



The Cleric Quintet

Canticle

In Sylvan Shadows

Night Masks

The Fallen Fortress

The Chaos Curse

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The Cleric Quintet • Book One

Canticle



Prologue

Aballister Bonaduce looked long and hard at the shimmering image in his mirror. Mountains of wind-driven snow and ice lay endlessly before him, the most forbidding place in all the Realms. All he had to do was step through the mirror, onto the Great Glacier.

“Are you coming, Druzil?” the wizard said to his bat-winged imp.

Druzil folded his leathery wings around him as if to privately consider the question. “I am not so fond of the cold,” he said, obviously not wanting to partake of this particular hunt. “Nor am I,” Aballister said, slipping onto his finger an enchanted ring that would protect him from the killing cold. “But only on the Great Glacier does the *yote* grow.” Aballister looked back to the scene in the magical mirror, one final barrier to the completion of his quest and the beginning of his conquests. The snowy region was quiet now, though dark clouds hung ominously overhead and promised an impending storm that would delay the hunt, perhaps for many days.

“There we must go,” Aballister continued, talking more to himself than to the imp. His voice trailed away as he sank within his memories, to the turning point in his life more than two years before, in the Time of Troubles. He had been powerful even then, but directionless.

The avatar of the goddess Talona had shown him the way.

Aballister’s grin became an open chuckle as he turned back to regard Druzil, the imp who had delivered to him the method to best please the Lady of Poison. “Come, dear Druzil,” Aballister said. “You brought the recipe for the chaos curse. You must come along and help to find its last ingredient.”

The imp straightened and unfolded his wings at the mention of the chaos curse.

This time he offered no arguments. A lazy flap brought him to Aballister's shoulder and together they walked through the magical mirror and into the blowing wind.

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The hunched and hairy creature, resembling a more primitive form of human, grunted and growled and threw its crude spear, though Aballister and Druzil were surely far out of range. It howled again anyway, triumphantly, as though its throw had served some symbolic victory, and scooted back to the large gathering of its shaggy white kin.

"I believe they do not wish to bargain," Druzil said, shuffling about from clawed foot to clawed foot on Aballister's shoulder.

The wizard understood his familiar's excitement. Druzil was a creature of the lower planes, a creature of chaos, and he wanted desperately to see his wizard master deal with the impudent fools—just an added pleasure to this long-awaited, victorious day.

"They are taer," Aballister explained, recognizing the tribe, "crude and fierce. You are quite correct. They'll not bargain."

Aballister's eyes flashed suddenly and Druzil hopped again and clapped his hands together.

"They know not the might before them!" Aballister cried, his voice rising with his ire. All the terrible trials of two long and brutal years rolled through the wizard's thoughts in the span of a few seconds. A hundred men had died in search of the elusive ingredients for the chaos curse; a hundred men had given their lives so that Talona would be pleased. Aballister, too, had not escaped unscathed. Completing the curse had become his obsession, the driving force in his life, and he had aged with every step, had torn out clumps of his own hair every time the curse seemed to be slipping beyond his reach.

Now he was close, so close that he could see the dark patch of yote just beyond the small ridge that held the taer cave complexes. So close, but these wretched, idiotic creatures stood in his way.

Aballister's words had stirred the taer. They grumbled and hopped about in the shadow of the jagged mountain, shoving each other forward as if trying to select a leader to start their charge.

"Do something quickly," Druzil suggested from his perch.

Aballister looked up at him and nearly laughed. "They will attack," Druzil explained, trying to sound unconcerned, "and, worse, this cold stiffens my wings."

Aballister nodded at the imp's rationale. Any delay could cost him, especially if the dark clouds broke into a blinding blizzard, one that would hide both the *yote* and the shimmering doorway back to Aballister's comfortable room. He pulled out a tiny ball, a mixture of bat guano and sulphur, crushed it in his fist, and pointed one finger at the group of taer. His chant echoed off the mountain face and back across

the empty glacier ice, and he smiled, thinking it wonderfully ironic that the stupid taer had no idea of what he was doing.

A moment later, they found out.

