

THE KINGDOM SERIES

BOOK 3

KINGDOM'S EDGE



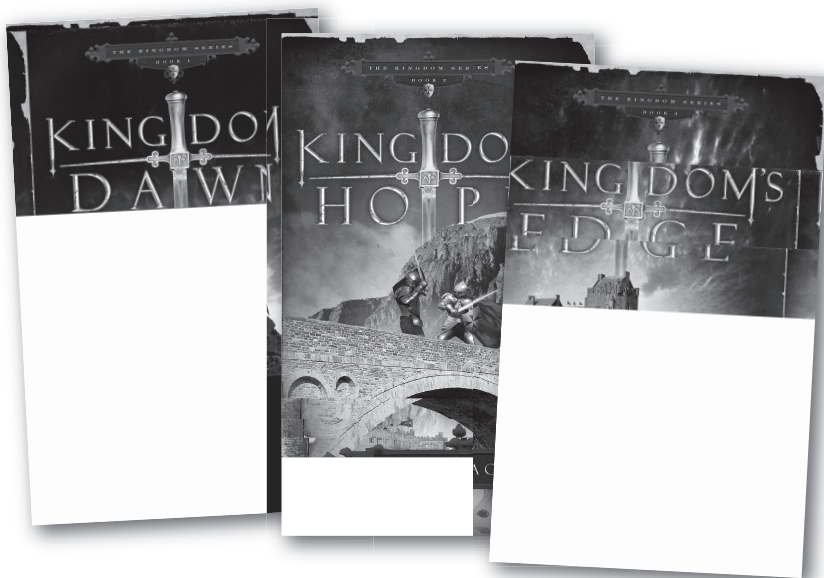
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THE KINGDOM SERIES

BOOK 3

KINGDOM'S EDGE

CHUCK BLACK

Multnomah® Publishers *Sisters, Oregon*

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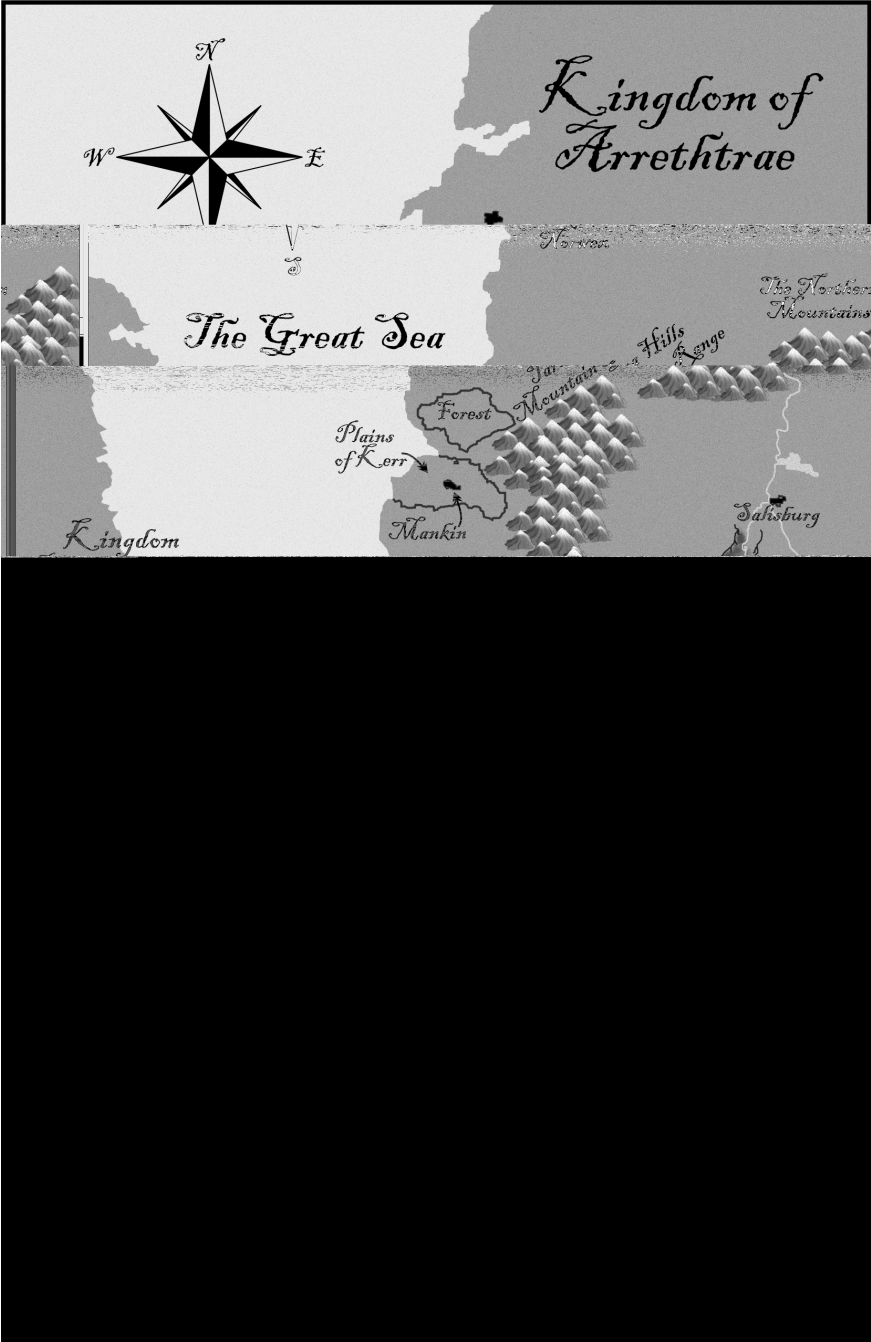
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To my devoted wife and editor, Andrea,
and to my children,
Brittney, Reese, Ian, Emily, Abigail, and Keenan.

