

THE SCEPTER AND THE SWORD

BOOK I OF THE SHADOWVEIL SERIES

By: Brian E. Nason

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Dedicated to:

Carriann N. - For her support and encouragement

Patrick C. - For his time and mentoring

- and -

Luke K. - For his insights and candor

Author's Preface

This story, though written by me and in my words, is not mine to tell. I pieced it together from the pages of two diaries; as well as a trove of artifacts, maps, and drawings. How I came about these items is a story in itself, which I will briefly chronicle over the next couple pages.

While on vacation in England many years ago, my travels took me to Manchester. The city was fantastic, but I wanted to take in a bit of England's natural wonders. I had a free day in my itinerary, so I decided to visit the Kinder Scout National Nature Reserve. It was right outside of Manchester and promised plentiful hikes, breathtaking views, and natural wonders including the Kinder Scout Plateau.

I was following a stream on a well-traveled path when the trail suddenly broke away from the water. There was no one around, so I decided to stray from the path and follow the river a bit to explore the unknown. I was only a hundred steps or so from the trail when I saw some metal sticking out of a natural wall of dirt and stone.

My mind told me to ignore it, but my curiosity convinced me to dig it out. It was a metal chest, roughly the size of a large shoebox, and pock marked by the ages. A thick black strap of metal secured the lid to the base and was held in place with a large bolt. There was no doubt in my mind that when this box was new, there was no way of opening it. But age and moisture had wreaked havoc on it, and I was able to work the bolt from the strap with just the pliers on my multi-tool.

When I took the lid off the box, I was dismayed to find that it contained a rectangular stone, the exact dimensions of the void and as smooth as river rock. I tipped the box over, but the stone stayed inside and would not budge. Frustrated by the boring contents, I took to beating the smooth stone with my multi-tool. But the stone, unimpressed by my brute force tactics, barely showed any scars. I almost threw the whole thing into the stream, but something in my mind persuaded me not to at the last moment. So I carried this box all the way back to my transportation, drove it back to my hotel, and set it on the desk in my room. As I lay in bed, waiting for sleep to come, I had the idea to use a chisel to free the stone and take the empty box home as a souvenir.

The next day, while on my way back from a tour of the Beeston Castle, I stopped by a hardware store and purchased a chisel and mallet. After a few strikes, the surface of the stone began to crack. A couple strikes later and the entire thing shattered. I tipped the box over to clear out the rubble and a tight bundle of oilcloth fell out. Inside the bundle were three maps, a smooth metal pendant, a wolf's-tooth necklace, two bound diaries, and many detailed drawings including an ornate sword, a magnificent suit of armor, and a young man with wild hair, a small face, and a sly smirk.

When I returned home from my trip, I poured over the information. It was written in a language that combined Old English, Middle English, old French, and a smattering of Celtic words. Using online references including the *Doomsday Book* and surviving *Cartularies* from Medieval England, I was able to

interpret most of what was written. The bound pages were written by the same hand; one was an autobiography of Theodulf Ranig and the other was a detailed account of one particular event from Theodulf's life.

They were fascinating reads, but I knew they were incomplete. I needed more information. Since many of the places referenced in the writings were towns from England's history, that's where I began my search. But it quickly became apparent that the geography from the maps and writings didn't match up to any of England's geography, nor was there any mention in historical writings of things like Shadowveil or places like Eldwigburg, the Fleot Sea, or Greenwood. In fact, the maps didn't match up to anywhere that exists today. The final pages of Theodulf's autobiography were the hardest to read because the writing was smudged and the pages were ripped, but from what I could make out, he talks about a great shaking of the earth, rivers of melted rock, and waves of enormous size. I can only conclude that Theodulf Ranig came from some unknown land that must have disappeared from history through the power of nature.

