



Chapter 1 - “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 stretch 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 gleams in the sunlight—polished and sharp. I have worked my sword for months in preparation for this very moment in time.

I am an unlikely knight—Cedric is my name. I come from the city of Chessington, in the kingdom of Arrethtrae. A few short years ago you would not believe it is I who tells you this tale of battles, knights, and swords. Time has gone quickly. I remember when I was but a peasant...

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

William was a dreamer. Unfortunately, these were times where 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 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. Besides, what is so grand about seeing not-so-noble ‘Noble Knights’ pass by when my stomach howls in hunger?” I said.

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

“You’re dreaming again, William,” I said. “We were not born of noble blood and we will therefore never become a Noble Knight. 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 himself as a knight in service to the

King. I half-jokingly addressed him as such, but I could never tell if it was I who was humoring him or if he was humoring me by graciously accepting my flippant 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'd been staring through.

His silver hair and brows partnered with his bent frame to paint a picture of a man near the end of life's journey. He initiated an attempt to rise and meet us, but I halted him as I placed my hand on his shoulder.

“It's alright, 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,” said William. “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 asked.

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

“We brought some bread for you, Leinad,” 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," said Leinad. "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. 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 condescendingly. "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 in pity. "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, Cedric," said William as we entered the city.

"What harm can it do, William," I responded. "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," said William.

"The sword is real," I said nonchalantly and soon was walking by myself. I turned around to see William standing still with a perplexed look.

“What?” came his bewildered reply.

“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 into its ownership,” I said. “He keeps it wrapped in a cloth in that old wooden chest in the corner. I fear that 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 were deep.

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

“It’s been years, but I’ve seen it myself,” I replied. “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 hoofs on cobblestone announced their 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,” I replied.

A poor old peasant woman was begging from one of the knights as he passed. “Please, good sir, a bit o’ food for an old hungry 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 dust-laden 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 “good will” toward the people. I believe they did it to inflate their egos; they loved their position over the people. They were indeed, however, chosen by the King to defend our land. And from all I have heard of the King, he was just and fair. Somehow, since he’d left for another country, the welfare of the kingdom 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 slow, gnarled hand and fingers I expected to see were not gnarled at all. In fact, the hand was quick and strong. He snatched the loaf with such ease and purpose; I looked a fool as my hands grabbed a handful of air.

The old man wore rags that served as a cloak to cover 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!

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

“Tell me, Cedric,” spoke the stranger in a rich voice, “what do you hope for?”

My mind was fuzzy. He must have heard my conversation with William, for he spoke my name. I heard the hungered 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 was given 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 were 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 determines his

worth, not his family name. No—hope 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?” asked the stranger as he turned toward him.

William was taken aback by the stranger’s gaze, as I was. “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,” said William.

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

William paused. “Well, ‘Man From a Distant Land,’ 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?” asked the stranger.

“I AM the poor, sir,” replied William. “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 dream world.”

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

“Yes, yes, William. I’m sure he runs a dreamers guild you could join.” I laughed and slapped him on the back.

*There WAS something about that man, I thought
privately.*





Chapter 2 - "The Unlikely Knight"

The days went by and my mind kept returning to the encounter with the stranger from a distant land. *Who was he?*

"I hear the Noble Knights are training in the square this afternoon," said William as we lifted our day's catch onto the dock. "Let's go watch for a bit."

"It's all for show, William," I said. "We've seen them sword fight a hundred times."

"I know, Cedric, but seeing how grand they handle a sword gives me comfort when I think of the Dark Knight and his desire to conquer this kingdom some day."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," I said. "Let's finish up and make an early day of it."

On our way to the square, we detoured to Leinad's home to check on him.

"What do you think of Leinad, William?" I asked as we neared the small old cottage.

"I don't think I can answer that, Cedric," said William. "Calling him crazy doesn't fit, and yet his delusions of past adventures are absurd."

"I know what you mean, William," I said.

We knocked on Leinad's door. "Sir Leinad, may we enter?" I asked through the closed door.

There was no answer. I called to him again...silence. I opened the door hoping to find him asleep but dreading worse. He was not asleep nor was he anywhere in the home.

“William, let’s check down by the stream,” I said with some urgency. “Maybe he fell while getting water.”

Leinad was nowhere to be found. At the stream’s edge, an ominous thought invaded my mind. I grabbed William’s arm—we had simultaneously come to the same conclusion.

“THE SWORD!” we said in unison and ran back to Leinad’s home. We burst through the door and looked for the chest. It was in the corner and still closed, but I saw finger marks in the dust on its lid. I hesitated before opening it for I knew it would tell me the fate of Leinad. I knelt down before the chest...hoping not to find what I knew I would. The hinges creaked as I lifted the lid and gazed inside. The cloth was open, and the sword was gone!