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SOMETHING EVIL COMES OUR WAY




My heart is beating rapidly. My eyes are focused. I can see the dust rising in the distance. Something massive and evil is coming our way.

As I scan the horizon from left to right, my eyes come to rest on the line of gallant knights beside me that stretches as far as the eye can see. They are men of courage and valor. Yes, I am in that noble line as well. My steed's muscles twitch with power in anticipation of the coming battle. My armor shines, and the helmet fits my brow comfortably. My sword, polished and sharp, gleams in the sunlight. I have worked my sword for months in preparation for this very moment.

I am an unlikely knight. Cedric is my name. I come from the city of Chessington, in the kingdom of Arrethtrae.

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A few short years ago you would not have believed that I would be telling you this tale of battles, knights, and swords. Time has gone quickly. I remember when I was but a peasant... 

A STRANGER IN OUR MIDST



“Cedric, if you don’t hurry, we’ll miss the procession,” William called.

William was a dreamer. Unfortunately, these were times when not even dreamers could hope for a brighter tomorrow. Although his heart was tender, his features were sharp, giving the false impression that he was a hard man. William was strong and knew where he wanted to be, but he was not sure how to get there. His hair was dark and matched his brown eyes. Taller than average, he was a handsome man. I had known him since I was a boy. He was my friend.

“William, you know I’ve got to check on Leinad first,” I said. “Besides, what is so grand about seeing not-so-noble Noble Knights pass by when my stomach howls in hunger?”

“If only we were one of them, we wouldn’t *be* hungry,” William said as we approached an old cottage that matched the age of its lone occupant.

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"You're dreaming again, William. We were not born of noble blood and will therefore never become Noble Knights. Get that foolish notion out of your head!"

Leinad lived just outside Chessington near a small stream that lazily wound its way toward the sea to the south. He was a strange fellow. I had come to know him when I was a young lad. People tend to avoid what they cannot understand or what makes them uncomfortable, and this was the case with Leinad.