I don't know how long ago it was that these events happened, since all the date references I could find refer to the "year of our land", but based on the technology that is mentioned and the strong use of Middle English in the writings, I would guess it was between the 13th and 14th centuries. Sometime shortly after this all was recorded, the land of Greenwood must have been hit by a natural event so cataclysmic, it removed all evidence and memory of the land from history. We may never

know where Greenwood was, but I have a good idea of where to look. Based on what I know of the land, it would be close to coasts of England and Ireland, part of the African trade routs, no farther north than Scotland, and no further south than Spain.

Unless the land is found, the information I have may be the only proof that Theodulf Ranig, Cynburga, and the land of Greenwood ever existed. So please, enjoy this story that comes to us from a land consumed by nature and forgotten by time.

~Brian E. Nason

Chapter 1

"My name is Immin Ranig. It is the 11th of November, in the year of our land 1080. It is hard to believe this war has only been raging for five days. It seems like five years. As I lay here wounded, I can't help but think my day has come too soon. I was not meant to die alone like this.

If anyone finds this note attached to what was once a man, I ask only that you find a way to get it to the family Ranig in the Kingdom of Cynburga. Be you friend or foe, I pray you might honor the wishes of one who was once a brave soldier, a loving son, and a caring brother.

For the past five days, when not fighting for my Kingdom, I have searched for the truth. What I learned has allowed me to piece together the events that caused this dreadful war. I was not able to leave my mark on this world as I had hoped one day I would. All I have to offer is my account of this terrible conflict in hopes that people will learn from it.

Thorkell the Mighty, the ruthless ruler of Eldwigburg, found Shadowveil, a scepter of great magnificence, amongst the dead in the final battle of the war of 1065. He hung it on the wall behind his throne, and for the many years following, Eldwigburg became the greatest power in the land.

Last month Shadowveil disappeared from Thorkell's throne room. Suspecting that our king, Wulfgyth Ironside, had wanted Shadowveil ever since the day Thorkell found it, he sent an official messenger to the Kingdom of Cynburga accusing King Wulfgyth of taking his prized trophy. Insulted, King Wulfgyth sent one of his own messengers to the Kingdom of Eldwigburg demanding that either Thorkell officially and publicly apologize or he would halt all trade to Eldwigburg from the Fleot Sea.

Upon receiving the response, King Thorkell flew into a rage and ordered the messenger to leave Eldwigburg with a warning

that King Wulfgyth had until the 6th of November to return the scepter. If it wasn't handed over by then, King Thorkell would send his troops into Cynburga to retrieve it by force.

Though we have our Champions for protection, Cynburga hasn't kept a standing, trained army for many generations. Wulfgyth, knowing that nothing he could do would have influenced Thorkell's decision, used those five days to gather what forces he could. I signed up immediately to help, and with one day left before the deadline, Wulfgyth split up his forces and sent us out to various posts.

Right away we came upon an Eldwigburg camp full of soldiers. Though they outnumbered us, our commander decided that we had surprise on our side and thus, we should stay and fight. For days we held our own against the trained soldiers, alternating between fighting metal-to-metal and grieving for our losses.

Maybe we are too weak of people, or maybe they are nothing but animals, but while we honor our dead by sending them back to Cynburga, the Eldwigburgans simply toss their dead into the Kaldwray Marsh. Our luck is still holding and we are still keeping the enemy onslaught from breaking our ranks. They may know battle, but we have heart and know the forest well. We are using that passion and knowledge to keep the upper hand. I fear I will never know how this war ends. Early on in today's battle, I was struck by two arrows and dragged into the forest by my horse.

Here I lay at the base of a large tree, the horse having managed to finally work me from the stirrups. I have no expectations that I will be found anytime soon. I doubt anyone even knows where I ended up. Luckily my pack fell off my horse with me so I could write these last notes before I depart this world. When I am found, I can only hope that this letter is taken from my person and my final wishes followed.

I have countless regrets about my life, but I only have one regret about my death. Why is my life, along with so many others, valued less important than some metal and a few colored stones?"