My heart sank, and William placed his hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Cedric,” he said sympathetically. “There is a chance he is still alive.”

I fought back tears and tried to convince myself that William was right and that Leinad might still be alive. After all, there was no sign of a struggle, no body, and no blood.

“Maybe the sword was stolen while he was away,” I said hopefully. “He could have gone into the city for provisions. Although he is old, he is quite determined. Let’s get to the City Square and start looking there.”

We entered the city, and I was anxious and disturbed. The mystery of Leinad’s disappearance weighed heavily on my mind as we arrived at our destination. A large oak tree identified the center of the square. The people were already gathering to see the Noble Knights in action. Before long, thousands of

people had assembled. One hundred of the strongest, bravest men in the kingdom comprised the Noble Knights. I had to admit that they looked to be an awesome force with which to reckon. Their armor glistened and the horses stamped their pride of belonging to such a gallant force. The swords were a sight to behold. Each of these knights carried a sword that was the envy of all men. Their sword was the mark of their knighthood, a testament to their skill as a swordsman.

William and I searched the crowd and nearby shops in search of Leinad, but he was nowhere to be found. My hope faded slightly, but I was determined to search the entire city to find him if necessary.

The training of the Noble Knights began and I watched, but my mind found no rest from the mystery of Leinad's disappearance.

Each knight fought another to determine who was the best swordsman. Within minutes of each duel, the best swordsman was obvious. The defeated knight knelt in submission before his victor. Fifty were eliminated in the first round—then twenty-five. Swords screamed through the air and clashed with great force until there was one. The Noble Knight Kifus always won. He was truly the best in the entire kingdom, and he proved it time after time. The people cheered as the Noble Knights encircled Kifus and knelt in honor.

“Thief!” yelled a man behind me near a line of shops that bordered the square.

I turned and saw an enraged shop owner gripping the arm of a girl.

“Thief—she’s stealing my bread!” he yelled again.

He grabbed her basket and opened it for all to see. A single loaf of bread was inside. She was guilty, and a hundred witnesses knew it.

The disturbance brought the attention of Kifus and the Noble Knights. They were clearly upset with the interruption of their ritual, but the shop owner sought justice and dragged the girl into the opening. She tried to cover her face and resist, but it was pointless. I had seen her on the streets before—she was pretty. She was a little younger than I. Her auburn hair was mildly curly and hung below her shoulders. Though the faint, torn, remnants of a dress revealed her extreme poverty, it was clear that she tried to keep herself as respectable looking as possible.

“Please...No!” she pleaded with the man as her slender form twisted in an attempt to escape the humiliation of being caught.

How could she have lowered herself to stealing—even in her poverty? I wondered.

Kifus and the other Noble Knights moved toward the man and his captive.

“What is going on here?” asked Kifus with authority.

Kifus and the Noble Knights were the executors of the law. They judged and sentenced all serious disputes and crimes.

“I caught this thief stealing bread from my shop!” exclaimed the man. “Here is the proof,” he said as he held forth her basket with the incriminating evidence.

“Is this true?” Kifus asked the young woman sternly.

“Yes, my Lord. But I only—”

“Maggie! Maggie!” A panicked woman burst through the crowd and ran to the girl.

“Please, sir,” exclaimed the woman. “Maggie is my oldest daughter, and she stole the bread only to feed her younger brothers and sisters. Please let her go, Lord Kifus,” pleaded the mother.

“The law is very clear,” stated Kifus. “Anyone caught stealing will lose their right hand! There are no exceptions...not even for your daughter.”

The mother appealed again with tears streaming down her face. “I have no way of providing for the children. I have already lost one child to poor health and sickness. Maggie is a good girl. I will serve to repay this man...*please show mercy!*”

Kifus hesitated. He looked at the woman and her daughter and then at the crowd.

“The law must be fulfilled. It is our Code that must be followed,” he declared. “Stretch forth her arm on this tree stump!” He commanded his knights.

One knight peeled the girl from her mother’s arms and brought her to the stump. Another knight restrained the mother as she clutched her bosom in anguish.

“*No!*” she screamed.

The knight held the girl while another wrapped a leather strap around her wrist and stretched her arm across the stump.

The crowd held its breath as the inescapable arm of the law readied to strike. Kifus drew back his sword and then started its powerful arc across the blue sky toward the delicate hand stretched out on the stump. Her fate was trapped in the steel jaws of the law.

There was no pleasant alternative to this ugly episode...I thought!

