

Prologue

Voyage to the Edge

The occasional cool mist of the sea quietly reminds me of the unyielding truth of my journey. I am too far from battle to feel the rush within my muscles and yet too close to sleep.

The ship I am on is a grand ship and is only one of many. The night breeze chills my moist face as I gaze across the rhythmic mass and see the outline of hundreds of other gallant ships. Gallant ships carrying gallant knights. As I lean upon the mast, the creak of the timber and the melodic swish of each wave breaking against the bow tug upon my memories.

I am Cedric...Cedric of Chessington. You and I are alike in that we are on a journey. I am not referring to my trek upon this ship, although it is the final leg of my journey. No, my journey began a long time ago, when I was just a boy.

At ten years old, my heart was full of dreams and adventure. An old man by the name of Leinad enticed my appetite for adventure with his stories. His impact on my life was powerful, though I did not realize it at the time. I believed him as a boy, humored him as a young man, and honor him now, for the stories he told of his life were true. They were of a truth that lost its believability as I grew into the reality of life and dared not believe. And yet, here I am on an adventure every bit as unbelievable as Leinad's.

As I close my eyes, the moist air reminds me of the damp smell of spring nearly twenty-five years ago. There was a small stream east of Chessington that meandered south until it emptied into the vast sea. I loved to play upon its banks with my friend William. Our swords of willow clicked in the morning sunlight as we rescued the fair lady from the clutches of the Dark Knight.

William had been warned by his parents to stay away from the “crazy old man” who lived in a hut near the river, but I could not. He was odd for sure, but he was not dangerous at all. His tales of valor drew me to him. He was a mentor and a friend, and the memory of his voice has been a companion to me often, especially now that I know how his life fits so perfectly into the King’s plan for the kingdom. He had the voice of a seasoned knight...

“Sit down, lad, and share a slice of apple,” Leinad said as my mouth became wet in anticipation of the tart fruit. His worn hands worked the knife firmly and delicately to produce eight perfect slices.

“Sir Leinad, please tell me again about the mighty sword,” I pleaded as he slid a cracked wooden bowl across the table with the green apple slices. I thanked him and took a small nibble of my first slice to allow my mouth a chance to recover from the blast of sweetness that flooded my tongue and cheeks.

His silver hair seemed to betray the heart of a mighty warrior within. Though he was old, his shoulders were broad and his arms were strong. The firewood he chopped was an easy challenge for him, and the blade of the ax landed on its target every time. His gentle brown eyes were framed by tan wrinkles that ran toward his temples. They were eyes that I could gaze into and not turn away from. At times during his orations they became a living canvas that revealed love, pain, courage, and fear. The years of age only slightly masked what I knew was once a very handsome young man.

“Ah, Cedric, my dear boy,” he said and lowered himself into an adjacent chair on my right. It faced him toward a window that looked south to the sea, which was just beyond one’s vision. “That is a story worth its telling.”

A veteran hand landed on my shoulder, and his smile accompanied a wink. “It was a new beginning for the people, the dawn of a new kingdom...”

Leinad’s story is one of knights, swords, treachery, and love. There is no story like it, and though it is my beginning, it is his story—a story that must not be forgotten.

Chapter 1

Vision Search

The razor-sharp tip of the sword screamed deathly close to Leinad's chest as he quickly recovered from a foolish overextended thrust aimed for his opponent's torso.

I'll never underestimate his speed again, thought Leinad as he carefully took up his position, once again facing the older man. A quick exchange of cuts and parries ensued with no clear advantage. The older man advanced an attack with seasoned experience, carefully but aggressively. Leinad countered each attack with precision and confidence as he gave slightly, waiting for the expended energy to take its toll on the muscled frame of the older man. At sixteen years old, Leinad was just a boy to some, but his daily training by his mentor had developed strength and discipline in him before his time.

There it was—the first hesitation in his opponent's volley of cuts was a clear indication to Leinad that his attack was ending. He had studied his opponent carefully and knew that if he was to be victorious, he had to capitalize on such a moment as this. As he deflected the last cut to his left, Leinad quickly rotated his body one full circle, which doubled the force of his blade as it raced toward the older man's stomach. He risked the momentary unprotected exposure of his back based on the fatigue he sensed in his opponent. If he miscalculated, he would die. If he was successful, he would be the victor.

As he neared completion of the circling maneuver, Leinad turned his head to locate the target for his following sword to strike, sure that it was impossible for the older man to retreat quickly enough to avoid his deadly blow. He was suddenly gripped with fear. His sword was screaming toward nothing but air; his opponent was gone.