Chapter 2

In the southeastern region of the land of Greenwood, on land under the control of the Kingdom of Cynburga, there is a large farm with fields full of produce, grains, and livestock. Its borders are marked by the Someset Woods to the north, Castle Road to the west, and vertical cliffs to the east and south that drop to the Fleot Sea. These barriers provide the residents with peace and protection. Situated in the center of this plot of land is a cozy three-room farmhouse made of both wood and stone. Though it looks fairly new, the Ranig family erected the home many generations ago.

The morning sun is still melting away the evening frost as a visitor works his way through the fields of wheat with the sole purpose of quickly reaching the house of Ranig. When he arrives at the farmhouse - out of curiosity and with no intention of malice - the visitor glances into the kitchen window. From this vantage point he is able to spy on the inhabitants as they prepare to eat a simple meal after completing the morning chores.

The visitor first spies a young, hazel-eyed boy with medium length, wavy brown hair sitting at the table and waiting to fill his plate. He was given the name Theodulf in honor of his father's father who passed from this life to the next moments before the birth of his second grandson. While growing up, Theodulf was told exciting stories of his departed grandfather's exploits as a Champion. These stories inspired Theodulf to train as a Champion of Cynburga - the noble class of trained warriors who are charged with the protection of the King. He has been in practice since the age of five and is now recognized by

most of Cynburga's people as an accomplished weapons and combat master. Though he just recently celebrated his fifteenth birthday, he is already taller than most adults and still growing.

Drawn to movement out of the corner of his eye, the visitor turns to see a woman seated across from the brown-haired boy. Her name is Cuthburh, Theodulf's mother, and although she is almost forty years of age, she is so youthful in appearance that the visitor assumes she is the hazel-eyed boy's older sister. Vague thoughts of stealing her away from this place and keeping her for his own swarm chaotically through his head. 'Who could resist a beauty like that?' he asks himself as he begins to admire everything about her. She has perfectly blonde hair cascading over her slender shoulders, big blue eyes that sparkle with mirth, and a gracefully soft neck that disappears into the high collar of a well-tailored dress. He continues admiring her until she turns to stoke the cooking fire behind her. All his illusions are shattered the moment he finds that Cuthburh is not a complete woman. The right sleeve of her dress is sewn shut halfway down its length, hiding the grisly stump where her arm once was before an accident nine years ago stole it from her.

A giant suddenly steps into view and the visitor's body begins shaking with terror as he becomes certain that his life is about to come to an abrupt and violent end. 'I didn't mean any harm,' the visitor instinctively tries to blurt out. But the words catch in his throat and he stands rooted to the spot as his frozen legs ignore his mind screaming for him to flee.

Eventually the terror melts away as the giant man sits, with his back to the window, at the head of the table. This

is Cuthburh's husband, Thrydulf. He is a goliath of a man who looks like he has seen his share of fights and has been on the winning side of them all. His broad shoulders are sandwiched between a thick neck and a large chest, and arms as big as trees hang down from the sides. Despite his intimidating appearance, Thrydulf is actually a quiet, peace loving, and moral man who expects his family to follow the strict beliefs he lives his life by.

With everyone seated, Thrydulf removes his cap, exposing a head free of hair and glistening with perspiration from the morning chores. "Did you finish brushing Crispin?"

"Yes, father," replies Theodulf with a frown that only the stranger seems to catch.

"I hope so. I need to ride him into town to pick up the cart I ordered. If I find burrs on his hide or knots in his tail, I won't be forgiving. Remember, a man is only as good as the care and pride he takes in his work. Your brother does a fine job caring for Crispin, I only hope you have taken the same care."

"I have brushed out more horses in my time than Immin; including our King's horse. I know I did good."

"Good is what common folks do," scoffs Thrydulf. "If you can't do great in everything, then you might as well not do anything."

"I know father," says Theodulf through his teeth. "I promise, I did great."

"Then let's eat before you have to go back to the Champion's Village. You can serve the food now, wife."

