

KNIGHTS WITHOUT CEREMONY

PART ONE: INSURRECTION



ARI MAGNUSSON

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CHAPTER 1



Ettan tightened his grip on his two-handed sword and braced himself for the next attack. Synar, his opponent, stood behind a tall shield just out of range of Ettan's weapon, tensed and ready to lunge. Ettan had successfully repelled each charge, but he was tiring and didn't know how much longer he could hold his ground. Synar was quite skilled with his shield, and Ettan hadn't even managed to hit him hard enough to leave a mark on his leather armor.

Although Synar's sword was lying on the ground behind Ettan, he couldn't just move in for the kill. The two-handed sword was less effective at close range, and Synar had a dagger, which made him extremely dangerous. One wrong move or misjudgment on Ettan's part would mean a dagger to his ribs.

Ettan focused on his opponent's feet and the movement of his shield, knowing that at any moment he could spring. Synar shifted his weight from one foot to the other, the angle of his shield pivoting from side to side. Judging from his stance, Ettan suspected that he was going to lunge again to try to force Ettan back so he could recover his sword. If he managed to get it, then it would be all over for Ettan. However, if Ettan guessed wrong and Synar feinted and stabbed him, the fight would have the same unpleasant end.

Ettan dug the soles of his boots into the soft earth to secure

his footing. With each movement of Synar's shield, he tensed and shifted his balance. Then the motion of the shield stopped, the sign that some type of attack was imminent. Ettan took a gamble. He brought his sword back and swung with all his might.

Synar exploded forward, right into Ettan's swing. The sword connected squarely with the side of his shield and knocked him to the ground outside of the boundary stones, ending the match. Synar lay on his back, breathing heavily. Ettan stood for a moment, catching his own breath. Then, for good measure, he touched Synar's chest with the point of his sword, which also confirmed the victory.

"Good fight, Ettan," Synar managed to say between gasps.

"To you as well," Ettan replied as he swung the point of his wooden practice sword aside and extended his hand.

After helping Synar to his feet, Ettan turned toward the timber platform in the middle of the field, where the knights who instructed them monitored the matches, and raised a hand until one acknowledged his win. The day so far had been an even mix of victories and defeats, and Ettan had been getting worried that he would not have enough wins by the end of the day to avoid elimination from training. Each day that he avoided elimination brought him one day closer to the Spring Festival and the Battle Games, where those who made it through training would demonstrate their skills in front of King Sarlamon, the Knights of the Shielded Lion, and any citizens of Gorum in attendance to prove their worth for knighthood.

Ettan headed toward the edge of the training field to join the others who had finished their sword recovery matches. Despite the coolness of the day, sweat ran down Ettan's face, the droplets stinging his eyes and leaving his mouth dry and salty. The air was still and the humidity from the morning's rain gave no ground to the perspiration fighting to cool his armor-clad body.

The training field was just a short walk from the city of Cornth, the seat of the throne of the Kingdom of Gorum. The day was overcast, and the air was filled with the scent of forest, earth, and ripening crops. Carrion birds, mostly crows and vultures, circled above the main gate of the city, waiting for a column of knights and soldiers to march out for their next engagement. But they waited in vain, for the war between Gorum and the neighboring Kingdom of Norvar, which had begun three years prior, had been fought to a stalemate. Soldiers from both kingdoms now lined the country's shared border, neither side attacking nor standing down.

The opportunity to be selected for the Knights of the Shielded Lion had, for the entirety of Gorum's history, been reserved for the sons of noblemen only. But King Sarlamon had broken with tradition and opened training to the most skilled and able-bodied sons of the merchant and farming classes. This change had nothing to do with the depletion of the ranks of knights from the war, the King had insisted. In his decree, the King had declared that wealth and title would no longer be a determinant in who could serve the kingdom at the highest level.

For the landless peasants and sons of merchants and tradesmen, selection would be life-changing. Knighthood brought not just a rise in status but a small grant of land that the knight could, over time and with faithful service to his assigned lord, grow into a landhold. That landhold would ensure wealth and status for generations. But trainees only got one chance. If they were eliminated, they could never try again.

For thirteen-year-old Ettan, the opportunity to become a knight meant everything to him. He lived with his younger brother, Gerit, at the Royal Hennery, which they had been managing since their father's death, around the time the war began. Although their father had been from Gorum, Ettan and Gerit had been born in

Norvar. After their mother had died giving birth to Gerit, their father moved back to Gorum and started working as a servant in the King's castle. Since Ettan and Gerit had no other family when their father died, the King had taken pity on them and put them in charge of the hennery, a position that provided shelter, food, and a small stipend.