The older man had dropped to one knee and raised his sword for protection as he saw the deadly arc of Leinad's sword coming toward him. Leinad knew in an instant that he had miscalculated once again.

"Observation and experience build prediction, for if you study the past, you will know the future." Leinad recalled this lesson from his mentor, and now he was about to die as a consequence of forgetting it.

The speed of the sword was too great for him to change its direction, and yet once the sword passed over the head of his adversary, he would never be able to recover in time to stop the fatal thrust from his opponent that would surely follow. As the sword approached the vacant target just above the head of the master swordsman, Leinad pulled and jumped with all his might, using the momentum of the sword to catapult him, as though he were mounting a horse, over the top of the older man.

The last-chance maneuver sent Leinad tumbling on the ground behind the older man, but he was able to regain his footing before his opponent could turn and attack again.

The two swordsmen faced each other once again with sweat-soaked tunics and brows that could no longer hold the salty fluid that fell from their foreheads. The lush green meadow that hosted this fight seemed to wait patiently for its interrupted peace to return. The fight had lasted much longer than either of them had experienced before, and there was still no sign of a champion.

Leinad looked into the eyes of the older man—eyes that revealed experience, wisdom, and patience. He sensed a mutual respect for each other's skill as a swordsman and for each other's character as a man.

"That was a bit daring, son!" Leinad's father said as he yielded his sword to his scabbard.

Leinad smiled and knew that his father had just rebuked him for his carelessness.

“I’m sorry, Father. I will be more careful in the future,” Leinad said as he too found a home for his sword in his own scabbard.

Leinad had been trained by his father every day for the past four years in the art of the sword. Peyton was a master swordsman, and Leinad saw his father’s commitment to pass this mastery on to him through these lessons. Leinad also learned from his father that sword training alone was more devastating than helpful to a young man were it not tempered with discipline, honor, integrity, loyalty, and honesty—the very qualities his father had once learned from the King himself. Today Leinad revealed his proficiency, and he knew he was fast becoming a master swordsman like his father.

Leinad was of average height but still growing. With dark hair that curled when wet, he bore a strong resemblance to his father, which even included the slight dimple in his chin. His smile was slightly higher on the left and accentuated the handsome features of a maturing young man. He felt himself growing stronger each day, but he knew his boyish look was still quite evident. Leinad was glad that his voice no longer cracked when he talked. He found it difficult to say the right things to folks other than his father, and attempting conversation with a voice that cracked didn’t help matters. Leinad’s eyes were different than Peyton’s though, for the deep, sharp eyes of his father gave way to the compassionate eyes of his mother.

Leinad remembered his mother, although the image of her delicate face had become faint with the passing years. This upset Leinad, and he clung to the memory of her love for him all the more. Dinan had died when Leinad was eight. Even then Leinad could sense a deep ache in her heart that never seemed to leave her. The winter she fell sick and died was too grievous a time for Leinad to talk about. He assumed that was true for his father as well since he talked only of the pleasant times they once had as a family.

Although it was not complete, his father's gentle love was enough to carry Leinad into manhood without his mother. His father fulfilled both roles as well as any man could. Leinad knew this and responded with respect and loyalty.

As they walked toward a favorite sprawling oak tree for a time of recovery, Peyton placed his arm around Leinad's shoulder.

"Excellent lesson today, son. After our rest, how about we clean up and make a trip to town for some supplies?"

Leinad looked up slightly to meet his father's eyes, for he was nearly equal in height, and smiled. Any time there was a break in the routine labor of the farm, Leinad enjoyed it. At first that was why he loved the lessons in sword fighting. But later he came to love the training because he had reached a point where he knew he was quite competent with the sword. Although he knew he was far from his father's level of mastery, Leinad loved the fact that he was a challenge to him. For a long time he ignored the question that never left his mind: *What does sword fighting have to do with farming?*

The young lad loved to be in the presence of his father. There he felt secure. Not that Leinad ever felt threatened, for all he had ever known since he could remember was a peaceful life in the land. Unlike many youths of sixteen, Leinad never saw his father as an overbearing fool. He could see the depth of wisdom that resided in his father, and he never questioned the truth and sincerity of his love for him.

Peyton was a tall man with a well-seasoned muscular frame. His dark hair was accompanied by wisps of gray near his temples, and his eyes were deep and sharp but not harsh. His hands were large and leathery from long hours of working the land. Early on Leinad knew that his father's hands were fashioned for a different purpose—they had not always been the hands of a farmer. It was in the last four years that this was made obvious to him since his father had begun teaching Leinad skills quite different from those required to grow food from the land.