Pulling from a hidden strength, Cuthburh grabs the handle of a large pot she was keeping warm by the fire, lifts it effortlessly off the floor, and places it in the center of

the table. She ladles a thick mixture of meat, oats, and honey into three bowls; first Thrydulf's, then her own, and finally Theodulf's. Even though there are only three people in the house, the visitor notices the table has been set for four. With his recent sobering up and a renewed sense of urgency, the visitor walks to the front door and knocks.

Chapter 3

"It's a little early for a social call," grunts Thrydulf, sliding his chair away from the table with an air of annoyance. As he walks the short distance to the front door, there is another more urgent knock. "Calm down, I'm coming." A third, more furious series of knocks greet him when he reaches the door. Thrydulf, not normally a rude person as long as his belly is full, wrenches open the door. "What do you want?"

"Are you Mr. Thrydulf Ranig?" stammers the visitor, stunned by the harsh greeting.

"That I am. What's your business?"

"My name is Wihtgar Duddesunu. I am the Royal War Messenger between the front lines and the home front."

"Good morning. Now, once again, what's your business this early in the day?"

"Do you have a son by the name of Immin Ranig, born in the year of our land, 1060?"

"Yes. Is something wrong with him?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. Your son was wounded in battle three days ago."

Cuthburh, hearing the news about Immin, rushes to the front door. "How bad is it?" she asks in a panic. "Will he live? Is he all right? How did this happen?"

"You need to calm down," warns Thrydulf. Then, in a much softer tone than earlier, he asks Wihtgar, "Do you know what happened?"

"Your son was struck with two arrows while in battle. Our healers would have got to him sooner than they did, but his horse dragged him into the woods. When they found him, the battle had been over for about a day. They

pulled the arrows from his leg and stomach, but I don't know how well he's doing or how fast he's recovering."

While fighting back tears, Cuthburh asks, "Where is he now?"

"I'm not sure. They think it's safer not to tell the messengers where our healer stations are in case the enemy catches one of us. I'm truly sorry that I had to bring you this bad news so early in the day. You can visit the messenger tent at the south end of market any time to find out the latest news about your son. Take comfort in knowing your son, though injured, is at least still alive."

Wihtgar then turns and walks down the lane to bring worse news to the Ceorlacyn family. The Ranigs are only the first family he has visited this morning, and he still has five more to go.

With tears flowing freely from her eyes, Cuthburh escapes to the comfort of her bed as Thrydulf slowly closes the door and wanders, in a daze, back to the table. He takes his seat and stares across the table at the empty plate; the one Cuthburh always sets for Immin in case he returns unexpectedly. Theodulf watches his father's face go blank as he stares off into nothingness, lost in his own thoughts. Theodulf, knowing his mother needs the comfort of his company more than his quietly pensive father, excuses himself from the table and walks to his parents' room.

He enters without knocking, finding Cuthburh sitting on the edge of the bed and staring out the window towards the north. Theodulf sits next to her and softly clears the sad lump in his throat. "I'm sure he'll survive. He's too stubborn to allow himself to die yet. Not until he makes Ann his wife and inherits the farm from father. Now is not his time to go."

Cuthburh turns her head slowly to Theodulf and gently leans into him. Between soft sobs, she whispers into her son's shoulder, "I just wish he'd never volunteered to help. You know he only did it because your father told him not to. Those two have never agreed. Most of the time, it seems their purpose in life is to try and make the other one angry."

"I know. Remember when I was nine and I wanted to go with him and his friends to market? He told me I couldn't go with him, so I went to father and complained?"

"Your father told him, if he doesn't take you with him, he couldn't go."

"Immin was so mad father and me that, when we reached the split, he said he'd sell me at market if I followed him any farther. I sat by the road most of that day waiting for him to return," recalls Theodulf, grinning at the memory. "I was so mad at him. When he came back, I refused to follow him home. We spent the better part of the evening standing in the split, yelling insults at each other."