I saw a man to my right throw back a ragged cloak and I heard the *SHING* of his sword as it left its scabbard. His motion was quick and smooth. The man drew forth a sword that had no equal, not even among the Noble Knights. Its beauty was unmatched and yet familiar. It gleamed so brightly in the sun that it was hard to look upon. Kifus' sword of judgment screamed through air and collided with this stranger's immovable sword of mercy—just above the maiden's wrist. The crowd exhaled in a unified gasp of astonishment.

Who dared to rescue this poor girl from the judgment of the Noble Knights? Who is this man that is either courageous or a fool? The moment seemed frozen in time. The stranger's magnificent sword, powered by mighty arms, held its position under the full strength of Kifus' cut. The young lass opened her eyes in disbelief. She slowly turned her head upward to see the valiant face of her deliverer. Her countenance momentarily revealed absolute shock, then gratitude, and finally fear. She knew that the reprieve from judgment was only temporary, and this brave soul would pay with his life.

“What is that fool doing?” whispered William in my ear.

No one had ever challenged the authority of any Noble Knight, let alone Kifus himself. With his sword still in its protective position above the girl's wrist, the stranger slowly turned his head and locked eyes with Kifus. The rage in Kifus' eyes was evident to all.

“William,” I whispered, “doesn't that peasant look familiar?”

“Yes, yes...” recognition came slowly but now William was sure. “It’s the stranger we met on the street a few days ago! Why is he doing this?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, “but look at that sword. It must be Leinad’s!”

“Are you sure?” questioned William in hushed tones.

I focused on the sword and tried to remember. It was a long time ago since I’d laid eyes on Leinad’s sword. If this man was a thief, he was a strange one. He was risking his life to save the life of a girl...with a stolen sword. I couldn’t make sense of it.

“I can’t be certain, but I think so,” I whispered back. “In either case, I hope he’s ready to die. It’ll take more than a fancy sword to survive the wrath and skill of Kifus.”

Kifus pulled back his sword and glared at the stranger, still absorbing the reality of this rebellious act by a peasant.

Kifus growled at the stranger, “That was a very stupid move, peasant! I don’t know from whose castle you stole that sword, but I aim to run you through and return it to its rightful place among nobility. Prepare to die!”

The peasant raised his sword and took a swordsman’s stance that caused even Kifus to hesitate. This man was no peasant. He emanated power!

Kifus charged with the full intention of finishing this insolent fool within seconds. The stranger moved to the side with blinding speed, and his sword flashed like lightening to meet Kifus’ charge. The impact nearly put Kifus on his face. He regained his balance and approached more cautiously now. Kifus’ rage

transformed to bewilderment then back to rage. He attacked again. The stranger met every blow and thrust with the perfection of a true master. He nearly teased the Noble Knight Kifus as he maneuvered him at will. We watched in amazement as the flashing swords clashed time after time. Kifus perceived an opening and lunged to finish the stranger, but the stranger parried and executed a bind on Kifus' sword with unmatched speed and power. The fight was over. Kifus stood empty handed, his sword beneath the foot of the stranger.

The crowd, along with the other knights, stood dumbfounded and silent. One question was on the mind of everyone...*who was this man?*

The stranger had disgraced the entire force of the Noble Knights in front of all the people by defeating their very best swordsman. I was still confused, but I knew that a man possessing such incredible skill and courage could hardly be a thief.

In a move of cowardice, two knights drew their swords from behind the stranger.

"Behind you!" I shouted, but my warning was in vain. The stranger had already moved to meet their attack. No one standing in the square that afternoon would have believed a single man could possess such craft as a swordsman were they not there to see it with their own eyes. Within minutes, one knight was without his sword and the other was prone on the ground before the stranger—the tip of the magnificent sword at his throat.

"Release the girl," commanded the stranger. The prone knight looked at Kifus and pleaded with his eyes.

Kifus nodded at the two knights that were restraining the young woman, and they released her. She was too stunned to move—all of her energy was gone. I went to her and helped her gain her feet. She wiped away tears of deliverance as I guided her to her mother who was still held in the shocked grip of a Noble Knight. He finally released her, and Maggie collapsed into the yearning arms of a restored mother.

Kifus spoke. “You are not what you appear to be, sir. Tell us who you are and where you come from.”

The stranger relaxed his sword. “I am the Son of the King of this kingdom, and I come from his palace in distant lands across the sea,” said the stranger.

A low rumble flowed through the crowd. William came and stood by me. “Could this be true, William? Do you think he is really the King’s Son?” I said.

“I don’t know, Cedric,” said William. “I want to believe it. Like I told you, there is definitely something about that man!”