After each had taken long drinks from their water flasks, they dug into a knapsack and enjoyed the sweet taste of fresh fruit. Now that peace had returned to the meadow, so had the songs of the birds.

Leinad and his father lived in the Plains of Kerr, which was along the western shore of the kingdom. The Great Sea bordered the kingdom on the west and down to the south as well. Most of the inhabitants of the Plains of Kerr were farmers. The town of Mankin served as a central community for the people as well as a place of trade for travelers from other regions of the kingdom.

Leinad's farm was a half-day's walk north of Mankin, and the Great Sea was just as far to the west. It was lush, beautiful country. The farm rested on the northern edge of the Plains of Kerr. Rugged wilderness and forested country filled with wildlife was north of the farm, which afforded Leinad and his father many days of excellent hunting. Just to the east of the farm was the gentle meadow in which their lessons of the sword usually took place. It was in this meadow that they now were enjoying a moment of rest.

"Your sword skills have greatly improved, Leinad," Peyton said. "Do not become impatient with the fight. Impatience breeds recklessness, and recklessness will end in defeat against a skilled opponent. It is the patient perfecting of the fundamentals that wins battles. That is why I have worked with you to improve your strength and focus your mind, but you must decide that you will discipline yourself to use them."

"I understand," Leinad said. "Father, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"What does sword fighting have to do with farming?"

Peyton finished a draw on his flask and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "No matter what a man's occupation, he must be ready to fight for the King. One never knows if he will be called upon to serve the King in battle."

Peyton paused and looked at Leinad. "But honestly, son, for you it will mean much, much more." He did not wait for the next inevitable question. "Come. Let's clean up and get to town so we can return home before dark."

Chapter 2

The Servant's Sword

Peyton and Leinad entered the outskirts of Mankin midafternoon on their horses. The streets were moving with their usual activity. Mankin had no protective walls surrounding it and thus was vulnerable to raids from various bands of marauders. It was the crafty and sometimes less-than-honorable town prefect who actually kept the community thriving in spite of these bands of thieves. When necessary, he paid off the marauders with a portion of the duty he collected from the inhabitants of the town. The payoff might be gold coins, food, or weapons. The thieves never went so far as to hinder the town's potential to recover and provide another payoff. When possible, the bell in the tower located at the town square was sounded to warn the people. A short burst of clangs called a town meeting, but a continuous ringing of the bell meant the marauders were on their way. This allowed parents time to gather their children off the streets, for it was not unusual for a stray youngster to end up as a slave in a distant land.

After buying some cooking supplies at the town market, Peyton and Leinad walked their horses toward the blacksmith's shop at the end of the main thoroughfare.

"I need Gabrik to fix a shoe on Rosie here," Peyton said as they passed by various shops in the town. Leinad noticed that any time they came to town, his father always found an opportunity to stop at the blacksmith's shop. There was an unusual bond between his father and Gabrik. Leinad could never quite understand why there was any friendship at all since Gabrik was stern and spoke very little. Although his work was superb, the townsfolk entered his shop

only for business. Both Gabrik and the townsfolk were content with their business-only relationship.

“Gabrik is an awfully serious fellow, Father,” Leinad said as they neared the shop. “What’s his story?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Peyton said with a slight smile.

“Are you kidding? The man is huge! I’ll not risk upsetting him. Besides, every time we go to his shop, he stares at me as though I need watching.”

Peyton laughed. “Trust me, Leinad, you have never seen Gabrik upset. And as for his demeanor toward you, I think he likes you.”

Leinad stifled his own laugh and thought privately how glad he was that their encounters with Gabrik were brief and infrequent.

The familiar sound of hot steel being pounded into a usable form met his ears. Leinad tied his horse to the hitching post, and Peyton led his horse to the open door of the shop, where a large, dark-skinned man looked up from his work.

“Gabrik, my friend...greetings!” Peyton smiled and raised a friendly hand.

Gabrik’s countenance softened slightly when he saw Peyton. He nodded his greeting and doused his work in the cooling tank. Hissing white steam rose into the air around Gabrik, and the hammer came to rest on his anvil.

“Hello, Peyton.” His voice was deep and slightly accented. It was an accent that matched none other that Leinad had ever heard. Gabrik wiped the sweat from his brow and some soot from his hands with a cloth. That unsettling stare once again came to rest on Leinad.

