



THE KNIGHTS OF ARRETHTRAE

BOOK 6



SIR ROWAN

AND THE CAMERIAN CONQUEST



CHUCK BLACK

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*To my grandmother, Izetta...
a faithful servant of the King who lived her life
as a testimony, bringing many to Christ*

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KINGDOM'S HEART

An Introduction to the Knights of Arrethtrae



Like raindrops on a still summer's eve, the words of a story can oft fall grayly upon the ears of a disinterested soul. I am Cedric of Chessington, humble servant of the Prince, and should my inadequate telling of the tales of these brave knights e'er sound as such, know that it is I who have failed and not the gallant hearts of those of whom I write, for their journeys into darkened lands to save the lives of hopeless people deserve a legacy I could never aspire to pen with appropriate skill. These men and women of princely mettle risked their very lives and endured the pounding of countless battles to deliver the message of hope and life to the far reaches of the kingdom of Arrethtrae...even to those regions over which Lucius, the Dark Knight, had gained complete dominion through the strongholds of his Shadow Warriors.

What is this hope they bring? To tell it requires another story, much of it chronicled upon previous parchments, yet worthy of much retelling.

Listen then to the tale of a great King who ruled the Kingdom Across the Sea, along with His Son and their gallant and mighty force of

Silent Warriors. A ruler of great power, justice, and mercy, this King sought to establish His rule in the land of Arrethtrae. To this end He chose a pure young man named Peyton and his wife, Dinan, to govern the land.

All was well in Arrethtrae until the rebellion...for there came a time when the King's first and most powerful Silent Warrior, Lucius by name, drew a third of the warriors with him in an attempt to overthrow the kingdom. A great battle raged in the Kingdom Across the Sea until finally the King's forces prevailed. Cast out of the kingdom—and consumed with hatred and revenge—Lucius now brought his rebellion to the land of Arrethtrae, overthrowing Peyton and Dinan and bringing great turmoil to the land.

But the King did not forget His people in Arrethtrae. He established the order of the Noble Knights to protect them until the day they would be delivered from the clutches of the Dark Knight. The great city of Chessington served as a tower of promise and hope in the darkened lands of Arrethtrae.

For many years and through great adversity, the Noble Knights persevered, waiting for the King's promised Deliverer.

Even the noblest of hearts can be corrupted, however, and long waiting can dim the brightest hope. Thus, through the years, the Noble Knights grew selfish and greedy. Worse, they forgot the very nature of their charge. For when the King sent His only Son, the Prince, to prepare His people for battle against Lucius, the Noble Knights knew Him not, nor did they heed His call to arms.

When He rebuked their selfish ways, they mocked and disregarded Him. When He began to train a force of commoners—for He was a true master of the sword—they plotted against Him. Then the Noble Knights, claiming to act in the great King's name, captured and killed His very own Son.

What a dark day that was! Lucius and his evil minions—now known as Shadow Warriors—reveled in this apparent victory. But all was not lost. For when the hope of the kingdom seemed to vanish and the hearts of the humble despaired, the King used the power of the Life Spice to raise His Son from the dead.

This is a mysterious tale indeed, but a true one. For the Prince was seen by many before He returned to His Father across the Great Sea. And to those who loved and followed Him—myself among them—He left a promise and a charge.

Here then is the promise: that the Prince will come again to take all who believe in Him home to the Kingdom Across the Sea.

And this is the charge: that those who love Him must travel to the far reaches of the kingdom of Arrethtrae, tell all people of Him and His imminent return, and wage war against Lucius and his Shadow Warriors.

Thus we wait in expectation. And while we wait, we fight against evil and battle to save the souls of many from darkness.

We are the knights who live and die in loyal service to the King and the Prince. Though not perfect in our call to royal duty, we know the power of the Prince resonates in our swords, and the rubble of a thousand strongholds testifies to our strength of heart and soul.

There are many warriors in this land of Arrethtrae, many knights who serve many masters. But the knights of whom I write are my brothers and sisters, the Knights of the Prince.

They are mighty because they serve a mighty King and His Son.

They are...the Knights of Arrethtrae! 

CAMERIA THE GREAT



In the days of the great war against Chessington, the Dark Knight nearly destroyed the King's people. They were scattered from one end of the kingdom to the other, and though many did not believe the Prince to be the true Son of the King, the King did not forget them nor His promise to them. Those who did believe, the Knights of the Prince, were likewise spread from coast to coast. Wherever they went, they took the truth of the Prince and made brothers and sisters of enemies and strangers.