Although most people avoided him, I was drawn to him and his stories—stories that seemed too strange to be true and too original to be fabricated. If even a small portion of the tales were true, then Chessington was ignorant of a very gallant man. If the tales were indeed made-up, then Leinad was just as everyone thought him to be: insane. Either way, I had a tender spot in my heart for him, especially since he was now too old to properly care for himself.

"Good day, Sir Leinad!" I raised my voice in greeting as we approached his door. Many of his stories portrayed him as a knight in service to the King. I half-jokingly addressed him as such, but I could never tell if I was humoring him or if he was humoring me by graciously accepting my flip-pant use of the title.

"Ah, dear Cedric," came the familiar warm voice. "Welcome to my palace. Please come in."

We stepped into his home to see Leinad seated at a small table near the south wall. His left hand was resting on the sill of the window he was staring through.

His silver hair and brows partnered with his bent frame

A STRANGER IN OUR MIDST

to paint a picture of a man near the end of life's journey. He attempted to rise and meet us, but I halted him as I placed my hand on his shoulder.

"It's all right, Leinad," I said. "I know you are already standing in your heart."

"It is good to see you, Cedric and William," Leinad said with sincerity. He smiled at us with his eyes.

"Hello, Leinad," William said. "How are you feeling today?"

Leinad took in a deep breath, and he turned again toward the window.

"They listened once before, but time has defeated the sincerity of truth," Leinad said, answering a question no one had asked.

William glanced my way with a raised eyebrow. I smiled.

"We brought some bread for you," I said, trying to break his distant trance. "I will try to bring some fruit on my next visit, but the city is pretty short on food these days."

Leinad turned to us and gazed into my eyes. "*Time* is short," he said. "The power of the King is near, and the Dark One is mounted. You must be ready...the people must be ready!"

We were used to Leinad's odd talk, but today he seemed overcome with his delusions.

"My mission is nearly complete," he said. "The Sword of the King sings in anticipation of the One who is worthy!"

"Yes," I said, "your sword has no equal in splendor or beauty, that is certain. You have done well in its keeping." I

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rested my hand on his shoulder. "Leinad, we must leave you now, but I will return in a few days to check on you. We can talk more then."

Leinad smiled. "Very well, Cedric. Thank you for the bread. The King will remember your kindness to me."

I bowed and smiled as I winked at William. "Good day then, Sir Leinad," I said as we turned toward the door.

Outside William took a deep breath and shook his head.

"Someday, William, you and I will be hallucinating fools too," I said as we quickened our pace to make the procession.

"I don't think you should humor the old man so much," William said.

"What harm can it do? Leinad is old, and if he wants to spend his final years believing in something more than we are living...then why not?"

"Yes, but I think you crossed the line with that bit about the sword," William said as we entered the city.

"The sword is real," I said. Soon I realized I was walking by myself. I turned around to see William standing still with a perplexed look on his face.

"What?"

"Yes," I said. "Leinad owns a sword that is more magnificent than any I've ever seen—even more beautiful than any of the swords owned by the Noble Knights."

"Where did he get such a sword?" he asked, still not quite believing me.

"His story is long and bizarre, William. In truth, I do not know how he came to own it. He keeps it wrapped in a cloth in that old wooden chest in the corner. I fear that

A STRANGER IN OUR MIDST

someone would kill him for it if they knew it was there. That is why I have told no one about it.”

William rejoined me, but his gait was slower now, and his thoughts appeared to be deep.

“You’re sure about this sword, Cedric?” he asked.

“It’s been years, but I’ve seen it myself. It nearly glows in its splendor. Why someone would give a sword like that to Leinad is a mystery indeed.”

At the city’s main thoroughfare, we pushed our way to the front of the crowd. Beside us a woman with two small children waited, hoping for a scrap of food the Noble Knights might throw her way. The children’s faces were as dirty as their clothes. Poverty overwhelmed the people.

The sound of hooves on cobblestone announced the knights’ approach.

“Their horses prance and snort to match the arrogance of their riders,” I said in low tones to William.

