

MASON GIDEON and the Glass Tower

Legacy of the Round Table

Book Two

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Chapter One

A Fiery New Enemy

The ruins of Craigmillar Castle sat as a monument to Scotland's past, a stone's throw from the modernized world of Edinburgh. Once a solitary structure surrounded by a lush forest and green plains, modern life had crept upon its old stone walls and proud towers. Construction from nearby villages and the sprawling campus of the University of Edinburgh encroached further onto its grounds every year. Unbeknownst to the citizens, far beneath the fourteenth century castle-turned-tourist-attraction, a series of secret chambers contained the northernmost outpost of the Order of the Knights of the Round Table.

On a chilly March night, in one of those chambers, a lone man sat at his desk reviewing the same file he'd been reading for over an hour. Sir Angus McTavert was the Eques Dux of the Scottish branch of the Order and proud, like his father before him, to be a part of the ancient society composed of the descendants of the original Knights of the Round Table. For fifteen hundred years, men and women like him had kept the supernatural world at bay: fighting trolls, witches, dragons, and other magical threats to keep people safe and unaware of their existence.

McTavert worked for years to achieve the position he now held but, if he kept having to read boring reports, he might retire early. He struggled to get past a line he'd read several times. Blinking rapidly, he leaned back in his chair, running a hand through hair more gray than black, as he threw the file on his desk. He needed a break.

Somehow Dame Catherine Covington, the Primus Eques, could make any subject boring. After centuries, the Order finally had achieved its longstanding goal of finding King Arthur's son, something many deemed impossible. It was a momentous success, yet her report on him and his subsequent training was impossibly dull. For a moment he debated getting one of the knights to read it and respond – there were a couple who enjoyed reading these – but knew it was

beneath him. He needed to find out for himself what kind of a person this Mason Gideon really was.

McTavert hated being limited to desk duty instead of on assignment with his fellow knights. He was nursing the injury he suffered at “The Battle of the Tor” in Glastonbury.

Damn those glaikits working for Blackthorne.

One moment of distraction and he’d gotten sliced. It was on him, of course. A knight knew better than to lose focus, but a man had turned into a fire-breathing, scale-covered serpent right in front of him. Who wouldn’t be distracted by that?

Wincing as he stood, he involuntarily grabbed his left side and massaged the scar tissue healing there. McTavert hadn’t left Craigmillar in weeks and was restless. He wanted to be in on the action and needed that feeling of staring death in the face as he proved himself worthy of the name “knight.” But his sword had remained in his scabbard, leaning against the side of the desk for nearly five months. Far too long for his liking.

Until his side fully healed, he was stuck reading mundane reports behind a desk.

Rubbing his eyes, he’d resigned himself to giving the file one more try when a siren wailed around him, red lights flashing against the stone walls. Recognizing the outpost’s intruder alarm, McTavert grabbed his sword and started toward the command center at a run. The wound in his side complained, but he ignored it, knowing the outpost and all the people stationed there were his responsibility.

He fumbled with the buckle on his belt as he reached the entrance to the command center. Once he had it fastened, he drew his sword and kicked open the heavy wooden door, charging into the room. Behind him, he heard shouts as other knights and their squires arrived, but the battle cries faded when they saw what triggered the alarm.

Sitting cross-legged on the wooden table in the center of the room was a woman draped in a crimson cloak with the hood raised, hiding everything but long, frizzy curls of fiery red hair. A hush fell over the room as she pushed back her hood, revealing an ageless face, pale as moonlight with eyes as green as the Highland hills.

Even as she met McTavert's gaze, she kept a hand on the table, tracing shapes with her finger on the worn surface. The smell of singed wood, like the bonfires of Beltane, reached his nostrils, as an icy chill wormed along his spine. The woman was burning the table with her fingertip.

"You're McTavert, aye?" she asked in a bored voice. "The Dux Eques here in Scotland?"

"I'm McTavert," he said, adjusting his grip on the pommel of his sword. His hands were slick with nervous sweat. There was no use denying his identity, but he couldn't imagine how she'd come by the information.

"And is everyone finally here?"

McTavert didn't take his eyes off the woman, there was no need. He knew his knights surrounded him. They were well trained, and everyone responded to the alarm. The post was small with only a handful of knights and a few squires, but all of them had gathered, swords ready.