It was during these days that brave knights carried the mission of the Prince across the vast expanse of the Altica Valley to the five cities of Cameria. At first the Dark Knight paid no heed to their seemingly feeble efforts, for he deemed this region too remote from Chessington to matter. But the Camerian cities embraced the truth of the Prince and grew strong in the ways of the Code. This truth united the five great cities, and Cameria grew to be one of the most powerful regions in all the kingdom.

Many great Knights of the Prince arose in Cameria to battle against the evil one—knights whose stories deserve their own telling in another book of chronicles. Their love for the King and His Son inspired the people of this great land to reach across the vastness of the Altica Valley

and help the people of Chessington in their darkest hour. They bred horses that could endure the harsh travel required, and they flew across the valley as if on the wings of eagles. And it was they who gave battle against one of Lucius's most formidable Vincero Knights, Sir Adophal, who had risen up to conquer much of the southern kingdom. When this vile knight had nearly destroyed all that was Chessington, when the Dark Knight was ready to proclaim himself king of all Arrethrae, the United Cities of Cameria came to the rescue of the King's people.

They snatched victory from the jaws of the great dragon, inspiring the dragon's terrible wrath against Cameria and its people. But the truth of the Prince was so strong in Cameria and its Knights of the Prince so wary of the dragon that the Dark Knight could not overcome them by force. So he turned to more subtle tactics, scheming to infiltrate Cameria with thousands of Shadow Warriors and Vincero Knights and destroy the people and their great cities from within. The victory would be accomplished not by might but by deception, apathy, and entertainment.

As the years passed, the Dark Knight waited patiently for his evil scheme to take effect. Slowly, as a weed grows up beside the wheat stem, the deceptions of the Dark Knight began to choke the once vibrant truth of the Prince from the hearts of the Camerians.

Gradually they forgot the Prince.

Then they forgot Chessington...and the Dark Knight claimed victory.

With his heart overflowing with hatred, the Dark Knight then turned his eyes once more to Chessington and resumed his war against the King's people—a war that would rage on until the great day of the Prince's return.

For a time, however, the Camerians delayed the evil hand of Lucius, the Dark Knight. Some might think that the tale of their conquest is a tragedy, but out of every tragedy rise heroes—heroes whose chronicles are worth telling.

This is the story of such a one...the story of Sir Rowan. 

STABLE BOY



Some men are born to be poets, some to be builders, others bakers, sheriffs, and stable masters. But Rowan of Laos was born to be a swordsman, and every fiber of his body seemed to know it. His mastery of the art form was as instinctual as an eagle's drive to soar in the seam of sky between the mountain peaks and the blue canvas above them. And though he was born in utter poverty and orphaned at an age too early to remember his parents, something deep within him always whispered that he was destined for greatness.

As a boy, Rowan watched knights duel in the tournaments of Laos, memorizing every stance and move that he and the other boys of the street could practice later with their makeshift wooden swords. By age twelve, though he'd never held a real sword, he knew every move of the great fighters—knights like Sir Tarrington, Sir Byrk, Sir Borlan, and Sir Padruth.

Rowan loved sword fighting with a mighty passion, yet his chances of ever owning a sword were slim to none. He barely managed to eat, surviving on the handouts of passersby. As he grew, he eventually found work in one of the city stables, which provided some food and a reasonably dry place to sleep. Though he yearned to be a gallant knight someday and fight in the tournaments, his poverty gave him no hope of becoming anything more than a stable boy.

It was a fine horse named Algonquin that finally gave young Rowan of Laos his chance. Rowan was tacking up the stallion on a cool spring morning when Algonquin's owner came to collect his steed.

"He's a fine animal, sir." Rowan handed the reins over to a tall knight with dark brown eyes and a friendly face, then swiped a tousle of blond hair from his eyes and wiped a sleeve across his nose.

Sir Aldwyn smiled. "Thank you. Looks like you've taken good care of him. Here—" He pressed a coin into Rowan's hand, then winked.

Rowan's face lit up. "Thank you, sir." He eyed the coin as though he'd been given the world. Then his smile slowly disappeared.

Aldwyn tilted his head at the strange response.

"What is it, boy?" he asked.

Rowan glanced at the splendid sword that hung from Sir Aldwyn's belt, then looked up at the knight.

"I'd...like to buy something from you, sir." Rowan's gaze went back to the sword that sparkled in the morning sun, its pommel brilliantly flashing a unique mark he had seen once before.

Sir Aldwyn's hand fell on the golden hilt of the sword as he followed Rowan's gaze. He placed a gentle hand on the lad's shoulder. "I'm afraid a sword such as this costs far more than you have."