"So that's why you didn't come home until after supper," says Cuthburh, slowly cheering up at the remembrance of her first born. "And all these years I thought you just happened to have fun with one another and lost track of the day." With this final thought, her eyes start to clear and her sobs slowly disappear behind a falsely brave smile.

"Besides, the messenger admitted he didn't know how bad Immin is," says Theodulf. "It takes a good day of riding to get from the front lines to here. For all we know, he could be on his way to a complete recovery."

"You're probably right. Besides, there's no reason to worry right now. It won't help anything." With a final

sniff, Cuthburh brushes Theodulf's hair away from his face and rests her arm on his shoulder. "Now, I think you should be getting over to Sir Osweward's. If you're late, he might change his mind about letting you come home every few days to help with the farm."

"Are you sure you'll be ok without me here?"

"I'm sure."

Theodulf rests his hands on his mother's shoulders and looks confidently at her. "I will be back in three days. If you need anything before then, you know where to find me."

"Don't worry about us. Your father and I will be fine," assures Cuthburh as she stands up on shaky legs and waits for Theodulf to do the same.

Theodulf takes his mother's arm and they slowly shuffle to the door, leaning into each other for support. On the way past the table, Theodulf scowls inwardly as he discovers his father's seat empty and his deerskin coat missing from its peg by the door.

'I can't believe he left mother at a time like this,' thinks Theodulf darkly as he concludes that Thrydulf went on a walk; just like he always does when he hears something he doesn't know how to handle. Sometimes he is only gone for a short period while other times he is gone for most of the day. Knowing he can't wait around for his father to return to comfort his mother, Theodulf gently asks her, "Do you need me to wait with you until father returns?"

"No. I'll be fine. I promise."

"When he finally comes back, can you tell him I said goodbye?"

"Of course."

With a grim smile, Theodulf slips on his boots, grabs

his pack from inside an aged chest, and with a quick kiss on his mother's cheek, he heads out the door. Cuthburh watches as Theodulf walks rigidly down the lane until he disappears into the trees. She slowly closes the door and wanders back to her room, her smile melting to a frown as her tears return.

Chapter 4

Theodulf trudges along the well-worn path from his house to the divide in the road where he and his brother fought all those years ago. The road on his right leads to town while the road on his left goes directly to Sir Osweard's home inside the Champions' Village. Theodulf pauses at the crossroads for a long time, thinking over the events of the morning. As a plan slowly forms in the back of his mind, Theodulf absentmindedly coils his long hair around his finger. The plan, a fleeting thought just a moment ago, solidifies into a mission. Determined to follow through with it, he shifts his pack on his shoulder and cuts to his left to follow his resolve wherever it leads him.

Theodulf soon arrives at the entrance to the Champions' Village. It is guarded by a set of oversized doors that stand at twice a man's height and are as wide as two horses walking side-by-side. They are made from planks of an exotic dark wood, elegantly carved with depictions of famous battles that have been fought by the Champions. Large strips of silver metal, polished so meticulously that Theodulf can see his reflection staring back at him, hold the slats of wood tightly and prevent anyone from seeing inside.

The gates would normally seem out of place, more accommodating to royalty than soldiers, but everything about this village is overdone. All the houses are two stories high and built from thick stone, the pathways are lined with glistening white rocks and rich green grass, and the stable houses the most magnificent destrier stallions in the land. The splendor blends perfectly with the aura of

superiority that hovers over this plot of land like a thick fog and creates a feeling of confident eliteness. When Theodulf first visited the village six years ago, he stood in awe at the magnificence of it all for so long that he was late to Selection. Despite his tardiness, Sir Osweward the Saint chose Theodulf out of a group of ten other boys to become his apprentice. Since that day, every time he passes between the gates, Theodulf's sense of pride is renewed.