The knights followed their training to the letter, fanning around him in the cramped room, while keeping the only exit covered. A squire tripped on a cord, disconnecting the display monitoring the entrance to the castle as she tried to find a place to stand. All the while, the intruder held McTavert's gaze, a half-smile curving her lips.

His stomach dropped, and McTavert realized their mistake a moment too late. *It was a trap.*

The girl burst forward from the table with her arms outstretched, already on the attack. With a wave of her hand, Sir Edgar fell before he could unsheathe his sword, his scream filling the small room. There was a distinct smell of burnt flesh as the witch turned towards the next knight.

Dame Rebecca, one of McTavert's most experienced and deadly knights, swung her sword at the woman, but the intruder arched back, almost bending in half to dodge the attack while pointing a finger at the knight. Grunting in pain, Rebecca dropped her weapon to the floor. It was glowing red, as if it had just been removed from a blacksmith's forge. It burst into flame,

the steel melting into a lava-like puddle. Without missing a step, the woman moved again, darting between the knights and squires so fast no one could touch her.

It was like fighting smoke.

One by one, the intruder dispatched McTavert's knights and their squires effortlessly, using the small size of the room against them. They couldn't get a clean attack on her for fear of hitting one of their own. Those that did attack, quickly fell, burns and blisters covering their skin until McTavert was the only one left standing.

"Who are you?" he croaked, ashamed of the fear in his own voice.

Suddenly, McTavert flew backward through the open door and into the worn, stone hallway, slamming into the opposite wall. Air rushed from his lungs as the wound in his side seared with pain. McTavert lost his grip on his sword, and it clanged to the floor. He tried to reach for it but couldn't move.

The intruder rose off the ground, defying gravity, and advanced toward him with one hand outstretched, holding him immobile. As soon as she passed through the door of the command center, it slammed shut, and the lock clicked into place. The wounded knights trapped inside shouted and banged on the door, trying to get out.

She floated toward him until her hot breath seared his neck. "I am Ignis, one of the four. Hear me, fool, and listen. Your life depends on it. You will travel to London and inform your Order that the Elfennau is coming."

"I don't know who the Elfennau are, but I won't betray the Order, *witch*." He spit on her face, hoping it would distract her enough to loosen her magical grip on him. He needed to free his knights, gather his strength, and fight.

Ignis' eyes flashed red for an instant as his spittle sizzled, then evaporated from her skin.

Immediately, the shouting from behind the door became more panicked, turning from angry cries to screams of terror.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

“They burn,” she said simply, her face betraying not a wisp of emotion.

“NO!”

He doubled his efforts to escape, desperate to help but unable to break free. He wrenched at his arm and felt his shoulder separate from the socket. The pain was excruciating, but he didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of responding, so he bit his tongue bloody to keep from crying out.

McTavert struggled until the screams stopped. His head lolled to his chest as he fought back the tears. The heat coming from under the door singed his skin as acrid smoke billowed from beneath. There was no hope of survival.

“Go to London. Tell them the Elfennau is coming for the one who wields Excalibur.”

“The Order will find you and send you to the devil where you belong. We protect the world from heathen creatures like you!”

She placed a hand against the wound on his side. McTavert could no longer contain his screams as the fire seeped through the wound into his soul. The heat spread from her hand until the skin she touched was blistered and burned – a black handprint branded his side. “Just a taste of what is in store for you unless you do as you’re told.”

“You’re going to regret not killing me,” he growled.

Ignis leaned in and whispered in his ear, “I’m sure I’ll get another chance soon.”

Chapter Two

New Normal

When his alarm clock buzzed, more vibration than sound, Mason Gideon quieted it with a gentle touch before it woke anyone else. Without a grumble or even a yawn, he rolled out of bed onto his feet. Within a few minutes, he'd made his bed, brushed his teeth, and dressed for the day.

Less than a year ago, he would have been complaining about the hour and trying to weasel a few more minutes of sleep out of his mom. Now it was different. *He* was different.

