



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 the bow breaking each wave tug upon my memories.

I am Cedric...Cedric of Chessington. You and I are alike in that we are all 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 by 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” that 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 sweet taste that flooded my tongue and cheeks.

His silver hair seemed to betray the heart of a mighty warrior within. Though fairly 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 axe landed on its target...every time. His brown, gentle eyes were framed by tan wrinkles that ran

toward his temples. They were gentle eyes that I could gaze into and not turn away. At times during his orations they became a living canvas that revealed love, pain, courage, and fear. As an elderly man, he was stately. 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 which was aimed for his opponent’s torso.

I’ll never underestimate his speed again, thought Leinad as the young lad 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 in such an attack 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 extreme 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 in this grueling battle, he had to capitalize on such a moment as this. Leinad did not wait for the offensive attack by his opponent to completely end. As he deflected the last cut to his left, Leinad powerfully and 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 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, the fight would be over, and he would be the victor.

As he neared completion of the circling maneuver, Leinad twisted his head and led with his eyes to pinpoint the target for his following sword to strike. Leinad was sure that it was impossible for the older man to retreat quickly enough to avoid his deadly blow. Within a fraction of a moment, Leinad's fear gripped him. His sword was screaming toward nothing but air, and his opponent was gone.

The older man had dropped to one knee and began raising his sword for protection as he saw the deadly arc of Leinad's sword coming toward him. Leinad diverted his eyes downward and 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 within the split second that remained, and yet once the sword passed overhead of his opponent, he would never be able to recover in time to stop the fatal thrust that would surely follow from his opponent. As the sword approached the vacant target just above the head of the master swordsman, Leinad pulled and jumped with all of 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 feet 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 which 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 ever experienced before, and there was still no sign of a champion.

The men locked eyes. One set of eyes revealed experience, wisdom, and patience. The other revealed dreams, ambition, and energy. Though they fought, both saw complete respect for the other—respect for each other’s skill as a swordsman, and respect for each other’s character as a man.

“That was a bit daring, Son!” said Leinad’s father 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,” said Leinad as he too found a home for his sword in his own scabbard.

Peyton had trained his son every day in the art of the sword for the past four years. He could not help the pride he felt about his son. Peyton himself was a master swordsman, and he was driven to pass this mastery on to his son. But he also knew 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 he had once learned from the King himself. Today’s training session revealed to Peyton just how

proficient the boy had become. At such a youthful age, Leinad was nearly a master swordsman himself.

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 his handsome features as a young maturing man. His physique was growing stronger each day, but the 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 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 or his father to talk about. They focused on the pleasant times they once had as a family.

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

They walked toward a favorite large sprawling oak tree for a time of recovery. "Excellent lesson today,

son,” Peyton said, and he placed a loving arm around his shoulder. “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 reached a point where he knew he was quite competent with the sword. And although he knew he was far from the level of mastery of his father, he 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. The boy’s early maturity helped him 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 as a farmer. 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 began teaching Leinad skills quite different than 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 the peace had returned to the meadow, so had the song 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 point of 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,” said Peyton. “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, Father,” replied Leinad. “Father, may I ask you a question?”

“Certainly,” Peyton responded.

“What does sword fighting have to do with farming?”

Peyton finished a draw on his water 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 will never know if he will be called upon to serve the King in battle.”

Peyton paused and looked at Leinad with a deeper knowledge. “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 mid-afternoon on their horses. The streets were moving with their usual activity. Mankin had no protective walls surrounding it, and thus it was vulnerable to raids from various bands of marauders. It was the crafty and sometimes less-than-honorable town prefect that 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 in the near future. 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 the 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 Gabrik, the blacksmith, and his father. 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 only entered his shop for business. Both Gabrik and the townsfolk were content with their business-only relationship.

“Gabrik is an awfully serious fellow, Father,” said Leinad 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,” Leinad replied.

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 useable form met their 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 firm countenance softened slightly when he saw Peyton. He nodded his greeting and doused his work in the cooling tank. The 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 set deep. Leinad could not force himself to look into those penetrating eyes for more than a brief moment. He met Gabrik’s gaze briefly 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 country 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,” said Gabrik.

