



The Wolf's Den

*Book One of the Three Brothers
Trilogy*

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SUMMER 600

“One, two, three!” the oldest of three brothers shouts, and the youngest swings on a rope swing and lets go, splashing into the pond.

The three blond-haired, blue-eyed Wolfensberger brothers are enjoying the second-to-last day of summer before the oldest, Borus, age ten, goes off to become a page at the Trinity School for Knights at King Renard’s Burmstone Palace. Kassandros (Kass), age nine, has one more year at home before he will follow in Borus’s footsteps in pursuit of knighthood. The youngest brother Julien (Jules) is only seven and still has three more years before he’ll be able to begin his journey, as well.

Sons in noble families who are not mages are encouraged to become knights to serve the king. Borus, Kass, and Jules have wanted to become knights to follow in the footsteps of their grandfather since they were old enough to understand what it means to be a knight in Etria.

All three boys are extremely close to each other, and Borus will be missed.

After each gets two more turns on the rope swing, Borus checks the sky and determines it's time to go in to get ready for supper. Just as he goes to inform Kass and Jules of this, they hear a bell summoning them back to the castle. They hurry to pull on pants, boots, and shirts. The bell this close to dinnertime means one of two things: danger or that someone important has arrived.

All three boys jump onto their respective ponies and urge them into a gallop racing back to the house to see what's going on.

They burst through the back gate into the stable yard and are greeted by three stable hands and their mother, Diana. "Boys, the Wolf is here! Hurry up and get washed for dinner. We mustn't keep him waiting!"



Scrubbed, hair combed, and fresh dinner clothes on, Borus, Kass, and Jules file quietly into the dining hall. Standing behind their chairs, they wait politely.

Kenric Wolfensberger, head of the house at Wolfensberger Castle and father to Borus, Kass, Jules, and Sabine enters the dining hall accompanied by his wife, Diana, and an older man with an eyepatch, long white hair, and the same nose.

The three boys bow to their father and the older man and wait for the adults to seat themselves before taking their own seats.

"We were not expecting you, Father," says Kenric to the older man.

“I wanted to escort my eldest grandson to the knight school. Is that a problem?” replies Burchard “the Wolf” Wolfensberger.

“No, not at all, but if you had sent word ahead of your arrival, I could have had your rooms better prepared,” replies Kenric.

“Nonsense. I spent over half of my life as a soldier. A bed is better than the ground!” grumbles the Wolf.

Kenric signals for the food to be brought in and served.

Borus is itching to say something, wanting to know why the Wolf is taking such an interest in him. Wisely though, Borus stays silent, knowing that unless asked to speak his words would be unwelcome during dinner.

Just as dinner is wrapping up an excited squeal comes from outside the door. The hall door opens, and a pitter patter of tiny feet can be heard. A tiny little girl with bright red hair and green eyes launches herself across the dining hall and into the Wolf’s lap. A nursemaid follows closely behind trying to grab her but stops once Sabine is within reach of the Wolf.

“Wolfie, Wolfie, Wolfie,” Sabine repeats over and over, giggling and patting his face.

Surprising even Kenric, the Wolf’s face softens, and he gives the little girl a big hug.

“Hello, my dearest. I missed you, too,” he says.

At Kenric’s signal, Diana stands up and swoops Sabine out of the Wolf’s arms. “Time for bed. You can see Grandpa in the morning,” Diana says.

Kenric glances at the three boys and decides that they should also be getting ready for bed. “Go on, boys. You can see the Wolf tomorrow as well.”

Borus is the last to the door, hesitating, hoping that his father will call him back. With one last wistful glance behind him, he quietly shuts the door and slowly goes upstairs.



Borus wakes up with the sun. He cleans his face with the basin of water left by a servant and carefully gets dressed for the day. The Wolf, always inspects his grandsons each morning on his visits and expects them to take pride in their appearances.

Kass is tangled in his sheets still sleeping when Borus pounds on his door. When there is no response Borus opens the door saying, “Kass, we’re going to be late for breakfast. You know the Wolf will be displeased if you’re late!”

Kass groans and rolls over. Too close to the edge, he tumbles onto the floor in a heap of sheets. Borus struggles to keep a straight face, as Kass attempts to untangle himself and fails. “Help me, please?” Kass begs.

“Sure, but only because the Wolf is here. Otherwise, you’d be on your own. I’m starving,” says Borus. Sure, enough there is a loud rumble from Borus’s stomach.

Borus and Kass working together finally get Kass untangled. Borus hunts for his brother’s boots while Kass pulls on his tunic and breeches.