For one thing, instead of living in a rundown flat in Caerleon, he and his mom lived at the London headquarters of a secret organization called the Order of the Knights of the Round Table, which protected the United Kingdom from supernatural threats. The operation was located in a series of tunnels far beneath The Tower of London, where it had been since the construction of the tower nearly a thousand years ago.

Mason was a squire for the Order, which is why he was dressed in the standard baby blue uniforms with the emblem of the Order – a white shield and red dragon – on his chest. Being a squire meant he was learning how to become a warrior from the actual descendants of the original knights of the Round Table.

Only he wasn't just learning from the descendants, he was one. On his thirteenth birthday, Mason discovered he was the son of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. The *real* Arthur and Guinevere who'd lived hundreds of years ago. It sounded crazy but somehow the wizard, Merlin, had saved his life by sending him forward through time.

This revelation started a chain reaction that led to Mason undertaking a quest to find Arthur's hidden sword, Excalibur. It was a challenging quest full of murderous birds, skeleton

warriors, and the search for the Holy Grail, while being pursued by a lunatic named Augustus Blackthorne.

As he fastened his belt – with Excalibur hanging from its side – he felt a sense of purpose and determination.

“You’re an embarrassment, mate,” a voice rasped from the bed next to his. “Have some respect and whine about having to get up before the sun like a proper kid.”

Mason’s best friend, Rhys Lear, groaned, his sandy blonde hair sticking straight up as he lifted his head from underneath the blanket. He’d come with Mason from Caerleon and joined the Order after the quest to find Excalibur. Since then, Rhys had changed almost as much as Mason, if not more. Gone was the overweight kid who’d been picked on constantly. Rhys had lost nearly thirty pounds and grown four inches since the day he slew the dragon on Glastonbury Tor.

Rhys had been with Mason when he discovered he was one of the rare people in the world who could do magic. A bully was threatening Rhys and Mason lost his temper, making lightning rain from the sky and destroying a park in Caerleon. He couldn’t explain it, had no idea how to use it, and not everyone liked it, but magic was a part of who he was. He even had his own wizard’s staff, which he’d learned once belonged to Merlin. The staff was meant to focus and control his magic but, more often than not, Mason felt like it hindered more than helped. Even still, he carried it with him wherever he went, not comfortable without it anymore. Grabbing his staff, Mason headed across the barracks towards the exit.

Mason tapped his wrist, a signal for Rhys to hurry.

“Are you mental? It’s over an hour until we have to get up.” Rhys waved him off, rolling towards the wall to go back to sleep.

“Morning, Mason!” A cheery voice whispered from his bed, sitting up and rubbing one eye. “First awake again?”

Basil Henson was ten and the youngest squire in the barracks. His mom was a knight in the Order, while his dad, like Mason’s mom, was non-combat personnel who worked somewhere

in London. Basil was short – like Mason had to be careful not to accidentally step on him short – with mousy, brown hair and a high squeaky voice.

“Shhhh...go back to sleep, Basil,” Mason whispered, hurrying past the boy, who immediately flopped back on his pillow.

Overall, life in London was an upgrade in every way for Mason. Even the older squires were friendly to both him and Rhys, despite them being only thirteen and among the younger squires there. Mason attributed that to having earned their positions in the Order by successfully completing a quest. Unfortunately, there was one squire who went out of his way to give Mason a hard time and his bunk happened to be right next to the door.

“Good morning, *your majesty*,” Reggie Bunker, the burly, sixteen-year-old Head Squire mocked as he slid out of bed, yawning and stretching a muscled arm across the doorway in front of Mason’s face. “Sneaking off again? The extra workouts won’t help, you know?” Reggie stated, his voice a carefree, confident lilt, though his gray eyes were hard as steel. “I don’t care how many you do or who people say are your parents, you’re still pathetic.”

Mason clenched his jaw, working to keep his temper at bay. He focused on a spot in the hallway just over Reggie’s shoulder, waiting for the older boy to move. “If it’s not going to help, why are you so bothered? Let me leave before you wake everyone up.”

“I could order you to stay,” Reggie sneered as he glared at Mason. “When the Head Squire gives you a command, it’s your duty to comply.”