Theodulf walks boldly down the lane towards Sir Osweward's hut, passing by the great fire that always burns with the intensity of a 'smiting oven, the stables that house both the Champions' steeds and the King's prized mare, and an armory stocked with so many weapons and armor that each Champion can be outfitted twice. As he passes by the Royal Blacksmith's shop, he is stopped by the sound of hammering metal breaking through the quiet tranquility of the morning. He stands there listening to the conflict between the oppressed shard of metal and the maul oppressor, debating whether he should continue on to Sir Osweward's house or take a small detour into the shop. He looks to the sky, reasons that he has some time to spare, and decides to enter the shop for a quick talk with his best friend.

Theodulf passes through the entrance and is nearly deafened by the steady roar of the furnace and the rhythmic sound of metal striking metal. Basic tools of the trade, as well as a number of tools hand crafted by the blacksmith himself, hang neatly along the back walls at the ready to serve their master should the 'smith require them. Half a dozen anvils of different shapes and sizes surround the immense furnace in the center of the room from which metal can go in black as the darkest night, yet emerge

bright red with a glow as white as newly fallen snow.

Hovering over the largest anvil on the shop floor is a massive body, hardened by a lifetime of demanding labor and covered in various scars attributed to both his choice of work and the difficult life he has lived. This is the lumbering hulk of Reduald Snilling, the Royal Blacksmith. Though a man of few words, he commands respect wherever he goes and has been known to argue with both peasants and royalty alike for a cause he believes in. Standing in his shadow is another mass of flesh, not quite as big as the Royal Blacksmith, but equally solid and peppered with its own share of scars. This is both the blacksmith's apprentice and his son. He is fifteen years old and has been hardened both physically and mentally by his father since the age of seven, finally becoming an apprentice the 'smith can proudly call his son.

"Eadric!" shouts Theodulf to the lesser of the two masses, trying to be heard over the intense noise thundering off every wall.

Both figures look up from their work, angry at the intrusion. But that quickly melts away to delight when they recognize the intruder.

"Hi, Theodulf!" shouts Eadric with the deep, booming voice of someone much older than him. "I'll be right over." Eadric hangs his maul from a forked hook on the anvil, hangs his apron on a wall peg, and splashes some water over his face.

"Hello Theodulf," greets Reduald Snilling as Eadric hurries over to greet his best friend with water still dripping from his nose and chin. "Achae was just saying we should have you over for dinner soon. It's been so long since she last saw you."

“Mother seems to fancy you more than me at times,” laughs Eadric as he gathers Theodulf into a crushing hug. Theodulf, though accustomed to his friend’s smothering welcome, still finds himself panicking ever so slightly as the air is squeezed out of his body.

“You can talk for only a short while before we need to get back to work,” says Reduald. “We’re reaching the most important point in this stage of forging. If done right, this metal is practically indestructible. But, if it’s done wrong, it will be as brittle as dead leaves.”

“Don’t worry Mr. Snilling,” says Theodulf. “I don’t have that long anyways!”

“Why don’t we go outside for some air,” suggests Eadric as he guides Theodulf to the door. After passing through the threshold of the shop, they are greeted with the still chilly morning air. Eadric takes in a deep breath, filling his lungs with as much fresh air as possible, and quickly releases it in a puff of vapor. “By your lady! It feels good to be outside! We have been in that shop since before the stars disappeared from the night sky.”

“What exactly is that metal you were working on just now? The surface looks all wavy.”

“It’s a trade metal called Damascus steel. My dad’s teaching me how to work it because Shadowveil’s rumored to be made from it. It’s very expensive, very rare, and can only be made in a really hot furnace.”

“It’s a shame there isn’t more of it. If it’s half as strong as your dad suggests, one could become invincible wearing a suit of armor made from it.”

“That would be a nice thing to own,” says Eadric as he continues to breathe deeply. After a long, quiet pause, Eadric looks over to his best friend and notices he doesn’t

look the same as usual. There is sadness in his eyes not normally present. "So tell me, what's troubling you?"