Every time Leinad saw Gabrik, he was amazed at his size. He stood a full head taller than Peyton, and his sweat-soaked tunic did little to hide the massive muscles beneath it. His jet-black hair was short and straight. His eyes were a hazel-green mix and were set deep. Leinad could not force himself to look into those penetrating eyes for more than a brief moment.

He met Gabrik's gaze and then found a sword to study hanging on a nearby wall. Gabrik's finest work was in the swords he made. The work was of such quality that Leinad wondered why he was blacksmithing in a region of the kingdom where there was more need for plows and horseshoes than for swords. And yet, for as long as Leinad could remember, Gabrik had been the community blacksmith and swordsmith.

"What can I do for you today, Peyton?" Gabrik asked.

"Rosie needs a shoe repaired," Peyton said.

Gabrik immediately went to work, and the shoe was fixed in short order.

"Gabrik, how is your other work coming along?"

Gabrik glanced toward Leinad. "I finished it two days ago. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, I believe I would," Peyton said.

Gabrik walked to the back of his shop, through a door, and into his storage room. When he returned, he was carrying an item wrapped in cloth. He set it before Peyton and Leinad on a wooden worktable.

Gabrik opened the cloth to reveal a beautiful, masterfully crafted sword. It surpassed the splendor of even Peyton's sword. Leinad's jaw dropped slightly as his eyes scanned every detail of the magnificent sword. He yearned to hold it, but his temperance forbade him. The blade was razor sharp and shined like white silver. From the hilt to midway up the blade was an ornate and intricate inlaid pattern. The handle was gold with more intricate design on the guard. The pommel contained the distinct insignia of the King, just as did Peyton's sword did.

"It is absolutely splendid, Gabrik!" Peyton said as he too admired the fine work.

"The steel in the blade was folded over two hundred times," Gabrik said without emotion or pride.

Leinad became aware of his gawk and tried to show mature restraint instead. "Who is it for?" he asked Gabrik. It was the first question Leinad had ever asked him, and it brought another gaze from Gabrik that made Leinad wish he had stayed silent.

"I do believe this is the finest sword in all of Arrethtrae," Peyton said, seemingly unaware that Leinad had spoken.

Gabrik looked back at Peyton. "Only one sword surpasses it," he said matter-of-factly.

"Yes," said Peyton, "and I was fortunate enough to see that one as well. There has never been, nor will there ever be, a sword that equals that of the King!"

Gabrik nodded. "True indeed, true indeed."

Gabrik covered the sword once again with the cloth. "The scabbard is also nearly finished. Within the next day or so, my work will be done." He left the room to return the sword to its place of rest.

Upon Gabrik's return, Peyton thanked him and paid for the work done on Rosie's shoe. They exchanged parting courtesies and turned to leave the shop. Leinad followed his father outside, and as he neared the threshold, he heard Gabrik's bass voice.

"Leinad." It was the first time he had spoken directly to the boy.

Leinad turned and felt his cheeks flush slightly, not knowing what verbal retribution would be added to the soul-penetrating stares he always received.

"The sword is for one who is willing to serve the King...and the people."

For a moment, Gabrik's eyes did not cut Leinad as they had so often in the past—they searched. Leinad hesitated, nodded his appreciation, and turned to leave.

Down the street, Peyton and Leinad stopped at a shop to purchase some fresh bread, fruits, vegetables, and venison to add some variety to their food

pantry on the farm. Soon they would bring a portion of their own produce to town to sell and trade.

As they exited the shop, Leinad glanced up the street and missed a rise in the threshold, which nearly sent him to the cobblestoned pavement. The sack of food spilled onto the ground, and an apple rolled four paces to the dirty feet of a young girl who looked every bit a street orphan. Leinad quickly recovered his balance and his dignity and began to restock his bag. He kept one eye on the girl, fully expecting her to grab the fruit and bolt. Her hair was a gnarled mess, and its color was undistinguishable, although Leinad thought it might be reddish. She wore a tattered dress that was as plain as the dirt on the street. The thin cloth hung limply on her lean body. Her cheeks were soiled, but her eyes were not empty as one might expect. The spark of life was still evident in those bright blue eyes.

Leinad turned away from the girl to finish filling the sack and to provide an opportunity for the girl to escape with her booty unnoticed. He knew his father would have given the hungry girl some food anyway as he had done for many others in the past. Figuring enough time had elapsed, he turned back and nearly dropped the bag again. The girl was standing directly in front of him with her arm outstretched, apple in hand. Leinad gazed at her somewhat surprised and perplexed.