“You could.” Mason ground his teeth as sparks of energy crackled beneath his skin, travelling along his arms. He needed to walk away before something bad happened, but the only way out was behind Reggie. “You’ve told me this before.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Before Mason could dodge, Reggie grabbed his arm sending a spark, like static electricity, through Mason. The Head Squire gasped, letting go and shaking his hand as if it hurt.

“Sorry, Reggie,” Mason said, reaching to help, but stopping himself before he accidentally shocked him again. He never wanted to hurt anyone with his magic. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Using magic against other squires now?” Reggie smiled, victoriously, stepping out of the doorway. “I’m going to have to report this. There’s a reason the Order banned that filth. That’s earned you menagerie duty. And make sure it’s spotless.”

Mason hurried past him, angry with himself for losing his temper. He’d played right into Reggie’s stupid hands. Mason knew Reggie would tell everyone he’d attacked him and was dreading lessons later when Mason would have to see the Head Squire again and face the consequences.

Rhys was right, Mason wasn’t a proper kid anymore. He had to work harder than the rest of the squires because of who he was and the sacrifices people had made for him.

Even with magic and a sword from legend, he hadn’t been able to save everyone at the battle at Glastonbury Tor. Sir Harrington, a knight and his mentor, had perished saving Mason’s life. He knew he had an obligation to honor Harrington’s life and, more specifically, his death. Mason never wanted to find himself in the position where someone sacrificed themselves for him again.

Trying to get Reggie out of his head, Mason proceeded to the Mess Hall for anything he could eat on the go to get training and his chores done before lessons. Though enticed by the aromas of baking bread and frying bacon, Mason didn’t have time for a full meal. Now that he had menagerie duty, he needed to hurry if he wanted to get his extra training in.

He nodded a greeting at a table with four knights, dressed in their standard dark blue military fatigues, enjoying tea and a full breakfast. Sir Cameron, his weapons instructor, was entertaining the group, as he always did, with some of the worst jokes Mason had ever heard.

“Oh, come on,” Sir Cameron said to Dame Sara-Jayne, a striking woman who was the Order’s magizoologist, “You’ll like this one.”

Dame Sara-Jayne gestured for Sir Cameron to continue with a get-on-with-it sort of motion, like she knew whatever he said was going to be awful.

“Why can’t a Tyrannosaurus Rex clap?” Sir Cameron waited expectantly, a childish smile on his bearded face. When they didn’t answer, he crowed, “Because it’s extinct!”

Sir Gavin, a tall, wiry knight with light brown hair receding in the front and a long beard shook with silent laughter while Dame Sara-Jayne rolled her eyes but smiled in spite of herself.

Only Sir Declan didn't care for Sir Cameron's joke. He glared menacingly at Mason as he passed the table. Mason kept his head down and hustled to the counter to grab something. Luckily, one of the cooks had taken a liking to him and knew his routine. A brown paper bag sat on the counter with a still-warm breakfast sandwich and some other goodies inside.

"Cheers, Mary," Mason called, scooping up the bag on his way through the Mess. "I owe you one."

"You owe me about a hundred at this point," Mary teased, wiping her hands on her apron. "Work hard today."

"I will." Mason saluted with the bag as he headed out of the hall, running straight into a wall.

Or at least it felt like one.

It was really the broad chest of Sir Declan.

"You'd better watch where you're going squire!"

"Sorry, Sir Declan," Mason stammered, trying to move around the knight, but the man put an arm out to block his path.

"Still walking around with that filthy stick, I see," Sir Declan sneered, his crooked teeth showing through thin lips.

Mason's frustration level was rising but he knew he had to control his temper. Accidentally zapping Reggie was one thing but doing it to a knight would probably get him tossed out of the Order altogether, maybe even sent to the dungeons.

"Good morning, Mason," a voice boomed from behind him, and he turned to see Sir Cameron approaching, a big smile on his face. "Another early morning training session?"

"Yes, Sir Cameron." Mason replied, standing at attention. "And then to clean the menagerie."

“*Again?* Good lord, you must have made Reggie angry to keep getting that as your chore!” Cameron laughed heartily, running his hand through his black, shoulder-length hair. “Everything alright here?”

“Of course,” Sir Declan slowly lowered his arm. “I was just informing this squire that walking around with that *filthy* stick is an affront to everything the Order stands for.”