Rowan looked up, his face flushed. "I...I know, for this *is* all I have. I don't want to buy it, sir." He swallowed hard, hesitating even to ask such a daring question of a knight. "May I buy a chance to hold it for just a moment?"

Sir Aldwyn stared hard at Rowan, stunned at the request. Rowan ducked his head and lowered his gaze. He slowly tucked the coin into a pocket and began to turn away. But the beautiful sound of steel sliding on steel touched his ears as Sir Aldwyn slowly removed his sword from the scabbard.

Rowan lifted his head, turned about, and watched with widened eyes as the slender silver blade made its final exit from its home. Sir Aldwyn held the sword across both hands, palms open, and offered it to Rowan. Rowan looked up with absolute hope in his eyes and caught the subtle nod of the knight.

His hands quivered as he reached out and touched first the perfect steel of the blade and then the intricate yet sturdy hilt that bore the load of such a gallant weapon. Slowly his right hand encircled the grip, and he lifted the weapon.

The sword felt good—no, it felt great in his hands, almost as if he'd been reunited with a lost brother. It was weighty, but not as heavy as he'd expected. He held it before himself, wanting to take position and execute a cut. He glanced up at Sir Aldwyn. The knight nodded and stepped back. Rowan assumed a perfect middle-guard stance, then attacked an invisible enemy with a high to low diagonal cut followed by a horizontal cut and a quick thrust.

He held his final position, and chills flowed from the sword through his arms and up and down his entire body. He closed his eyes, trying to memorize the feel of the weapon in his hands. He relaxed, stood straight, and handed back the sword hilt first, the blade supported by his left hand, just as he'd seen the tournament chancellor do many times.

Sir Aldwyn took the sword and held it just a moment longer as Rowan soaked it up with his gaze, then placed it back in the scabbard. Rowan retrieved the coin from his pocket and held it out to Sir Aldwyn. The knight reached for it but instead closed Rowan's fingers around the coin.

"You have good form for such a young lad," Aldwyn said with a gaze that seemed to penetrate into Rowan's heart. "Come to the haven of the Prince, and I shall teach you."

He picked up Algonquin's reins, wheeled the horse around, and mounted. Rowan stood motionless, staring after him until he disappeared around the corner. Then he sprang to life and sprinted back into the stable to gather his meager belongings.

That was the day that changed Rowan's life forever. Sir Aldwyn mentored Rowan for the next four years, teaching him the ways of the Prince, the Code, and the sword. Rowan thrived under the training—fully embracing the truth of the Prince and the Code, at least at first.

Truth be told, his interest in Sir Aldwyn's stories eventually waned, but he reveled in the swordsmanship. With proper food and exercise, his body grew into that which it was intended to be—a powerfully muscled physique. His strength was beyond that of normal men, even at the youthful age of seventeen, and he soon mastered and exceeded all that Sir Aldwyn taught him about the sword.

On the day of Rowan's commissioning, Sir Aldwyn presented him with a magnificent sword of the Prince and invited him to ride by his side on a mission for the Prince. But though Rowan was grateful for Sir Aldwyn's kindness, the ventures of ordinary knights held no interest for him. He was determined to fight in the tournaments, to be one of the famous knights that stood before ten thousand cheering spectators.

At age eighteen, and against Sir Aldwyn's counsel, Rowan entered his first tournament and lost in the initial round. He had allowed the spectacle of the event to distract and hinder him. Afterward, the taunts and jeers of the small crowd so humiliated him that he wondered why he had even tried. As he walked through the arena gate, his embarrassment slowly transformed to determination. He glanced back into the arena as the next combatants entered under the cheers of many, and he vowed never to lose another fight—no matter the cost.

From that day forward, Rowan threw himself into training with single-minded determination. He pushed his body and his mind, drilling long hours each day, sparring with any partner he could find. After six months of intense work, Rowan registered for a small tournament in Sanisco, a city not far from Laos.

When the flag of commencement dropped, Rowan became so focused and determined that the sound of the crowd melted to silence and the stadium faded from sight. All he saw or heard was the knight before him and the sword the man held. An intensity akin to fury filled his veins, and after just a few strokes the duel was over. When he released the battle to victory, the sights and sounds of the arena flooded in upon him like the rushing waves of the sea. It was a glorious feeling, and Rowan reveled in it.

By day's end, Rowan was the champion of the Sanisco tournament.

He received the gold medallion amidst the cheers of hundreds of spectators, and a new tournament hero was born. On the platform, satisfaction settled deep in his soul, and yet he hungered for more.

More crowds. More cheering. More glory and gold.

That day was the making—and the eventual unmaking—of the mighty Sir Rowan. 