Borus and Kass meet up with Jules on their way into the dining hall. Before entering, they each carefully inspect each other, adjusting their shirts so they are just right.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the only adult in the dining hall is their mother, Diana. Although there is evidence that father and the Wolf have been there, the boys are too late. Diana waves her arm inviting them to relax and sit down.

“Father and the Wolf went out early to check the town wall. They should be back within the hour. The Wolf expects to see all three of you in the training yard after breakfast,” she says.

The boys load their plates with juicy bacon, hot biscuits, and porridge then tuck in. When they finish, they stand, bow to their mother, and race out to the training yard.



The brothers start their preparation for the drills they know are coming by doing stretches, followed by three laps around the curtain wall. As they are finishing their last lap, the Wolf and Kenric ride through the gate.

Kenric hands off his horse to a groom and heads inside. The Wolf stays mounted and moves closer to the training yard to meet the boys.

The Wolf loves keeping his grandsons on their toes and always changes what he wants to see first. Today since he started his day with a ride, he wants the boys to start with one as well. Often knights are faced with hard riding followed by intense combat. The Wolf feels it is important Borus, Kass, and Jules focus on developing their stamina from a very young age.

“Go get your ponies, boys. We’re going to ride first!” the Wolf shouts to his grandsons who haven’t made it down from the curtain wall yet.

Borus rolls his eyes and gets elbowed by Kass. “Don’t let him catch you doing that,” Kass hisses. Borus sighs and heads down the stairs.

Jules starts bouncing. He spends as much time as possible in the stables, so starting with riding means he can show the Wolf his best skill before he’s tired and starts making mistakes.

They emerge from the stable and go out to the training ring. The Wolf, sensing Jules’s eagerness, decides to start with him.

“Jules, I want you to show me your walk, trot, and canter in both directions and then demonstrate a dismount when your horse is walking.”

Jules grins and does as the Wolf asks. He does his dismount at the walk landing on his feet, and his pony halts.

“Show off,” Borus mutters.

A little too loudly because the Wolf says, “Borus, you’re next!”

Borus urges his pony forward, his dismount is a little wobbly, but he doesn’t fall.

“Borus, you need to practice more! What is going to happen if you have full plate armor on? You would have fallen over if your feet were not solidly planted.”

Borus turns red at the scrutiny. Practicing moving dismounts is not usually high on his priority list. Borus hopes that once he is at school he will have more opportunities to practice. The last thing he wants is to be laughed at as a knight who can’t successfully complete a moving dismount in armor.

Kass, knowing he’s next, goes through his paces.

“What next, sir?” Kass asks.

“How about each of you show me something I haven’t seen you do before on a horse? And then we’ll work on swords,” replies the Wolf.

The Wolf notices each reaction his grandsons have to his requests and has an idea of what Borus and Kass will do in their demonstrations but has no idea what Jules will come up with. The Wolf has known since he first saw Jules with the horses and ponies when he was only one that he had a rare kinship with the horses that the Wolf’s father had had.

Borus goes first. He starts his pony at a walk. While the pony is walking, he drops the reins and scoots back some, then swings his left leg over the pony’s head, so he is essentially riding side saddle. Side saddle is the way many noblewomen prefer to ride when they are wearing long skirts. While the pony continues to walk, Borus swings his right leg over its rump, so he’s now facing backwards. Then he dismounts by pushing himself off over the pony’s rump.

Borus glances over at the Wolf. This time he had landed squarely on his feet doing a moving dismount. The Wolf gives a short nod of approval.

Next up is Kass. Kass considers his pony his friend, not just a tool, making him somewhat more adventurous in what experiments he does in his free time. Kass’s demonstration involves everything that Borus does, except his pony is trotting.

“As a knight, often you must adapt to a situation. In the field, you could ride double with the archer facing to the rear. Allowing for steering and protection from the enemies behind.” The Wolf says, adding a real scenario, so the brothers understand why he values their creativity.

While Borus and Kass are going through their demos, Jules has dismounted and leaves his pony, Blue, ground tied, while he messes around with a stack of logs and poles off to the side of the riding yard. When Kass finishes his turn, he turns and looks around for Jules and is surprised to see the setup along one side of the yard.

There is a series of three obstacles of various heights and widths. Not sure what Jules is planning on doing, Kass goes over to wait next to Borus and the Wolf.

The Wolf has a notion of what might happen with Jules's setup. Surprised, but very pleased at the same time, he eagerly awaits.

Jules jumps back onto Blue, takes one last look at his setup, and nudges Blue into a canter. He does one big circle and then changes his position, so he's not quite in the saddle, but balancing on his thighs. The next thing they know Jules is flying over the obstacles!