“I see, but I’m going to have to politely disagree with you.” Sir Cameron scratched his chin thoughtfully. “I, for one, am glad he’s carrying it.”

Sir Declan’s expression darkened, and he opened his mouth to respond when Sir Cameron cut him off.

“Mason and that stick saved my life on Glastonbury Tor.” The other knight’s face reddened as Sir Cameron continued, “I’d been snatched by a gryphon who flew me at least as high as the top of St. Michael’s Tower. And then it dropped me. If young Mason hadn’t used...what did you call it? That ‘filthy stick?’ Well, if he hadn’t used it, I wouldn’t be around to entertain you with my jokes.”

“Maybe the squire should be punished,” jested Dame Sara-Jayne, joining their group. “Sir Cameron, if we’re going to make that video call with Scotland, we need to get moving. Waldo is ready for a home in the wild.”

“Yes, of course. Come, Mason,” Sir Cameron started to lead him out of the Mess Hall, “We’ll walk you to the Menagerie.”

He wrapped a large, heavy arm around Mason’s shoulder, like he was protecting him from Sir Declan’s glare as he ushered him from the room. They reached the door at the same time as Sir Kenneth, an older knight with a bushy mustache bigger than his nose. Following him was Tricia, one of the more experienced squires in the Order. Sir Kenneth nodded at Sir Cameron before instructing the squire to get them breakfast.

“Are they going out on a quest?” Mason asked.

“Yeah, a salamander up north has started a rash of fires,” Dame Sarah-Jayne explained. “They’re going to check it out.”

Mason looked longingly at the knight and squire before Sir Cameron urged him forward. Training was great, but nothing compared to being on an actual quest.

Sir Cameron clapped him on the back. “I know you haven’t been selected for any missions yet, Mason. Try not to let it bother you too much. Most of the squires have been a part of the Order since birth. You and your friend have a lot of catching up to do. Tricia is almost ready to take the Codex Trials. You’ll need a bit more experience before you’re ready for that.”

Mason knew the Codex Trials were a squire’s final test before becoming a knight. In a perfect world, he’d be able to take them in a couple years, but Sir Cameron was right. He and Rhys had a lot of catching up to do.

“I just want to help people. I figure the best way to do that is to become a knight,” Mason explained, looking at his staff and wondering if his magic would prevent him from being selected to go on a mission or take the trials.

“I’m sorry about Sir Declan,” Sir Cameron said, stopping Mason at the entrance to the staircase that led to the lower levels. He ran his hand through his hair and bit his lower lip before continuing: “There’s a long history of prejudice against magic, and it will take time to change those feelings. We’ve forgotten something very important.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s the person we’re fighting, not the power. People can be good or bad, but magic is a weapon like a sword or a knife.” Sir Cameron looked at Mason as though he was trying to get the measure of him. “I’ll tell you what, next time I go on a mission, I’ll select you as my squire.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. I meant what I said, Mason. I’m glad you *and* your magic are here.” Sir Cameron chuckled him on the shoulder. “Now go and get to work.”

“Yes, take care of my animals,” Dame Sarah-Jayne added. “But be careful around that chimera.”

“I will. Thank you.”

“Oh, and Mason, try not to be late to lessons later. You need to work on keeping your elbow in. You're still extending it, which makes you vulnerable to counterattacks.”

“Yes, sir.” Mason waited until the knights had moved on before starting down the hall, an extra spring in his step and a smile on his face. Taking a bite of his sandwich, he headed down the staircase to the lower levels.

Mason hurried through the tunnel, eating his breakfast sandwich in about three bites before starting on the fruit and granola bars in the bag. Mary was amazing. He'd have to remember to do something nice for her one of these days.

The tunnels had been updated throughout the years, adding indoor plumbing, electricity and even Wi-Fi, but there were unused parts. These were the passages Mason liked best because they were quiet, which gave him time to think. He would've loved to use them to practice magic, but he hadn't been given permission to use it at headquarters. No one at the Order knew how to use magic, and most thought like Sir Declan rather than Sir Cameron.

Before his chores in the menagerie, Mason went to the arena, anxious to train with Excalibur. The arena was a little smaller than a football pitch with a long, wooden rail running down the center, splitting it in two. It was surrounded by a red-and-white fence covered in various weapons that the squires used for practice and filled with soft, white sand.