While the arrangement was certainly better than being homeless on the streets of the city, particularly during wartime, it offered little more than sustained survival. Knighthood was the one chance Ettan could see for escaping a lifetime of servitude and for securing a better life for himself and Gerit. More than that, however, knighthood would give him a chance to be someone more than a person who took care of chickens or, like his father was, a simple servant at the castle.

Ettan took his place in the line of other boys who had finished their matches and scanned the field to see who was still battling, the fingers of his gauntleted hands automatically scouring the seams of his armor to remove bits of grass and dirt. Between his own matches, he studied how the other boys fought, looking for some weakness that he could exploit the next time he faced them. The least skilled of the trainees had long been eliminated. Ettan's daily ratio of wins to losses kept getting closer and closer to even, so every win at this point was critical.

"Come on defenders, drive forward!" Sir Galwin, the head knight, called from the platform, spurring the pairs of exhausted boys still on the field to renew their efforts. "Swordsmen, show no mercy!"

A murmur arose among those watching, and Ettan looked to see what was causing the stir. At the far edge of the field, one of the smallest of the boys, Anselon, was sitting back on his haunches, huddled beneath his shield, while Harmont, a much taller and stronger opponent, repeatedly hammered it with his

sword. As the blows continued, Ettan winced. Anselon was really taking a beating. Although the arm cuff and handgrip on the inside of each shield were padded, direct, full-strength blows hurt. Finally, Sir Galwin shouted for everyone to halt. All the pairs stopped, the last few blows of swords against shields echoing across the field.

“What is going on?” Sir Galwin asked, walking to the edge of the platform nearest to Anselon and Harmont.

“He wouldn’t yield!” Harmont said.

A chuckle ran through those watching from the sideline.

“Gentlemen,” Sir Galwin said, addressing them all, “you must remember: *shield integrity*. In an actual battle, a wooden shield will only be able to absorb so many blows from an edged weapon before it gets cut into kindling. You must recover your sword before that happens or you will be slotted from skull to pelvis. For that reason, I award the match to Harmont.” He clapped once. “Last one and then you’re done for the day. Choose your opponents, but I want to see Marin defending against Balor, Synar defending against Orlon, and Ettan defending against Drogue.”

Ettan groaned. Drogue was the son of Lord Geldstone, who held the largest landhold in the kingdom. He lived in a massive keep that rivaled the King’s own castle. After King Sarlamon, Lord Geldstone was the most powerful man in Gorum. As the son of a lord, Drogue stood to inherit his father’s landhold and the large stream of income from the rents provided by the farmers on the land. Drogue needed to do nothing but sit on his hands and he would be set for life.

Since Drogue clearly had no need for the honor or benefits of knighthood, the other boys assumed that he was there simply to prevent the lower-class boys from attaining a degree of the power and respect that he commanded. Drogue did everything he could, including low blows, hard hits, and outright cheating,

to beat the sons of farmers, merchants, masons, coopers, and any other non-noble. Worse, he always got away with it. Those not noble-born hated being paired with Drogue.

Drogue stood waiting for Ettan, his expression that of mild impatience, as though he were a master waiting for a slow servant. As Ettan drew close, Drogue pointed his sword at a set of boundary stones that were placed right at the edge of the knight's platform. Another pair had already gotten into position between them but moved when they saw Drogue approaching. Ettan knew why Drogue chose that spot: it was in clear view of Sir Galwin and the other instructors. Drogue was planning something that would give him an easy victory. Ettan would have to be careful.

Ettan laid his sword down at one end of the boundary stones and took up his position at the other. Drogue moved into place just in front of Ettan's sword. He looked back at it, then kicked it farther out of reach.

"We can't make it too easy for you," Drogue said.

Ettan glanced over at the platform, hoping one of the knights had seen how Drogue was trying to tilt the match in his favor before it had even begun, but they either didn't notice or simply ignored it.

"You could put my sword a furlong away," Ettan said, "and it would make no difference."

"Confident today, aren't you," Drogue said with a smile. "Care to wager on the match?"

Ettan looked down at the grass, pretending to be concentrating on securing his footing.

"Oh, right," Drogue continued. "You're so poor, you've got nothing to wager. Gentleman's bet then."

Ettan didn't reply.

"Silly me," Drogue said, slapping his forehead in mock realization. "How could I forget? Not a nobleman. I guess I'll just have

to accept the honor of victory as my prize. And credit from the knights, of course, who will have a clear view of your defeat.”

“Masters Drogue and Ettan,” Sir Galwin said, the thumping of his boots on the platform timbers growing louder as he approached. “Exactly what aspect of sword recovery requires a discussion?”

Drogue put on an innocent expression, shrugged, and looked at Ettan. Sir Galwin turned to Ettan.

“No aspect, sir,” Ettan replied.

Sir Galwin glared at him, then stood and walked to the middle of the platform. “Okay, gentlemen!” he yelled out at the field through cupped hands.