Just before his spell discharged, Aballister had a cruel thought and lifted the angle of his pointing finger. The fireball exploded above the heads of the startled taer, disintegrating the frozen bindings of the ice mountain. Huge blocks rained down, and a great rush of water swallowed those who had not been crushed. Several of the band floundered about in the ice and liquid morass, too stunned and overwhelmed to gain their footing as the pool quickly solidified around them.

One pitiful creature did manage to struggle free, but Druzil hopped off Aballister's shoulder and swooped down upon him.

The imp's claw-tipped tail whipped out as he passed by the stumbling creature, and Aballister applauded heartily.

The taer clutched at its stung shoulder, looked curiously at the departing imp, then fell dead to the ice.

"What of the rest?" Druzil asked, landing back on his perch.

Aballister considered the remaining taer, most dead, but some struggling futilely against the tightening grip of ice.

"Leave them to their slow deaths," he replied, and he laughed evilly again.

Druzil gave him an incredulous look. "The Lady of Poison would not approve," the imp said, wagging his wicked tail before him with one hand.

"Very well," Aballister replied, though he realized that Druzil was more interested in pleasing himself than Talona. Still, the reasoning was sound; poison was always the accepted method for completing Talona's work. "Go and finish the task," Aballister instructed the imp. "I will get the yote."

A short while later, Aballister plucked the last gray-brown mushroom from its stubborn grasp on the glacier and dropped it into his bag. He called over to Druzil, who was toying with the last whining taer, snapping his tail back and forth around the terrified creature's frantically jerking head—the only part of the taer that was free of the ice trap.

"Enough," Aballister said firmly.

Druzil sighed and looked mournfully at the approaching wizard. Aballister's visage did not soften. "Enough," he said again.

Druzil bent over and kissed the taer on the nose. The creature stopped whimpering and looked at him curiously, but Druzil only shrugged and drove his poison-tipped stinger straight into the taer's weepy eye.

The imp eagerly accepted the offered perch on Aballister's shoulder. Aballister let him hold the bag of *yote*, just to remind the somewhat distracted imp that more important matters awaited them beyond the shimmering door.



One

The White Squirrel's Pet

The green-robed druid issued a series of chit-chits and clucks, but the white-furred squirrel seemed oblivious to it all, sitting on a branch in the towering oak tree high above the three men.

“Well, you seem to have lost your voice,” remarked another of the men, a bearded woodland priest with gentle-looking features and thick blond hair hanging well below his shoulders.

“Can you call the beast any better than I?” the green-robed druid asked indignantly. “I fear that this creature is strange in more ways than its coat.”

The other two laughed at their companion's attempt to explain his ineptitude.

“I grant you,” said the third of the group, the highest ranking initiate, “the squirrel's color is beyond the usual, but speaking to animals is among the easiest of our abilities. Surely by now—”

“With all respect,” the frustrated druid interrupted, “I have made contact with the creature. It just refuses to reply. Try yourself, I invite you.”

“A squirrel refusing to speak?” asked the second of the group with a chuckle. “Surely they are among the chattiest—”

“Not that one,” came a reply from behind. The three druids turned to see a priest coming down the wide dirt road from the ivy-streaked building, the skip of youth evident in his steps.

He was of average height and build, though perhaps more muscular than most, with gray eyes that turned up at their corners when he smiled and curly brown locks that bounced under the wide brim of his hat. His tan-white tunic and trousers showed him to be a priest of Deneir, god of one of the host sects of the Edificant Library. Unlike most within his order, though, this young man also wore a decorative

light blue silken cape and a wide-brimmed hat, also blue and banded in red, with a plume on the right-hand side. Set in the band's center was a porcelain-and-gold pendant depicting a candle burning above an eye, the symbol of Deneir.

"That squirrel is tight-lipped, except when he chooses not to be," the young priest went on. The normally unflappable druids' stunned expressions amused him, so he decided to startle them a bit more. "Well met, Arcite, Newander, and Cleo. I congratulate you, Cleo, on your ascension to the status of initiate."

"How do you know of us?" asked Arcite, the druid leader.

"We have not yet reported to the library and have told no one of our coming." Arcite and Newander, the blond-haired priest, exchanged suspicious glances, and Arcite's voice became stem. "Have your masters been scrying, looking for us with magical means?"