Leaning his staff against the fence, he unsheathed Excalibur and went through the forms and stances he'd learned over the past five months. He began slowly, his body loosening and muscles relaxing into the routine. Excalibur sliced the air as Mason spun and stepped through the movements he'd memorized. The movements grew more complicated, but he gained speed with each repetition, until swinging his sword in a wide arc, stopping with the blade centimeters from his face. His shoulders heaved with deep, winded breaths and a thin sheen of sweat clung to his body.

“You're still extending your elbow,” a voice echoed from the other side of the arena.

Chapter Three

Frustrations

He would've been startled if he hadn't recognized the voice.

Elizabeth Covington stepped out of the shadows, and his heart did a somersault inside his chest. Mason always found himself tongue tied whenever he was around Elizabeth. He'd had a crush on her back when she was just Mr. Harrington's granddaughter who visited on Christmas, before he found out they were part of a secret organization of knights.

Now they were both squires, but even five months of seeing her every day in lessons and training hadn't cured him of the familiar swoop in his stomach whenever he saw her.

Normally, Elizabeth's hair was a puff of dark as night curls she kept in a ponytail, but now it was a mass of wet ringlets hanging past her shoulders. Her creamy, coffee-colored skin glowed in the light as if she'd brushed gold dust on her cheekbones. She was lithe and strong and somehow made the standard issue squire's uniform look good.

At fourteen, she was far and away the best warrior among the squires, regularly defeating the older kids. Academically, she was a top student in every class. There were only two problems with her as far as Mason could tell. First, her boyfriend was the biggest jerk in all of London: Reggie Bunker.

Ugh.

They both had parents who were knights, so they'd grown up together in the Order and been friends since they could walk. Mason didn't see why that meant they had to be together. Even if she wasn't with Mason, he knew she could do so much better than Reggie.

And the second problem, he was responsible for her grandfather, Sir Harrington's, death.

"Yeah, I'm working on it," Mason told her, pausing to catch his breath.

“Still...not bad,” she said, scrunching her face into an *it-could-have-been-worse* sort of way, which only drew his attention to her lips – not a good thing when he needed to focus on what she was saying. “You’re almost ready to fight me for real.”

“Not bad isn’t good enough.” Mason rested Excalibur on the rail before wiping the sweat on his brow.

“You just learned that combination last week, right? You’re loads better than everyone else at this point. Well, except me, of course.” She winked at him, softening the statement, and Mason resisted the urge to grin.

Elizabeth shifted her body to imitate the stance Mason had been working on and mimicked swinging a sword.

“See how my back elbow is in?” she asked, turning her head to look at him.

“Uh, yeah.” Mason pulled his focus away from her curls swinging around her shoulders as she moved. He copied her position, correcting his stance.

“This helps you keep your balance and allows you to go from defending to attacking quicker.” She grabbed a sword off the rack of weapons and handed it to Mason. “It might help you if you do the maneuver with two swords.”

Really? Why?” he asked, taking the practice sword in one hand and grabbing Excalibur with the other.

“You have to fight differently when you use two weapons. You’ll feel it more when you extend your elbow. So, if you don’t learn to keep that elbow in, you’ll leave yourself vulnerable to counterattack.”

Elizabeth leaned against the center rail as she watched Mason run through the stances Sir Cameron had drilled into them, suggesting adjustments when he faltered.

“It’s weird using two swords at once,” Mason commented.

“It takes some getting used to for sure.” Elizabeth corrected Mason’s movements with a gentle but firm grip on his side. “I’m glad I switched to using one, though. It feels more powerful. For you, it shouldn’t be much different than using Excalibur and your staff.”

She continued mentoring him through the positions, her critiques gradually lessening.

“Good job. I think you’ve got it,” she commended him after a particularly challenging movement; heat bloomed in his cheeks at her praise. “Now,” she added with a mischievous glint in her eye, “let’s see if you can do it against an opponent.”

With blinding speed, Elizabeth slid her sword out of its sheath and swung it, aiming for Mason’s head. Moving instinctively, he brought Excalibur up to block the blow. Elizabeth countered, and Mason slid into the position he’d been practicing, diverting it with the other weapon.