"Nothing."

"Now I know something's wrong. What is it?"

Theodulf sighs deeply. "This morning the King's official war messenger came to my house to deliver some bad news about Immin. Apparently he was wounded in battle. The messenger didn't seem to know if my brother would recover."

"That's horrible! What are you going to do about it?"

"There is nothing I can do."

"I've never known you to not do anything, so you're either saying you don't know yet, or more likely you do know but you don't want to tell me."

Theodulf looks at his friend, shocked at how well Eadric can read him. "Well, I intend to leave tonight to find my brother and see for myself how he is."

"What does you dad think of this?" asks Eadric cautiously - knowing that Theodulf's relationship with Thrydulf is strained even in the best of times.

"I didn't ask him and I have no plans of doing so. If he found out, he'd tell that I'm too young to do this -that I'm making a fool's decision. He still treats me like a child that needs constant correcting."

"But won't your parents be worried about you?"

"I should be back before they ever know I'm gone."

"So where should I meet you?" asks Eadric without a moment's thought.

"Umm, what are you talking about?"

"Well, if I'm going to be going with you, I need to know where I should meet up with you tonight."

"I can't ask you to come with me. Besides, I don't think

your father will let you.”

“First of all, you aren’t asking me to go, I’m telling you I am. Secondly, I don’t care if he likes it or not, I am going with you.”

“I don’t want to create a problem between you two.”

“What’s he going to do, rescind my apprenticeship? He’s put too much time and effort into shaping me. Short of burning down the shop twice, there’s no way he would rescind. Besides, it’s only a few days journey to the front lines by foot. I think he can live with that. You’re the one that should be worried about your apprenticeship ending. Your master’s not also your father, as is my case.”

“I don’t care what happens with Sir Osweard; family comes first. If he can’t understand that, I don’t want to be his apprentice,” says Theodulf with more conviction in his voice than he feels inside. “If you insist on coming, meet me at sunset in the usual place.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there. Now I better get back inside before my father gets angry. Good luck with Sir Osweard.”

“And good luck with your dad,” replies Theodulf as he resumes his walk to Sir Osweard’s.

Chapter 5

“...and so that is why I need you to grant me *exeat* for five days,” explains Theodulf to the imposing man sitting across from him. “If I’m not back at the end of five days, I won’t argue if you decide to rescind my apprenticeship. All I know right now is that I need to do this for my family.”

The imposing man leans back in his chair ever so slightly and begins to stroke the scar on his lower lip while thinking Theodulf’s proposition over. His thick forearms are crossed over his wide chest and a white tunic covers his large stomach, filled over the years by meat and ale. His trunk-like legs are wrapped in black hose and knee-high leather boots, made from eel-skin to resist water. He is Sir Osweward the Saint, a Champion of Cynburga and Theodulf’s mentor.

At the moment, Sir Osweward is having a hard time deciding what he should do. On the one hand, Theodulf pledged loyalty and commitment to the King and to Sir Osweward’s teachings for life when he was chosen as an apprentice. On the other hand, one of the members in his family is in trouble, and Sir Osweward has always told Theodulf that there are only two certainties in the life of a Champion - service to your king and loyalty to your family.

Sir Osweward slowly returns the two elevated legs of his chair to the floor as he leans forward, resting his bristled chin upon his folded hands. He stares into the eyes of Theodulf and notices a familiar look of determination. Briefly, Sir Osweward thinks back to the day six years ago when he selected Theodulf from a varied group of young boys to become his apprentice. Though he wasn’t the

strongest or the fastest of the group, Sir Oswearð saw a look in Theodulf's eyes that conveyed the same determination he is showing now. This look is what convinced him to choose Theodulf.