“If you are the King’s Son, give us a sign,” Kifus called out. “Show us your royal ring and robe. Where are your servants, the coaches, and treasures worthy of a prince?”

“I can give no sign save my skill as a swordsman and my duty to my Father,” replied the stranger.

“Nobility is more than wielding a sword, stranger. It is in the blood. This we know by the Code our King gave us,” said Kifus. “We live by the Code!”

“You speak of the Code, yet you do not live by the Code nor teach the people so that they may live by the Code. You dishonor the King by your actions,” rebuked the stranger. “The Code of the King is not born in your blood but grown in your hearts. You feed

the people morsels of food and keep them in subjection to your whims for the sake of power and control. That is not nobility—it is treachery!”

Never before had anyone dared speak such truth out loud. All that he said made perfect sense. The people were clearly moved as he spoke, and the Noble Knights were growing more furious with every word.

“While you serve yourselves, the Dark Knight prepares this very day for battle against our kingdom,” continued the stranger. He turned toward the crowd. “People of Arrethrae, my Father has not forgotten you. I come to raise up an army of truth, justice and honor...an army willing to fight and die for the good of the kingdom...an army willing to serve the people...an army that must someday fight the Dark Knight and his Shadow Warriors. I come in the name of the King! I come to serve him and you. Follow me and learn the true ways of the Code.”

“You are a traitor to the King!” shouted Kifus. “I will not allow you to destroy his kingdom or his Code!”

The King’s Son turned toward Kifus. He raised his magnificent sword at him and the Noble Knights. “*You* have defiled the Code and are not worthy to be called the King’s Noble Knights. Be sure of this, I will accomplish my Father’s will!” His voice was overpowering. Kifus seemed to shrink from the rebuke.

The King’s Son spoke to the people, “I have chosen men among you worthy to serve the King. I do not offer a life of ease and comfort but of sweat and blood. It will not be easy, but it will be noble!”

He moved toward the crowd and closer to us. Soon he was standing before William and me. I looked once more into those penetrating eyes. Was this really happening, or was I in some strange dream? Could this really be the King's Son? I knew in my heart that what he said was true; I saw it in his eyes. This was a man who would not lie. My gaze left his eyes and came to rest on the magnificent sword. It fit his hand as though it were part of him. He followed my eyes.

"Cedric," I heard him speak my name. "Leinad has done well in keeping my sword for this appointed day. Do not worry; your friend is safe."

I believed him and found relief in his words, but why he would entrust such a treasure as this sword to a crazy old man was still a mystery. The golden handle was inlaid with precious stones. Its double-edged blade shined like polished silver and was as sharp as a razor's edge. What a splendid sword it was.

I looked to his face again as he continued to speak. "Will you discover hope and follow me to become a Knight of the Prince, Cedric?"

Me? Surely he was mistaken. "My Lord," I said, "I am but a poor peasant. I am not worthy. Surely you look for someone better than I?"

"No, Cedric, I have chosen you. I do not care about what you were or what you are, but about what you can become."

In my heart I knew I must answer one question—*Do I really believe this man is the Son of the King?* In an instant I knew the answer, and there was but one thing for me to do...I knelt before the Prince. "I will follow you, my Lord."

“And you, William. Will you follow me and discover your dreams?” he asked of my friend.

“My life is yours, my Prince,” responded William as he knelt beside me.

“Rise up, my friends, and come with me.” His firm hand was upon our shoulders. We rose and followed him through the crowd. The Prince stopped before certain men and bid them to follow him. Most joined us, but some did not. The men he chose were anything but warriors. But who was I to talk? I knew nothing of the skill of sword fighting or knighthood. I had held a sword only once in my life, and it was the very sword that the Prince now wore. Leinad had let me hold it once when I was boy. His tale of the Sword of the King had captivated me, and holding it made the story seem real. I had believed him then but lost that childhood faith later in my “mature” years. Now it all seemed to be happening just as Leinad said. Maybe he wasn’t as crazy as I thought.

As we emerged from the crowd, twenty-five men, scruffy men, followed the Prince. The Noble Knights roared in laughter.

“So this is your grand army to defeat the Dark Knight, aye, stranger?” sneered Kifus. “I’m sure your King would be proud of such an awesome selection of knights to defend his kingdom,” he mused.

The Prince showed no embarrassment for us as one might expect, but instead turned toward the knights one last time and spoke with authority. “On the appointed day, you will be judged for your treason, and I shall be that judge. My Father has given me all authority over this kingdom—be warned!”

That was the beginning of my life as an unlikely knight. It was a day that changed my life forever.