Kass's mouth has fallen open in shock and awe as he watches Jules jump Blue over the three obstacles. The tallest is about two feet tall. Jules starts to slow Blue down to a trot, looks at the Wolf, grins, and then urges Blue back into a canter.

Even the Wolf is not sure what he's going to do.

Jules heads straight for the training yard fence.

For a moment, terror takes a hold of all three observers as Jules speeds up more and prepares Blue. All four feet leave the ground, and miraculously boy and pony clear the four-foot fence with room to spare.

The Wolf starts to clap. Borus and Kass glance at each other and follow suit. Others join in. Kass glances around and realizes that their parents and the training master and head stableman

are also watching and applauding Jules.

Jules comes back through the gate at a trot with a huge smile on his face. He wasn't originally planning on jumping the yard fence, but he knew Blue could do it. They'd jumped similarly sized obstacles out in the field. Surprised and pleased by the applause, he realizes that he just spilled his secret and wasn't sure if his parents would allow him to even keep riding. Previously, Kenric had lectured Jules on being reckless.

The Wolf glances at Kenric, whose face has turned serious, and steps in to intercede as Jules is walking towards his father.

"That was spectacular, Jules. Who taught you how to jump like that?" says the Wolf, giving Kenric a look.

Jules looks at the Wolf and shrugs. "I taught myself. Master Randolph has shown us how to pay attention to our surroundings when on horseback and how to navigate obstacles. I just took it a step further and decided sometimes going over is faster than going around."

"Very good. Make sure you keep practicing, skills like this could be very handy if we go to war again," replies the Wolf. Jules looks at the Wolf in surprise when he mentions war. Etria has been at peace for almost twenty years. Did the Wolf know something? Or was he just acknowledging the usefulness of jumping obstacles as a skill to a knight.

Diana sees Jules's expression when the Wolf mentions war. She hugs him and speaks quietly. "Don't worry about something that is out of your power. If you want to be a knight, then follow your path. War and peace come and go. It is not something you or I have control over."

The crowd disperses as the boys move over into the sword training area.

The Wolf pairs off with Borus and indicates that Kass and Jules should pair off, too. The four of them go through high, middle, and low strike and block exercises.

Sensing Jules is starting to struggle because of his age and inexperience, the Wolf dismisses him for the remainder of the day. Jules bows and heads inside.

“Now that Jules has gone, I’d like to see the two of you pair together, so I can help you with your footwork,” the Wolf says.

They spend the next hour running through the same drill, with small adjustments to footwork and explanations of why the changes will help. The Wolf believes at this stage in their training it is critical that his grandsons understand why they need to make changes, otherwise how will they learn the purpose if they are just told to do it?

A gentle bell rings.

Lunch!

Borus and Kass glance at the Wolf, wondering if he will release them for lunch or if they will continue without a break.

A messenger runs up, bows to the Wolf, and then waits. The Wolf nods to the messenger, who approaches and offers a scroll.

“Sir, there is food and water inside. Please help yourself while I read the message and determine if you need to depart with a response,” states the Wolf. The messenger disappears inside.

“Boys, go inside and eat. I have business to attend to,” says the Wolf. Borus and Kass go inside.

The Wolf sits on the steps and cracks the seal on the scroll.

Burchard,

I was surprised when your aide informed me that you had departed before we finished our discussion about Crown Prince Richard. I had hoped to determine the best knight master for my son before the new school year starts.

Alas, I have not had such luck.

Please send my regards to Kenric and Diana. I look forward to resuming our discussion when you return to Burmstone Palace with Borus.

*Your friend,
King Renard*

The Wolf sighs. A scolding. Phah! what a waste of a messenger when King Renard knows he'll return in a few days. At least, it is not bad news or a formal summons. Although the Wolf is all too aware that if he doesn't meet with the king within a day of returning, there will be a formal summons and a more severe scolding.



Later that evening, the whole family gathers in the library.

Deep mahogany wood shelves polished to a gleam are full of books and other treasures. The Wolfensberger library is famous

across the country for the rare books it holds.

A selection of comfortable sofas and chairs surround a thick rug of white bear fur.

The children are rarely permitted in the library. It is a place for the adults to retreat, not for child's play.

The Wolf is in the largest chair in the room. Kenric and Diana are sitting on a sofa with Sabine curled up in Diana's lap. Borus, Kass, and Jules are on the larger of the two sofas. Everyone is waiting for the Wolf to speak.