Meanwhile, Theodulf has been sitting across from Sir Oswearð awaiting his response, never breaking eye contact. By all outward appearances, Theodulf is as sure of Sir Oswearð granting him *exeat* as he is sure the sun will rise tomorrow. However, his insides are telling a different story. Not only is his mind running wild with all the reasons Sir Oswearð will not grant him *exeat*, but nerves have tightened his stomach into a ball so small that, had he a chance to eat that morning, it certainly would have ended up on Sir Oswearð's table.

"I feel I have been very generous allowing you to go home every couple days to help with your family's farm while your brother's away protecting this land."

"Indeed you have, sir," replies Theodulf respectfully. "Both my mother and father are indebted to your kindness. On countless occasions I've heard them planning different ways to repay you."

"I also feel I have been rather understanding of your afternoons with Bronwynn, especially since that's the time you should be practicing your sword skills."

"As you know, that's why I go see her. What good is practicing my sword if I have no one to practice against?" questions Theodulf with considerably less conviction than he demonstrated moments before. "And I do thank you for all you've done for me. I know I'm not the easiest person to teach. I also know there are plenty that would give anything to be in my position."

"And don't you forget it," warns Sir Oswearð. "I don't

think I ever told you this, but before I became one of the Champions of Cynburga, I was studying to become a priest."

Theodulf's foot begins tapping nervously against the leg of the table as he fights the urge to rush his master through the inevitable story and get to his decision. "No, you never told me that."

"Now calm down, I'll give you my answer when I'm finished. When I was just about your age, the war of 1065 began. At that time, I called the town of Wilcheton my home. We weren't too worried about the war since Wilcheton was considered neutral ground back then. However, late one night, the forces of Eldwigburg came storming through our town and killed everyone they passed by. Amongst the victims were both my mother and father. I was spared because my fellow apprentices and I were ordered to wait in the scroll room until someone came to get us. As soon as I learned the fate of my parents, I renounced the priesthood and spent all my time learning the ways of combat. I was not able to save my parents, but I vowed that I would no longer hide while innocent people were terrorized and killed."

"I'm sorry," whispers Theodulf sympathetically. "I never knew."

"That's why I carry the surname Saint. It's to remind myself of my past and why I do this. Your stubbornness shows how far you'll go to help someone you love. I've always said you can tell a lot about a person by looking into their eyes. That's how I knew you're going to do this regardless of the decision you're asking me to make. That's also why I must do what I'm about to."

Theodulf watches as Sir Osweard gets up from the table

and walks over to his writing desk. As his master scrapes clean a piece of parchment and sharpens the tip of a fresh quill, Theodulf begins shaking with the knowledge that his plan has cost him his future as a Champion.

With quill in hand, Sir Osweward quickly scratches something on the parchment, folds it up, and places it on the table. As Sir Osweward walks to the door, Theodulf can't help but grab the folded sheet and open it as fast as his trembling hands let him.

I, Sir Osweward the Saint, Master Champion of Cynburga in the First Order, request that the bearer of this note, one Theodulf Ranig of Cynburga, be given permission to see his brother Immin Ranig who is in recovery from wounds sustained in battle while protecting our land.

A smile slowly materializes on Sir Osweward's face as he watches Theodulf's worry turn to relief. After re-reading the note, Theodulf carefully folds it up, places it safely into his pack, and turns his eyes to Sir Osweward. "Does this mean you're granting me *exeat* for the five days I need?"

"No," answers Sir Osweward matter-of-factly. "I am granting you *exeat* for as long as you need. If you have any problems getting into the camp to find your brother, you just ask to see the camp's Commander and hand him that note. After reading it, he should allow you to see Immin."

"Thank you so much, Sir. How can I ever repay your continued generosity?"

"Just make sure to make me proud whenever the time comes to fight or flee." With this, Sir Osweward opens his front door and gestures for Theodulf to get on his way. As

Theodulf passes through the doorway, Sir Osweard says sincerely, "Good luck, and I hope you find your brother well on his way to a full recovery."

Theodulf turns to thank Sir Osweard again, but finds himself face to face with the dark brown wood of Sir Osweard's closed door.