"If you's goin' ta give me the food, you needs ta say so 'cause I don't like pretendin' I's stealin'," the young girl said in a matter-of-fact way.

"It's okay," Leinad said. "You can have it."

"Thanks, mister!"

Peyton joined the two. "What's your name, missy?" he asked.

"Name's Tess. But it don't really matter none 'cause nobody knows it or cares much." Her voice dropped slightly.

Leinad felt guilty for his own good life as he looked at the pathetic form of this young girl. She looked three or four years younger than he. He figured the odds were she had never seen a meal as good as he ate three times a day.

"That's not true, Tess," Peyton said. "A person's name always matters, no matter who you are. And there are people who care. You just don't know it yet. Tell me, where are your parents?"

Tess thought for a moment. It looked to Leinad as though she was trying to remember if she'd ever had parents. "I ain't got no parents. They was killed when I was little." The words were rather emotionless.

"Where do you stay then?" Peyton asked.

"I's a servant for Miss Wimble. I do errands an' washin' an' things, an' she lets me stay in her barn at night. Even gives me a potato an' a carrot every day," she said with a smile that clearly affected Peyton.

Leinad saw the evidence of a broken heart in his father's eyes.

"Tess," Peyton said, "did you know that your smile is like bright sunshine on a cloudy day?"

Tess blushed through the dirt on her cheeks and looked shyly at the ground. Leinad figured this little girl rarely, if ever, received a compliment, and she apparently didn't know what to do with it.

"How would you like to take a ride in the country and have a hot meal?"

Tess looked back up at Peyton. "But mister, Miss Wimble won't take kindly ta me bein' late for chores. She says she owns me, an' that I'd better not run off or she'd come find me. I's already late now, an' I bet she's plenty mad."

As if on cue, a voice screeched from down the street. "Tess! You'd better git yourself home now!"

Leinad cringed at the sound of the woman's voice as she came closer.

"I got floors need sweepin' an' clothes need washin'. If you want your meal today, you'd better git after it!"

Now we know where Tess learned her fine language skills, Leinad thought.

The woman, her form plump and her countenance stern, ignored Peyton and Leinad as she marched up to Tess, grabbed her upper arm, and began to drag her down the street. Tess glanced over her shoulder at Peyton almost apologetically.

“Excuse me, madam.” Peyton took a few strides to cover the distance between them.

The woman stopped and faced Peyton. “What do you want?”

“I don’t believe the girl wants to go with you. Are you her mother?”

The woman squinted at Peyton. “I’m the only mother she’s got, so she’s mine.”

“It sounds to me like you’re more her master than her mother.” Peyton’s stern demeanor made it clear that he would not be dealt with lightly.

“So what if she’s my servant. I’ve fed her for years, an’ I figure that makes me her owner.”

Peyton’s anger was evident by his clenched jaw. “What do you figure she’s worth to you?”

The woman’s countenance changed to one of delight. “I figure I gotta have at least eighty shillings ta compensate for all the hassle she’s caused me.”

Peyton grabbed his money bag. “Here’s five pounds—twenty shillings more than you asked.” He placed the coins in the woman’s hands and guided Tess away from her.

“I meant a hundred and eighty,” the woman said, hoping to further her profit with protest.

“The deal is done!”

Peyton turned to face the woman squarely. She backed off immediately and walked up the street counting her treasure. She never turned to say good-bye to Tess.

Leinad looked at Tess and felt sympathy for her. He thought he saw dread in Tess's eyes, as though she feared her new owner could be worse than Miss Wimble.

Peyton waited until Miss Wimble was long gone; then he knelt on one knee and placed a gentle hand on Tess's shoulder. In this position, Tess was taller than Peyton, and he looked up into her eyes with compassion.

"Tess," he said softly, "the King never intended for people to be bought and sold like cattle. I did not buy you—I bought your freedom."

She looked into his eyes and, as she later told Leinad, she felt real love for the first time in her life. Tears came to her eyes, and she hugged Peyton's neck. Peyton gently hugged her back, and his eyes brimmed with tears.

Leinad hoped that he would be as brave as his father—brave enough to reach through the dirt, the inconvenience, and the sacrifice to care for the unloved.

Every person has a story, he thought. How many endure the same heartache and need the same compassion that Tess did?

"Come on, Sunshine," Peyton said to Tess. "Let's take a ride to the country!"