at least two years off that.”

Edmund shrugged. “Have it your way. Short of finding my church records there’s really no way I can prove it to you.”

Arthran just shook his head.

“You must be from pretty far away, to be in the company of a Raven,” Xavier said with a disapproving glance at Arthran.

“Um, you mean Kestrel? He’s—I mean, he was visiting town, on leave, when Father took ill. We lived in Kritstown, which is near the Buten Gulf, but inland.”

“That has got to be nearly...” Xavier closed his eyes and nodded his head a few times as he performed the calculations. “What, six hundred miles from here! How long did that take you?”

“It was a long ride,” Edmund confirmed. “We’ve been traveling steadily for about a month. If things had gone better, I would probably have made the trip next summer.”

“Wow,” Kedrick whistled. “A month on the road. You must have seen nigh half of Norwinon.”

“It seems that way, sometimes.”

“Did you see the stone ring at Weatherstam?” Xavier asked. “It’s right off the Northway, near Treston. I was wondering because if you did...”

“I’m sorry,” Edmund broke in. “We were in a hurry, and I was in no mood for sightseeing. I could tell you about most of the inns between here and Kritstown, but little more than that I’m afraid.”

“Oh well,” Xavier replied with a sigh. “It’s too bad, though. I have heard it’s quite the sight.”

“So Edmund,” Kedrick broke in, “do you know what classes you will be taking?”

“How do you mean? Halrick just said I was supposed to follow you three around and do what you’re doing.”

“He didn’t let you choose?”

“Well, I mean, we didn’t really talk about it.”

“Well,” Kedrick explained, “some of the classes are required for all first-years—Archery and Wilderness Training, for example—and others you get a choice between options. We had options for three classes on our Sunday-Tuesday rotation, since we have foray on Starsday. We all picked the same things, since we didn’t really know what to do and the descriptions they gave us weren’t much help. It was mostly Xavier that chose, actually, since he had done more research than we had.”

“Meaning that he’d done some research,” Arthran interrupted.

“So we’re in Wilderness Lore at the eighth hour of the morning,” Kedrick continued, “Ethics at the tenth, and History at the fourth hour of the afternoon. They’re fine, I guess, but if I had to do it over again, I think I’d take Advanced Medicine instead of Ethics.”

“You just say that because Lark’s in it,” Arthran chided. “Besides, you’ll have the same options next year. You can take it then.”

“Those sound fine to me,” Edmund said. “Halrick said that you only have one class on Watersday, so I can get some help on catching up when we’re off watch. How does the watch work?”

“Oh, you’ll find out about watch soon enough,” Arthran said with a grin. “We’re off this Sceptreday, since we took our turn last week, but we’re on right after supper on Moonday, so you have that to look forward to. It’s ever so much fun, right Kedrick?”

“Oh yes,” Kedrick replied dryly. “It’s terrific. Especially the late watches.”

“There isn’t much to it,” Xavier said. “We just take our post, either on the Gatehouse or the Watchtower, and, well, watch to see if anyone or anything is coming.”

“And try to stay awake when nothing’s happening,” Arthran added, tapping Kedrick’s leg with his foot. Kedrick shot him a quick dirty look in reply.

“Oh. Do—do you ever see the enemy?”

“Arcadians you mean?” Kedrick asked. “No. There used to be a fort some miles south of here on the other side of the border—I’ve never seen it myself, but Guy told us about it in class—but it’s been abandoned since the Independence War. There were bandits there for a time too, but they were all cleared out years ago. Now the only people over the border on this side of the mountains besides us are a few Doudanni villages, and they don’t bother us any, though some come up at festival times to trade, or so I hear. I’ve never seen them.”

“It’s really only visitors from the north that we see, like yourself,” Xavier noted, “though usually people come during the day. But we have to be careful, just in case.”

“At least that’s what the knights always say,” Arthran added. “I expect it’s more to get us used to the idea of vigilance than because there’s any real need for it, especially not two simultaneously.”

“I see.”

“So, um, how do you like your new room?” Kedrick asked.

“It’s fine—it’s nice.”

“Yeah, I was surprised how much room was really in there when we got everything out,” Kedrick said.

“You... thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Let us know what it’s like,” Arthran said, “staying in the same tower as the girls.”

“The... the girls?”

“They’re right upstairs from you,” Arthran said with a sly smile. “Halrick must sure trust you.”

“More than he does you,” Xavier noted.

“It’s not a big deal,” Kedrick said, rolling his eyes. “The door to the second floor locks, and Edmund can just use the first floor lavatory.”

“You tried the door to the second floor?” Arthran asked.

“No. Lark told me.”

“You talked to Lark? Really?”

“Oh belt it, Arthran.”

“I wouldn’t do anything anyway, even if we were on the same floor,” Edmund said quietly. “On my honor.”

“That makes you a better man than a lot of the idiots here,” Kedrick said dryly, glancing at Arthran.

“Come on now, I wouldn’t... you know that.”

“Do anything *to* them, no,” Kedrick agreed. “But I wouldn’t put it past you to steal undergarments on a bet or something to that effect.”

Arthran stared at him with a hurt look that was half-real, half-mocking. “That you would think such a thing about me...”

“But at any rate, even if you did have ill designs toward the women, be assured that they are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves,” Kedrick noted.

“Especially Doranna,” Xavier added, shaking his head. “You don’t want to be on her bad side.”

“No,” Arthran agreed, rubbing a remembered bruise on his shoulder. “No you don’t.”

“You...?”

“No,” Arthran answered. “Goodness! But I’ve sparred with her before—all of us have. And I saw what happened to Rogenan when he tried to make unwanted advances. The bruises didn’t fade for over a week, and that was just with her bare hands!”

Edmund smiled but said nothing.

“Anyhow,” Xavier said, changing the subject, “has anyone brought you around the place?”

“A little,” the boy answered. “I mean, I’ve seen some...”

“I’ll tell you what,” Arthran said, “once we’re done here,” he gestured toward his mostly-finished supper, “We’ll show you around the place.”

“That way you’ll be able to at least find your classes on your own if we’re not around to help,” Xavier added.

“Okay,” Edmund replied. “That sounds good.”

“Are you coming too, Kedrick?” Arthran asked.

“Well I... I was going to get in some practicing...”

Arthran rolled his eyes. “Fine.” He turned to the newcomer. “Kedrick is *obsessed* with training. Unhealthily so, if you ask me. He seems to think he’s destined to become a legendary swordsman someday, in the vein of Guentin, maybe.”

“But without the character flaws, I hope” Kedrick added with a smile and a shrug. “Seriously, though, I’ve always believed that it’s important to keep at something, when you have a chance to be really good at it.”

“One day maybe you’ll be able to beat Doranna,” Xavier added with a smile.

“And there’s the fact that you get special honors if you can actually beat the testing board at the end of your second year,” Arthran said.

“Yes, there’s that too,” he acknowledged.

“Well, you’ll be missing out,” Arthran said. “We’ll take him up to the Watchtower too, and I think Lark is on duty there...”

“Oh, stop it and eat your stew.”

Arthran laughed.