"No, no, nothing like that," the young priest replied immediately, knowing the secretive druids' aversion to such tactics. "I remember you, all three, from your last visit to the library."

"Preposterous!" piped in Cleo. "That was fourteen years ago. You could not have been more than . . ."

"A boy," answered the young priest. "So I was, seven years old. You had a fourth to your party, as I recall, an aging lady of great powers. Shannon, I believe was her name!"

"Incredible," muttered Arcite. "You are correct, young priest." Again the druids exchanged concerned looks, suspecting trickery here. Druids were not overly fond of anyone not of their order; they rarely came to the renowned Edificant Library, sitting high in the secluded Snowflake Mountains, and then only when they had word of a discovery of particular interest, a rare tome of herbs or animals, or a new recipe for potions to heal wounds or better grow their gardens. As a group, they began to turn away, rudely, but then Newander, on a sudden impulse, spun back around to face the young priest, who now leaned casually on a fine walking stick, its silver handle sculpted masterfully into the image of a ram's head.

"Cadderly?" Newander asked through a widening grin. Arcite, too, recognized the young man and remembered the unusual story of the most unusual child. Cadderly had come to live at the library before his fifth birthday—rarely were any accepted before the age of ten. His mother had died several months before that, and his father, too immersed in studies of his own, had neglected the child. Thobicus, the dean of the Edificant Library, had heard of the promising boy and had generously taken him in.

"Cadderly," Arcite echoed. "Is that really you?"

"At your service," Cadderly replied, bowing low, "and well met. I am honored that you remember me, good Newander and venerable Arcite."

"Who?" Cleo whispered, looking curiously to Newander.

Cleo's face, too, brightened in recognition a few moments later.

"Yes, you were just a boy," said Newander, "an overly curious little boy, as I recall!"

"Forgive me," said Cadderly, bowing again. "One does not often find the opportunity to converse with a troupe of druids!"

"Few would care to," remarked Arcite, "but you . . . are among that few, so it would appear."

Cadderly nodded, but his smile suddenly disappeared. "I pray that nothing has happened to Shannon," he said, truly concerned. The druid had treated him well on that long-ago occasion. She had shown him beneficial plants, tasty roots, and had made flowers bloom before his eyes. To Cadderly's astonishment, Shannon had transformed herself, an ability of the most powerful druids, into a graceful swan and had flown high into the morning sky. Cadderly had dearly wished to join her—he remembered that longing most vividly—but the druid had no power to similarly transform him.

"Nothing terrible, if that is what you mean," replied Arcite.

"She died several years back, peacefully."

Cadderly nodded. He was about to offer his condolences, but he prudently remembered that druids neither feared nor lamented death, seeing it as the natural conclusion to life and a rather unimportant event in the overall scheme of universal order.

"Do you know this squirrel?" asked Cleo suddenly, determined to restore his reputation.

"Percival," Cadderly replied, "a friend of mine."

"A pet?" Newander asked, his bright eyes narrowing suspiciously. Druids did not approve of people keeping pets.

Cadderly laughed heartily. "If any is the pet in our relationship, I fear it is I," he said honestly. "Percival accepts my strokes—sometimes—and my food—rather eagerly—but as I am more interested in him than he in me, he is the one who decides when and where."

The druids shared Cadderly's laugh. "A most excellent beast," said Arcite, then with a series of clicks and chits, he congratulated Percival.

"Wonderful," came Cadderly's sarcastic response, "encourage him." The druids' laughter increased and Percival, watching it all from his high branch, shot Cadderly a supercilious look.

"Well, come down here and say hello!" Cadderly called, banging the lowest tree branch with his walking stick. "Be polite, at least."

Percival did not look up from the acorn he was munching. "He does not understand, I fear," said Cleo. "Perhaps if I translate . . ."

"He understands," Cadderly insisted, "as well as you or I. He is just a stubborn one, and I can prove it!" He looked back up to the squirrel. "When you find the time, Percival," he said slyly, "I left a plate of cacasa-nut and butter out for you in my room . . ." Before Cadderly even finished, the squirrel whipped off along a branch, hopped to another, and then to the next tree in line along the road. In a few short moments, the squirrel had leaped to a gutter along the library's roof and, not slowing a bit, zipped across a trail of thick ivy and in through an open window on the northern side of the large structure's third floor.