Ettan cursed under his breath. The knights never called out Drogue for anything. He was untouchable. But not, Ettan thought ruefully, to his opponent’s shield or dagger. Time to remind Drogue about the limits of his family name.

“On my mark!” Sir Galwin yelled.

The field grew quiet as the pairs readied themselves for the match. Ettan positioned his shield and pulled the wooden dagger from his belt. Drogue twisted his hands in opposite directions on the hilt of his sword, securing his grip.

“You’re going to lo-ose,” Drogue sang in a quiet voice.

Ettan peered around the edge of the shield. Drogue raised his sword and smiled. He was about to say something more when a shout came from Sir Galwin.

“ADVANCE!”

The first shot was always the worst. Ettan dropped to a crouch. He ducked his head, squeezed the handgrip, and braced himself. Drogue’s sword struck full force in the center of the shield. The shock almost knocked Ettan over. He winced at the pain but quickly shrugged it off. He dodged to one side, careful to stay within the boundary stones, and kept the bottom edge of the shield lifted slightly to see underneath. Drogue’s feet were moving,

not yet planted.

Ettan lunged forward and angled his shield. The force of Droque's blow stopped Ettan cold, but he had made it a couple of feet closer to his sword. In one smooth motion, he feinted left, stepped to his right, and charged forward, angling the shield at the last moment, deflecting the sword into the dirt. Ettan's shield plowed into Droque, who grunted and shoved off Ettan to both stop him and to get out of the way of a possible dagger strike. Ettan dropped into a defensive crouch. Even closer now. All he had to do was get his sword and he would win the match.

Droque set his feet and readied his sword. Ettan peered around the side of his shield. Droque's feet were firmly planted, but all his weight rested on his back foot. From observing Droque fight, Ettan knew the stance. He was getting ready to try to knock Ettan out of bounds for a quick victory. This was Ettan's chance.

Ettan moved to one side of the boundary stones and Droque turned with him. Ettan jerked his shield up, feigning a lunge. He saw Droque's feet set, committing to a swing—exactly what Ettan had hoped to see. He dove onto the ground, landing flat on his shield. He steeled himself for the possibility of a blow to his exposed body but, as expected, all he heard was the swishing of the sword as it sliced through the air above him.

In one quick motion, Ettan rolled off his shield, jumped to his feet, and sprang at Droque with all his might. The shield squarely hit Droque, who cried out and fell back, losing ground. Ettan continued pushing, trying to keep Droque off balance, his legs straining as he moved closer and closer to his sword. Droque, his sword rendered useless by Ettan's proximity, pushed back. Ettan stretched out a hand, his fingertips connecting with the sword's pommel. He pulled the sword an inch toward him. One more inch and—

Ettan suddenly saw Droque's sword land on the ground next to his. The next thing he knew, Droque had grabbed his shield,

jumped aside, and pulled Ettan forward, throwing him off balance. Ettan shot past Droque and landed painfully on his shoulder outside the boundary stones.

“Ettan and Droque, halt!” Sir Galwin shouted.

Ettan sat up, wincing in pain. Droque stood over him, hands on his hips, smiling. Ettan got up and was about to give him a shove when Droque’s expression stopped him short. Elimination was not based solely on wins and losses. The fastest way to get eliminated, Ettan knew, was to engage in any behavior considered unbecoming of a knight. Droque seemed to be hoping that Ettan would do something. He stepped back.

“Master Droque! Never, ever, EVER drop your sword!” Sir Galwin bellowed.

“Droque forfeited the match!” Ettan protested.

Sir Galwin gave him a hard look. “I will decide the match, thank you!”

The knocking sounds of swords hitting shields slowly died out as the others stopped and stared. Ettan glared at Droque as he pulled out clumps of dirt and grass that had gotten lodged between his neck and the collar of his armor.

“Droque,” Sir Galwin said, his voice firm, “do you know what they call a knight who drops his sword in a pitched battle?”

Droque smiled and shrugged. “Clumsy?”

“Dead,” Sir Galwin said without a hint of amusement. “There is no more attractive target than a defenseless knight. The enemy will do everything they can to slaughter you, no matter the danger to themselves.”

“Then I thank the heavens I’m only fighting Ettan,” Droque answered with a laugh.

Sir Galwin scowled at Droque, then turned to Ettan. “And you. As I’ve told you before, never expose yourself as you did just now, no matter how well you think you know your opponent. If you

misjudge once, and he chops instead of slices, you'll be split in two. For your continued disobedience, I award the match to Drogue."

Ettan started to shake his head in disagreement, then caught himself. "Yes, sir," he said.

"Ettan and Drogue, you are finished for the day. The rest of you, take your places and resume."