He easily parried her next attack, switching to an offensive stance, catching her off guard, and forcing her to shift to defense.

Back and forth they battled. The crash of swords echoed across the empty arena until they both ended with swords at each other’s throats. Mason could feel her breath on his face and the movements of her chest as they breathed in unison.

“I think you’ve got that move down,” she said, slightly out of breath.

“Thanks. You’re a good teacher,” he told her. Even after their workout, she still smelled like vanilla and oranges, the scent tingling his nose. Before he registered what he was doing, he lowered his sword and reached to brush a curl off her cheek. Her breath caught for a moment as her eyes met his, and he could see the flecks of amber in them. “You...”

He was interrupted by a chime echoing through the tunnels indicating half past the hour. It was how the Order remained on schedule, but Mason couldn’t help thinking its timing was horrible.

“Oh gosh, is it that late already?” Elizabeth gasped, stepping back, glancing at the spot on her wrist where a watch would be if she was wearing one. “That was...I didn’t...Never mind. I have to go.”

“Okay,” Mason said, though it was the last thing he wanted her to do.

“You’d better hurry and get your chores done or you’ll be late to class.” She backed up a few more steps. “If you are, Troyer will flog you to within an inch of your life.”

Mason wanted to find the stupid bell and slice it in half with Excalibur. Instead, he forced a smile, waving as she took off toward the Mess Hall. “Troyer likes me too much to flog me,” he called after her.

“Be on time,” Elizabeth turned and pointed a threatening finger in his direction. “Set a good example, *Your Majesty*...” She barked out a laugh as she disappeared through the doorway.

Mason kicked at the ground in frustration, but all he did was get sand in his boots. Tamping down his anger, he replaced the practice weapon before retrieving his staff and hurrying to the opposite end of the arena where the entrance to the Menagerie was. He could hear the familiar animal sounds even before he opened the door.

The barn-like room was reminiscent of the menagerie King Henry III built at the Tower of London in 1235 when he’d been given some big cats by the Holy Roman Emperor, Fredrick II. Personally, Mason would have thought the emperor was trying to kill him if he’d been given a bunch of leopards or lions, but the king decided to open a zoo.

The animals in *this* menagerie were nothing like the ones that lived above the headquarters. Here, there were magical creatures too rare and/or dangerous to return to the wild.

He’d never tell Reggie, who thought he was punishing Mason, but he preferred cleaning the menagerie to other chores. Mason wasn’t sure why he liked this place so much, but there was an odd sense of peace being around the animals. Maybe it was because sometimes he also felt like he was an unusual creature in the Order.

Most of the supplies he needed were kept away from the animals on the far side of the enclosures in a small storage space close to the door to the Menagerie. It had everything the magizooologists needed to take care of the animals, so Mason began by making sure the space was organized.

“Good morning, friends,” Mason said, grabbing some apples and carrots from a large container and dropping the treats in each stall’s bucket. They had keepers, like Dame Sara-Jayne, who fed them throughout the day, but you wouldn’t have guessed it from the way they devoured

their snack. It was a nice distraction, so they didn't think about eating him while he cleaned their stalls.

Normally, multiple squires were assigned to clean the Menagerie, but Reggie liked to force Mason to complete the chore alone, so he kept the others busy.

The first cage contained a cockatrice, a tiny, red-scaled dragon with a chicken head, lovingly named Bernice. She may have been small but she was one of the more dangerous creatures in the Menagerie. Cockatrices could kill someone just by looking at them, which was why she wore a hood at all times, effectively blinding her. She didn't seem to mind, though, reacting quickly to the sound of the food hitting the bucket. The distraction allowed him to rake her stall and replace the dirty straw with fresh.

Next to Bernice was a chimera, which was the strangest animal by far because of its three heads. On the front, there was a lion with a goat head growing from separate necks sprouting behind its muscular shoulders. It ended with a snake for a tail, making it deadly on both ends. No one had told him the chimera's name – if it had one – or three. Mason smiled at each head but hurried on when the snake hissed. Cleaning that stall required special equipment, so he saved it for last.