“Percival does have such a weakness for cacasa-nut and butter,” Cadderly remarked when the druids’ laughter had subsided.

“A most excellent beast!” Arcite said again. “And yourself, Cadderly, it is good to see that you have remained with your studies. Your masters spoke highly of your potential fourteen years ago, but I had no idea that your memory would be so very sharp or, perhaps, that we druids had left such a strong and favorable impression upon you.”

“It is,” Cadderly replied quietly, “and you did! I am glad that you have returned—for the recently uncovered treatise on woodland mosses, I would assume. I have not seen it yet. The headmasters have kept it secured until those more knowledgeable in such matters could come and appraise its value. You see, a band of druids was not wholly unexpected, though we knew not who, how many, or when you would arrive.”

The three druids nodded, admiring the ivy-veiled stone structure. The Edificant Library had stood for six hundred years, and in all that time its doors had never been closed to scholars of any but the evil religions. The building was huge, a self-contained town—it had to be, in the rough and secluded Snowflakes—more than four hundred feet across and half as deep through all four of its above-ground levels. Well staffed and well stocked—rumors spoke of miles of storage tunnels and catacombs beneath—it had survived orc attacks, giant-hurled boulders, and the most brutal mountain winters, and had remained unscathed through the centuries.

The library’s collection of books, parchments, and artifacts was considerable, filling nearly the entire first floor, the library proper, and many smaller study chambers on the second floor, and the complex contained many unique and ancient works.

While not as large as the great libraries of the Realms, such as the treasured collections of Silvermoon to the north and the artifact museums of Calimport to the south, the Edificant Library was convenient to the west-central Realms and the Cormyr region and was open to all who wished to learn, on the condition that they did not plan to use their knowledge for baneful purposes.

The building housed other important research tools, such as alchemy and herbalist shops, and was set in an inspiring atmosphere with breathtaking mountain views and manicured grounds that included a small topiary garden. The Edificant Library had been designed as more than a storage house for old books; it was a place for poetry reading, painting, and sculpting, a place for discussions of the profound and often unanswerable questions common to the intelligent races. Indeed, the library was a fitting tribute to Deneir and Oghma, the allied gods of knowledge, literature, and art.

“The treatise is a large work, so I have been told,” said Arcite. “Much time will be expended in examining it properly. I pray that the boarding rates are not excessive. We are men of little material means.”

“Dean Thobicus will take you in without cost, I would expect,” answered Cadderly. “Your service cannot be underestimated in this matter.” He shot a wink at Arcite. “If not, come to me. I recently inscribed a tome for a nearby wizard, a

spellbook he lost in a fire. The man was generous. You see, I had originally inscribed the spellbook, and the wizard, forgetful as most wizards seem to be, never had made a copy.”

“The work was unique?” Cleo asked, shaking his head in disbelief that a wizard could be so foolish with his most prized possession.

“It was,” Cadderly replied, tapping his temple, “except for in here.”

“You remembered the intricacies of a wizard’s spellbook enough to recreate it from memory?” Cleo asked, stunned.

Cadderly shrugged his shoulders. “The wizard was generous.”

“Truly you are a remarkable one, young Cadderly,” said Arcite.

“A most excellent beast?” the young priest asked hopefully, drawing wide smiles from all three.

“Indeed!” said Arcite. “Do look in on us in the days ahead.”

Given the druids’ reputation for seclusion, Cadderly understood how great a compliment he had just been paid. He bowed low, and the druids did likewise, then they bid Cadderly farewell and moved up the road to the library.

Cadderly watched them, then looked up to his open window.

Percival sat on the sill, determinedly licking the remains of his cacasa-nut and butter lunch from his tiny paws.

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A tiny drop slipped off the end of the coil, touching a saturated cloth that led down into a small beaker. Cadderly shook his head and put a hand on the spigot controlling the flow.

“Remove your hand from that!” cried the frantic alchemist from a workbench across his shop. He jumped up and stormed over to the too-curious young priest.

“It is terribly slow,” Cadderly remarked.