“Rosie needs a shoe repaired,” replied Peyton.

Gabrik immediately went to work and the shoe was fixed in short order. “Gabrik,” said Peyton, “how is your other work coming along?”

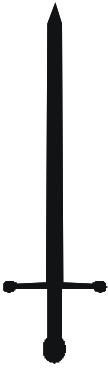
Gabrik glanced toward Leinad. “I finished it two days ago. Would you like to see it?” he asked.

“Yes. I believe I would,” replied Peyton.

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 even surpassed the splendor of 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.



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

“The steel in the blade was folded over two hundred times,” commented Gabrik without emotion or pride.

Leinad became aware of his gawk and tried to show mature restraint instead. “Who is it for?” Leinad 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 Arrethrae,” said Peyton, seemingly unaware that Leinad had spoken.

Gabrik looked back at Peyton. “There is only one sword that surpasses it,” Gabrik 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!”

“True indeed,” nodded Gabrik. “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,” said Gabrik. 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,” called Gabrik. It was the first time he had directly spoken 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 in thought, nodded his appreciation, and turned to leave.

Peyton and Leinad stopped at a shop that sold fresh bread, fruits, vegetables, and venison to re-supply their food pantry on the farm. They were nearly self-sufficient, but occasionally it was nice to add some variety to what they could produce themselves. Soon, Leinad and Peyton would bring a portion of their produce to town to sell and trade.

As they exited the shop, Leinad glanced up the street and missed a rise in the floorboard that nearly sent him to the ground. 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 would 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—the apple in hand. Leinad gazed at the girl 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’,” said the young girl in a matter-of-fact way.

“It’s okay,” said Leinad, “you can have it.”

“Thanks, mister,” said the girl with enthusiasm.

Peyton joined the two. “What’s your name, missy?” he asked.

“Name’s Tess,” said the girl. “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 like she was three or four years younger than he, and the

odds were that she had never seen a meal as good as he ate three times a day.

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

Tess thought for a second, as though she was trying to remember if she ever had parents. “I ain’t got no parents. They was killed when I was little.” The words were rather emotionless since she lost them at an age too young to know what life was like with parents.

“Where do you stay then?” asked Peyton.

“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,” said Peyton, “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. It was the first compliment anyone had ever given her, and she 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 and tried to discern his sincerity. “But mister, Miss Wimble won’t take kindly to 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!”

Peyton and 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!" hollered the woman who must have been Miss Wimble.

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

The woman completely 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," said Peyton as he took a few strides to cover the distance between them.

The woman, with her servant in tow, stopped and faced Peyton. "What do you want?" she asked abruptly. Her form was plump and her countenance stern.

"I don't believe the girl wants to go with you. Are you her mother?" he asked.

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," said Peyton quite sternly. His 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," said the woman.

Peyton's anger was evident by his clenched jaw, but he kept it in check.

"What do you figure she's worth to you?" Peyton asked.

The woman's countenance changed to one of delight. Here was an opportunity to make some money, and she was always one to explore a self-serving venture like this one. She calculated for a moment.

"I figure I gotta have at least eighty shillings to compensate for all the hassle she's caused me," she said, hoping he wouldn't barter down too much.

Peyton grabbed his moneybag. "Here is five pounds. That's twenty more shillings than you asked for." He placed the coins in the hands of the greedy woman and guided Tess away from her.

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

"The deal is done!" said Peyton as he turned to face the woman squarely. She backed off immediately and walked up the street counting her treasure. She never turned to say goodbye to Tess.

Tess didn't know what to think. She felt like chaff in the wind—where would she land? For all she knew, her new owner could be worse than Miss Wimble. Her little heart was struggling with an unknown future.

Peyton waited until Miss Wimble was long gone. He turned to face Tess and read her concern. He knelt down on one knee and placed a gentle hand on her 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 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 fought back his own 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,” said Peyton to Tess. “Let’s take a ride to the country!”