The din started up again as Ettan returned his dagger to his belt, picked up his sword and shield, and headed for the edge of the field. Without looking at the others, he joined the line and took deep breaths, trying to quell his anger.

"That was actually a good move," Ettan heard someone say.

He turned. The boy who had spoken was named Kemo. Although all the boys knew each other's names, no one had any real friends in training given that they were all competing for the same few positions.

"I saw the whole thing," Kemo continued. "You timed it perfectly."

"Thanks," Ettan replied, surprised at the praise.

Kemo stood out from all the other boys as his skin was dark, not fair like most people in Gorum. Ettan learned from overheard conversations during the first few weeks of training that Kemo's father was from Allgonia, a tropical country across the Argasso Sea. He had fought in the war with Norvar and had earned his citizenship, making Kemo eligible for training.

Kemo was quiet but had an intensity to him that made him a formidable opponent. Ettan hadn't thought he was much of a threat until their first match. His speed caught Ettan completely off guard, and Kemo won easily. He often used moves that Ettan had never seen before, which, while extremely effective, always brought the admonishment of Sir Galwin and the other trainers.

"It's a shame that inventiveness is not rewarded," Kemo added.

"Only tried and true techniques are permitted," Ettan said,

mimicking Sir Galwin's reprimand that they both had received many times.

At that, Kemo laughed, and Ettan felt his mood lifting.

"What are the son of an Allgonian and the foreign-born laughing about?"

They turned to find Drogue approaching.

"Foreign-born?" Kemo repeated, looking questioningly at Ettan, then back at Drogue.

"Oh, you didn't know?" Drogue asked. "Master Ettan was born in Norvar, the land of our enemy."

"I'm a citizen of Gorum," Ettan said.

"Of course you are," Drogue said, "or you wouldn't be here. I'm just saying, it's not a mark in your favor when it comes to selection decisions."

"What about cheating?" Kemo asked.

Ettan looked at Kemo, startled by his directness with Drogue.

"What are you implying exactly?" Drogue demanded.

"Nothing," Kemo answered, his voice feigning innocence. "I'm just wondering if cheating ranks higher or lower than being foreign-born in the eyes of the knights."

Drogue's face turned red. "Peasants," he said derisively. "And one of you lives in a henhouse," he muttered as he walked away.

"I'd rather live in the henhouse of a king than the keep of a fool," Ettan called after him, encouraged by Kemo's boldness.

Kemo laughed. Drogue whirled around and marched up to the two of them.

"You think that's funny?" he said to Kemo. "I'll tell you what's funny. You, thinking that you have a chance of becoming a knight. Just look in a mirror. And you," he said, turning to Ettan, "do you really think you'll be selected? You're a Norvarian. I really don't know why you even bother coming to this field."

Drogue turned and started walking away. Ettan felt his anger

rise, not from what Drogue had said about him, but from what he had said to Kemo. With a flick of his hands, Ettan swung out his sword and caught Drogue at his boots with the tip. He tumbled to the ground.

“Oops,” Ettan said. “So sorry. Now I’m the one who’s being clumsy.” He stepped over to Drogue and extended his hand.

Drogue knocked Ettan’s hand away and picked himself up.

“Thank you for making my point,” Drogue said, brushing off his armor. “Your skills are better suited for wielding a dung shovel than a sword.” He glared at Ettan, then at Kemo. “Enjoy your remaining time here,” he said before turning and walking off. “It won’t be for much longer,” he called over his shoulder.

Ettan and Kemo looked at each other and laughed. But their laughter was not fully sincere as they both knew that jokes at Drogue’s expense often came with a high price.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ari Magnusson is the author of the middle grade novel *Bitopia*, named one of the best books of the year by *Kirkus Reviews*, and two books on bullying: the comic *What YOU Can Do About Bullying by Max & Zoey* for students, and *The CirclePoint Method* for teachers and other educators. He lives with his wife, two sons, a happy dog, a crafty cat, and a very chubby bearded dragon in the town of Winchester, Massachusetts. He is particularly proud of his ability to snatch houseflies out of the air with his hands. For more information on his books and background, please visit his personal website: arimagnusson.com.

In the war-torn Kingdom of Gorum, Ettan, Drogue, and Kemo dream of becoming knights, but for more than the title and armor. For Ettan, an orphan whose father had been a castle servant and who is now stuck tending the King's chickens, knighthood would mean an escape from poverty. Drogue, the son of the kingdom's most powerful lord, might win his father's approval. And Kemo, despised by some citizens for his dark skin, would finally feel accepted. But the path to knighthood is not as straightforward as they believe, and the three rivals each face tests far more difficult than the battle exercises on the training field. What they decide when faced with a choice between honor and justice or personal gain—and whether to put aside their rivalries to do what is right—will determine who they become and will set the stage for a final battle for the kingdom.



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