“It has to be,” Vicero Belago explained for perhaps the hundredth time. “You are no fool, Cadderly. You know better than to be impatient. This is *Oil of Impact*, remember? A most volatile substance. A stronger drip could cause a cataclysm in a shop so filled with unstable potions!”

Cadderly sighed and accepted the scolding with a conceding nod. “How much do you have for me?” he asked, reaching into one of the many pouches on his belt and producing a tiny vial.

“You are so very impatient,” remarked Belago, but Cadderly knew that he was not really angry. Cadderly was a prime customer and had many times provided important translations of archaic alchemical notes. “Only what is in the beaker, I fear. I had to wait for some ingredients—hill giant fingernails and crushed oxen horn.”

Cadderly gently lifted the soaked cloth and tilted the beaker.

It contained just a few drops, enough to fill only one of his tiny vials. “That makes

six," he said, using the cloth to coax the liquid into the vial. "Forty-four to go."

"Are you confident that you want that many?" Belago asked him, not for the first time.

"Fifty," Cadderly declared.

"The price . . ."

"Well worth it!" Cadderly laughed as he secured his vial and skipped out of the shop. His spirits did not diminish as he moved down the hall to the southern wing of the third floor and the chambers of Histra, a visiting priestess of Sune, Goddess of Love.

"Dear Cadderly," greeted the priestess, who was twenty years Cadderly's senior but quite alluring. She wore a deep crimson habit, cut low in the front and high on the sides, revealing most of her curvy figure. Cadderly had to remind himself to keep his manners proper and his gaze on her eyes.

"Do come in," Histra purred. She grabbed the front of Cadderly's tunic and yanked him into the room, pointedly shutting the door behind him.

He managed to glance away from Histra long enough to see a brightly glowing object shining through a heavy blanket.

"Is it finished?" Cadderly asked squeakily. He cleared his throat, embarrassed.

Histra ran a finger lightly down his arm and smiled at his involuntary shudder. "The dweomer is cast," she replied. "All that remains is payment."

"Two hundred . . . gold pieces," Cadderly stammered, "as we agreed." He reached for a pouch, but Histra's hand intercepted his.

"It was a difficult spell," she said, "a variation of the norm."

She paused and gave a coy smile. "But I do so love variations," Histra declared teasingly. "The price could be less, you know, for you."

Cadderly did not doubt that his gulp was heard out in the hallway. He was a disciplined scholar and had come here for a specific purpose. He had much work to do, but Histra's allure was undeniable and her fine perfume overpowering. Cadderly reminded himself to breathe.

"We could forget the gold payment altogether," Histra offered, her fingers smoothly tracing the outline of Cadderly's ear. The young scholar wondered if he might fall over.

In the end, though, an image of spirited Danica sitting on Histra's back, casually rubbing the priestess's face across the floor, brought Cadderly under control. Danica's room was not far away, just across the hall and a few doors down. He firmly removed Histra's hand from his ear, handed her the pouch as payment, and scooped up the shrouded, glowing object.

For all his practicality, though, when Cadderly exited the chambers two hundred gold pieces poorer, he feared that his face was shining as brightly as the disk Histra had enchanted for him.

Cadderly had other business—he always did—but, not wanting to arouse suspicions by roaming about the library with an eerily glowing pouch, he made straight

for the north wing and his own room. Percival was still on the windowsill when he entered, basking in the late morning sun.

"I have it!" Cadderly said excitedly, taking out the disk. The room immediately brightened, as if in full sunlight, and the startled squirrel darted for the shadows under Cadderly's bed.

Cadderly didn't take time to reassure Percival. He rushed to his desk and, from the jumbled and overfilled side drawer, produced a cylinder a foot long and two inches in diameter.

With a slight twist, Cadderly removed the casing from the back end, revealing a slot just large enough for the disk. He eagerly dropped the disk in and replaced the casing, shielding the light.

"I know you are under there," Cadderly teased, and he popped the metal cap off the front end of the tube, loosing a focused beam of light.

Percival didn't particularly enjoy the spectacle. He darted back and forth under the bed, and Cadderly, laughing that he had finally gotten the best of the sneaky squirrel, followed him diligently with the light. This went on for a few moments, until Percival dashed out from under the bed and hopped out the open window. The squirrel returned a second later, though, just long enough to snatch up the cacasa-nut and butter bowl and chatter a few uncomplimentary remarks to Cadderly.