“Enough, Cedric. After all, these Noble Knights are the chosen, are they not?”

“The King has been gone so long that I wonder if He even remembers this dreadful land.”

A poor old peasant woman was begging from one of the knights as he passed. “Please, good sir, a bit o’ food for a hungry old woman?”

He laughed as he threw a half-eaten apple her way. “Don’t eat it all at once,” he sneered.

The old woman picked up the dirt-covered apple and ate it as though it was her last meal. Maybe it would be.

The Noble Knights often passed through the streets handing out tidbits of food to show their goodwill toward

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the people. I believed they did it to inflate their egos; they loved their position over the people. But they had been chosen by the King to defend our land, and from all I had heard of the King, He was just and fair. Somehow, since He'd left for another country, the welfare of the kingdom had continually declined.

"Here, old man, have a feast today."

One of the knights threw a loaf of bread to a bent old man just in front of me. I prepared for my opportunity, fully expecting the feeble old man to miss. I saw his hand reach up for the hurled loaf. The gnarled fingers I expected to see were not gnarled at all. The hand was quick and strong. He snatched the loaf with such ease and purpose that I looked a fool as I grabbed a handful of air.

The old man wore rags that covered his head and body. He began to turn around. As he did, his back slowly straightened until I faced a man who was a full three inches taller than I. He was not bent or gnarled or old. On the contrary, this man was close to my age and had shoulders as broad as a horse. His arms were defined and powerful. One could even see strength in his jaw as he removed the cloth that covered his head.

A man's eyes give away the story of his character; my father once told me. I forced myself to gaze into the eyes of the stranger. I felt as though he had already questioned my eyes for my character. His eyes burned like fire. They penetrated into the very depths of my soul. They were not eyes of hate or malice—far from it. I saw power yet meekness, forcefulness yet gentleness, discipline yet compassion. I had never seen eyes like his!

A STRANGER IN OUR MIDST

He stretched forth his hand with the loaf of bread and offered it to me. I slowly took it from him.

"Tell me, Cedric," the stranger said in a rich voice, "what do you hope for?"

My mind was fuzzy. I heard the hungry cry of one of the children beside me. How selfish I felt. I was ready to rob an old man of his bread, and instead he gave me the very thing I'd hoped to take.

I knelt down to the child and gave her the loaf of bread. "I'm sorry I haven't more to give you," I told the child's mother.

I turned to the stranger once more. "I am a man of little hope, sir. The kingdom becomes more dreary every day. The people are starving, and the Noble Knights are the only ones who fare well. What is there to hope for? Were I foolish enough to hope, it would be that Arrethtrae was a kingdom free from hunger. A kingdom of truth, justice, and honor. A kingdom where men may serve the King as knights though only common blood flows through their veins, where each man's character, not his family name, determines his worth. No, hopes and dreams you will not find in my heart, for I am too acquainted with disappointment already. If you're looking for dreams, William here is the one to talk to."

"And what are your dreams, William?" the stranger asked as he turned toward him.

William seemed as taken aback by the stranger's gaze as I had been. "You are clothed as a peasant, though you hardly look the role. Tell me who you are, sir, and I shall tell you my dreams."

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"I am a man from a distant land," the stranger said. "What are your dreams, William?"

William paused. "I dream of becoming a knight and serving my King as the Noble Knights do."

"And would you also pass out scraps of food to the poor as the Noble Knights do?"

"I *am* the poor, sir. I would never forget these people or their demise. I would defend my King and serve His people."


"Well spoken, gentlemen. Do not despair. The King knows the plight of His people in Arrethtrae. I bid you farewell, 'Cedric of Little Hope' and 'William of Dreams.'"

With that, the stranger turned and disappeared into the throng of people.

"Well, William," I said, "it looks as though you are not alone in your dreamworld."

"That man is more than a dreamer, and you know it. His peasant clothes don't fool me. There was something about that man!"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure he runs a dreamers guild you could join." I laughed and slapped William on the back.

There was something about that man, I thought. 

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