He liked Waldo the hippogryph, who had the head of an eagle and the body of a horse. Waldo had a buckskin flank that blended seamlessly with his golden feathers. Hippogryphs were proud creatures, but once Mason had learned how to greet Waldo appropriately, he'd become playful and cleaning the stall was more of a game than a chore.

The newest addition to the Menagerie was the gryphon. The eagle/lion hybrid had been part of Blackthorne's army and was the same creature who attacked Harrington in Caerleon. Mason kept his distance as the animal was jumpy and obviously wasn't used to people being nice. He made sure to add some extra apples in the bucket before moving on.

There had been others, like a hellhound, a phoenix named Brian, and some pixies, but they'd been released into the wild somewhere in Scotland at a sanctuary for mythical creatures. Mason couldn't remember exactly where, although he was sure someone told him at least once.

Mason spent the next fifteen minutes getting the menagerie into tip-top form. Normally, it took longer to clean, especially alone, but he had been doing it nearly every day and had it down to a science. Even putting on the protective gear, just in case one of the chimera's heads tried to bite him, didn't take long anymore.

Once all the stalls were cleaned, Mason moved to the far end of the room to his favorite animal. Lounging in her stall, like always, was the Order's resident unicorn. She was smaller than the few horses Mason had seen and tiny compared to the hippogryph. In the center of her forehead was a silver-and-gold flecked horn and her hair was so pure a white she glowed. She had soulful blue eyes that watched him intently as he approached.

"Hello, Callie," he said. The unicorn reached her head over the stall, gently nuzzling his hand. "Mind if I come in?"

Ignoring the door, Mason hefted himself over the wall in one motion and found a comfortable spot in the hay. Callie sprawled beside him, acting more like a large dog who wanted her ears scratched than a pure white horse with a large magical horn.

"Rhys told me an interesting thing about unicorns," Mason cooed, gently petting her coat. "He said that all horses used to be unicorns. A long time ago, there was a great war between magical people. The fairies were fighting the wizards, the witches were fighting the naiads, and the Titans were fighting everyone else. It was just a mess. He said most of the unicorns used up the magic in their horns trying to heal the injured until their horns were gone and they were just horses. What do you think? Is that why there are so few of you now?"

Callie chomped on some hay and flickered her ears, which didn't seem like an answer.

"Yeah, well, I expect it was just something he read about. It's getting a bit fuzzy on what's real and what's legend these days."

Mason closed his eyes and leaned against Callie. Being with her always relaxed him, even if it didn't help him solve his problems. Talking to her was easier than anyone else at the Order.

"I don't know what I'm going to do about my magic, Callie," he vented. "It's getting harder and harder to control. I accidentally zapped Reggie today. He deserved it, but I still

shouldn't have let that happen." Mason sighed, lazily drawing circles in the unicorn's soft, white hair. "Sir Troyer was going to speak to the Primus for me. Maybe they can find someone to teach me. I think I can help people, but no one will give me the chance. You're magical, do you have any ideas?"

The unicorn whinnied and nodded, making Mason chuckle.

"Well, anytime you want to share, I'll gladly take the help." He stood, brushing the hay off his pants as the sounds of his fellow squires entering reached him.

"Oy, Mason, you here?" Rhys called, craning his neck around a stall, Basil beside him. "You forgot your bag and...hey, are you done already?"

Mason vaulted the stall door again, landing in front of Rhys. "All finished. Took you lot long enough to get here."

"Reggie made us clean the bathrooms and half of the bloody kitchen before sending anyone here."

"The animals are used to me, which makes it a bit easier. Plus, the joke's on him, I like it here." Mason swiped the last of the straw off his pants.

"You do?" Basil asked, standing on his tiptoes to peer at the cockatrice. "Why?" Bernice cocked her head comically, as if she knew Basil was looking at her.

"Lots of reasons, but mostly because of her." Mason walked Basil to Callie's stall, lifting him so he could see. "This is Callie. Sitting with her makes me feel better no matter what's going on."

"He's sappy that way," Rhys teased, handing Mason his backpack. "Since you're done here, we'd better head to class before we're late."

Basil waved at the unicorn in the stall. "Bye, Callie."

"Yeah, bye, Callie," Mason waved as well. "See you tomorrow."