Still laughing, the young priest capped his new toy and hung it on his belt, then moved to his oaken wardrobe. Most of the library's host priests kept their closets stocked with extra vestments, wanting always to look their best for the continual stream of visiting scholars. In Cadderly's wardrobe, however, the packed clothing took up just a small fraction of the space.

Piles of notes and even larger piles of various inventions cluttered the floor, and custom-designed leather belts and straps took up most of the hanging bar. Also, hanging inside one of the doors was a large mirror, an extravagance far beyond the meager purses of most other priests at the library, particularly the younger, lower-ranking ones such as Cadderly.

Cadderly took out a wide bandoleer and moved to the bed.

The leather shoulder harness contained fifty specially made darts and, with the vial he had taken from the alchemist's shop, Cadderly was about to complete the sixth. The darts were small and narrow and made of iron, except for silver tips, and their centers were hollowed to the exact size of the vials.

Cadderly flinched as he eased the vial into the dart, trying to exert enough pressure to snap it into place without breaking it.

"*Oil of Impact*," he reminded himself, conjuring images of blackened finger tips.

The young scholar breathed easier when the volatile potion was properly set. He removed his silken cape, meaning to put on the bandoleer and go to the mirror to see how it fit, as he always did after completing another dart, but a sharp rap on his door gave him just enough time to place the leather belt behind him before Headmaster Avery Schell, a rotund and redfaced man, burst in.

“What are these calls for payment?” the priest cried, waving a stack of parchments at Cadderly. He began peeling them off and tossing them to the floor as he read their banners. “Leatherworker, silversmith, weaponsmith . . . You are squandering your gold!”

Over Avery’s shoulder, Cadderly noticed the toothy smile of Kierkan Rufo and knew where the headmaster had gained his information and the fuel for his ire. The tall and sharp-featured Rufo was only a year older than Cadderly, and the two, while friends, were principal rivals in their ascent through the ranks of their order, and possibly in other pursuits as well, considering a few longing stares Cadderly had seen Rufo toss Danica’s way. Getting each other into trouble had become a game between them, a most tiresome game as far as the headmasters, particularly the beleaguered Avery, were concerned.

“The money was well spent, Headmaster,” Cadderly began tentatively, well aware that his and Avery’s interpretations of “well spent” differed widely. “In pursuit of knowledge.”

“In pursuit of toys,” Rufo remarked with a snicker from the doorway, and Cadderly noted the tall man’s satisfied expression. Cadderly had earned the headmaster’s highest praise for his work on the lost spellbook, to his rival’s obvious dismay, and Rufo was obviously enjoying bringing Cadderly back down.

“You are too irresponsible to be allowed to keep such sums!” Avery roared, heaving the rest of the parchments into the air. “You have not the wisdom.”

“I kept only a portion of the profits,” Cadderly reminded him, “and spent that in accord with Deneir’s—”

“No!” Avery interrupted. “Do not hide behind a name that you obviously do not understand. Deneir. What do you know of Deneir, young inventor? You have spent all but your earliest years here in the Edificant Library, but you display so little understanding of our tenets and mores. Go south to Lantan with your toys, if that would please you, and play with the priests of Gond!”

“I do not understand.”

“Indeed you do not,” Avery answered, his tone becoming almost resigned. He paused for a long moment, and Cadderly recognized that he was choosing his words very carefully.

“We are a center of learning,” the headmaster began. “We impose few restrictions upon those who wish to come here—even Gondsmen have ventured through our doors. You have seen them, but have you noticed that they were never warmly received?”

Cadderly thought for a moment, then nodded. Indeed, he remembered clearly that Avery had gone out of his way to keep him from meeting the Gondish priests every time they visited the library. “You are correct, and I do not understand,” Cadderly replied. “I should think that priests of Deneir and Gond, dedicated to knowledge, would act as partners.”

Avery shook his head slowly and very determinedly. “There you err,” he said.

"We put a condition on knowledge that the Gondsmen do not follow." He paused and shook his head again, a simple action that stung Cadderly more than any wild screaming fit Avery had ever launched at him.