"My family, I know you want to know what news I bring from Burmstone Palace. Rest assured we are still at peace with all of our neighbors. Although King Renard continues to encourage the nobles to be prepared, many of them are no longer running drills or training their villagers. As the number of years, we have been at peace grows, in my opinion, the nobles are becoming too comfortable. We have been caught unawares before and learned that harsh lesson. I'd hate for it to happen on my watch again," the Wolf explains.

The war with King Bokur and Wanonia had ended just over twenty years ago in 580. The Wolf remembers those years all too well. Kenric's memories of the war with Wanonia are of worrying about his father being gone frequently fighting in the war and the beginning of his education at Onaxx Academy of Magic. Kenric hopes for the sake of his children that they stay at peace for another twenty plus years. Being a knight during peace time takes a much smaller toll on a person than during war.

"What of the royal family?" Diana asks.

“The queen is in good health, as are Crown Prince Richard, Prince Geoffrey, Princess Phaedra, and Princess Ellandre. There have been some whispers that King Renard should be already looking for a princess for the crown prince, but his advisors are recommending following the plan of allowing the crown prince to obtain his knighthood before pushing a marriage on him. If Prince Richard is going to rule someday, he needs to establish a reputation not just as the son of the king, but as himself. The most successful rulers are those who invest the time into understanding the people of their kingdom,” the Wolf says and then pauses. “Boys, this is important for you, too. One day Borus, maybe all of you if your deeds are great enough, will be ruling over lands such as your father does. People will follow you, if they trust you. Take the time to get to know them.”

Kenric nods in agreement with the Wolf.

“The Wolf is right. Even now as young inexperienced boys, you can make connections with people that will serve you a lifetime. Your mother and I were wed because of one such connection between our fathers during the Forest War in 557, when we were barely older than you are now, Borus,” explains Kenric.

Kenric glances at the Wolf who nods for him to continue. “The Wolf was involved in the Forest War because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lucky for us he was there or the three of you would not exist. The pages from the Trinity School were out on a week-long training camp in the southern forest, near the pass to Southwind Fort. The battle spilled through the pass and into the surrounding area trapping the pages. Diana’s father found the group and led them back his farm to hide.”

Diana smiles, eyes twinkling at Kenric. Even though the marriage had been arranged, Kenric and Diana fell deeply in love after a couple of years and remain deeply in love almost fifteen years later.

Borus clears his throat, hesitant to speak even though this gathering is informal.

“You may speak, Borus,” offers his father.

Borus clears his throat again and then speaks “If Etria stays at peace, how do new knights get experience?”

Kenric smiles. “Just as we have been doing here since you were five. Knights continue to train throughout their lives. Sometimes when we are at peace there are unique opportunities to learn different fighting styles by traveling to different countries. Yes, there are knights who during peace let all their training and skills go by not using them. However, it is a choice that you will have to make for yourself, when the time comes.”

Borus, encouraged by his father’s response, speaks again. “Are the princes going through Trinity with the other nobles, or do they train somewhere else? Will I meet them?”

The Wolf keeps his face straight and replies, “Yes, they go through the traditional knight school with the other noble boys. Although you will not see Crown Prince Richard much since he is starting his first year as a squire. Squires often travel with their knight masters. Prince Geoffrey is a fourth-year page. It is likely you will see him some, but most of your classes will be with other first year pages.”

“Well, I think this is enough for tonight. Borus needs to get up early in the morning for his departure. Borus, Kass, and Jules, good night,” says Kenric. He is about to add Sabine to the list and

glances over. Sabine is fast asleep on Diana's lap, red curls fanned out around her.

The boys file out and head to their rooms. Diana is about to get up, but the Wolf shakes his head and says, "Let me." The Wolf stands and ever so gently picks up his granddaughter, cradling her in his arms and heads up to her room.

Diana, freed of Sabine, stands, and stretches. Kenric captures her hand and gently kisses it.

"Kenny, is Borus going to be ok? I can't believe he's already old enough to go to school," Diana says softly.

"Of course, he will be fine. Diana, you know how much Borus has been wanting this since he was five! All he has spoken about is becoming a knight, a legend just like his grandfather. Honestly though, I would be ok if he doesn't become a legend. Even I don't know how much that has cost the Wolf. He has told me some of his secrets, but not all of them," Kenric says.

"I just hope Kass figures out how to handle being alone, you know how close he is to Borus. It will likely be his greatest challenge, but he will be stronger for it," whispers Diana. She is emotionally exhausted. Her oldest is leaving for ten months tomorrow. The longest they have ever been apart is a week.

Many changes are upon the Wolfensberger family.