"Why are you here?" Avery asked quietly, in controlled tones. "Have you ever asked yourself that question? You frustrate me, boy. You are perhaps the most intelligent person I have ever known—and I have known quite a few scholars—but you possess the impulses and emotions of a child. I knew it would be like this. When Thobicus said we would take you in . . ." Avery stopped abruptly, as if reconsidering his words, then finished with a sigh.

It seemed to Cadderly that the headmaster always stopped short of finishing this same, beleaguered point about morality, stopped short of preaching, as though he expected Cadderly to come to conclusions of his own. Cadderly was not surprised a moment later when Avery abruptly changed the subject.

"What of your duties while you sit here in your 'pursuit of knowledge?'" the headmaster asked, his voice filling with anger once again. "Did you bother to light the candles in the study chambers this morning?"

Cadderly flinched. He knew he had forgotten something.

"I did not think so," Avery said. "You are a valuable asset to our order, Cadderly, and undeniably gifted as both a scholar and scribe, but, I warn you, your behavior is far from acceptable." Avery's face flushed bright red as Cadderly, still not properly sorting through the headmaster's concerns for him, met his unblinking stare.

Cadderly was almost used to these scoldings; it was Avery who always came rushing to investigate Rufo's claims. Cadderly did not think that a bad thing; Avery, for all his fuming, was surely more lenient than some of the other, older, headmasters.

Avery turned suddenly, nearly knocking Rufo over, and stormed down the hallway, sweeping the angular man up in his wake.

Cadderly shrugged and tried to dismiss the whole incident as another of Headmaster Avery's misplaced explosions. Avery obviously just didn't understand him. The young priest wasn't overly worried; his scribing skills brought in huge amounts of money, which he split evenly with the library. Admittedly, he was not the most dutiful follower of Deneir. He was lax concerning the rituals of his station and it often got him into trouble. But Cadderly knew that most of the headmasters understood that his indiscretions came not from any disrespect for the order, but simply because he was so busy learning and creating, two very high priorities in the teachings of Deneir—and two often profitable priorities for the expensive-to-maintain library. By Cadderly's figuring, the priests of Deneir, like most religious orders, could find it in their hearts to overlook minor indiscretions, especially considering the greater gain.

"Oh, Rufo," Cadderly called, reaching to his belt.

Rufo's angular face poked back around the jamb of the open door, his little black eyes sparkling with victorious glee.

“Yes?” the tall man purred.

“You won that one.”

Rufo’s grin widened.

Cadderly shone a beam of light in his face, and the stunned Rufo recoiled in terror, bumping heavily against the wall across the corridor.

“Keep your eyes open,” Cadderly said through a wide smile. “The next attack is mine.” He gave a wink, but Rufo, realizing the relatively inoffensive nature of Cadderly’s newest invention, only sneered back, brushed his matted black hair aside, and rushed away, his hard black boots clomping on the tiled floor as loudly as a shoed horse on cobblestones.

* * * * *

The three druids were granted a room in a remote corner of the fourth floor, far from the bustle of the library, as Arcite had requested. They settled in easily, not having much gear, and Arcite suggested they set off at once to study the newly found moss tome.

“I shall remain behind,” Newander replied. “It was a long road, and I am truly weary. I would be no help to you with my eyes falling closed.”

“As you wish,” Arcite said. “We shall not be gone too long. Perhaps you can go down and pick up on the work when we have ended.”

Newander moved to the room’s window when his friends had gone and stared out across the majestic Snowflake Mountains. He had been to the Edificant Library only once before, when he had first met Cadderly. Newander had been but a young man then, about the same age as Cadderly was now, and the library, with its bustle of humanity, crafted items, and penned tomes, had affected him deeply. Before he had come, Newander had known only the quiet woodlands, where the animals ruled and men were few.

After he had left, Newander had questioned his calling. He preferred the woodlands, that much he knew, but he could not deny the attraction he felt for civilization, the curiosity about advances in architecture and knowledge.

Newander had remained a druid, though, a servant of Silvanus, the Oak Father, and had done well in his studies. The natural order was of primary importance, by his sincere measure, but still . . .

It was not without concern that Newander had returned to the Edificant Library. He looked out at majestic mountains and wished he were out there, where the world was simple and safe.