

# Mind Shadow

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A Tale of the Celts

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## Chapter 1

**A** hawk scribed lazy circles in the sky above the high country while profound silence shrouded the late afternoon. As the sun dipped lower, a blanket of cold air settled on the land and aroused a solitary traveler.

The man had paused to rest beside the mountain path, hidden from view by a large boulder. As he always did before moving, he took careful note of his surroundings but detected nothing to disturb the solitude. So he returned to the trail and continued for a little way.

But he halted when a familiar gloom settled over him and an icy chill once again knifed through the pit of his stomach. Something was very wrong. He could not recall his own name. Nor did he know why he trekked this lonely wilderness. And something, or someone, hunted him. Who? Why? What compelled him to be so watchful, so careful? To the silent trees he whispered his questions, but they gave no answer.

He stood just below timberline, where trees no longer grow and only hardy shrubs and grasses can survive. Lower down a tiny spring-fed lake glistened, cradled by low

## H. WAYNE SMITH

hills. Slowly, cautiously . . . guided by some instinct he could not identify and using skills that came without thinking . . . he moved toward the water, gliding stealthily from one covert to the next.

He had traveled many foot-sore days over rough mountain trails. Stones had bruised his feet and a relentless sun had burned his skin to a rich bronze. A painful emptiness gnawed at his belly. His legs ached and a dull pain throbbed in the small of his back. He was weary. Very weary. And hungry.

Slowly he made his way toward the lake. For a moment he paused behind a boulder where the path made its steepest descent. From there he searched the lakeshore, alert for the slightest movement. Again he asked himself, what am I watching for?

When he saw nothing to cause alarm he emerged from the curtain of trees and began to slog across boggy ground. Sticky soil sucked at his boots as he picked his way toward the clear, still water. Where the mire was deepest he tight-roped across rotted logs. Finally he emerged upon a quiet shore and gazed upward at the mountain tops that surrounded him. Patches of snow glistened white on bare rock faces. Overhead the hawk still soared and wheeled in a sky now ablaze with gold-fringed pink fire. Here he would spend the night

Then the traveler stepped near the placid water and started when his gaze fell upon his own reflection. A face . . . one he could not name . . . stared back at him, ringed in

## MIND SHADOW

golden hair that lay close against his head. The cheeks were shaved clean while golden mustachios drooped to frame his mouth. He wore chain mail, and under it a thigh-length tunic of plaid wool over rough and durable trousers. Leggings covered the tops of his boots. A rolled blanket draped over his left shoulder and from his belt hung a fighting sword and a dagger. In the reflection he saw a tall figure, broad of shoulder and powerful with sinewy cords of muscle.

To the image he said aloud, “Who are you?” Then he tossed a pebble into the still, shining lake and watched the ripples spread in wavy ringlets.

He took comfort in the icon he saw in the water. Though strange, it seemed right . . . familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. It was the image of a warrior and hinted at prowess, strength and endurance. Did it hint also of something else? The likeness affirmed that he had a place in the world . . . and it was clear what that place was.

But the reflection did not tell him where he belonged or why he wandered alone in these desolate mountains. And it did not dispel the nagging feeling that something elemental was very wrong.

Troubled, he cupped his hands and drank of the cold, refreshing lake water. Then he opened his meager rucksack and began to make camp. First, with a digging tool he made two small, adjacent holes and connected them carefully with a miniature tunnel. From the forest floor he plucked a double handful of duff and dropped it into one of the holes. Next he struck a spark with flint and steel. The spark caught. Gently

## H. WAYNE SMITH

he blew on the simmering edge of the dry and fibrous material and the duff blazed up to draw air through the little tunnel and down the adjacent hole. He fed the fledgling flame with small twigs. Larger sticks followed until he had brought to life a crackling fire, its glow hidden underground. Thin white smoke drifted upward to disappear into the pine boughs overhead. Thus concealed, the fire would escape detection by any who might watch in the night; yet the warmth by its edge brought comfort as the evening chill descended in earnest.

The wanderer spread his blanket on the soft ground beneath a canopy of stars and watched his fire burn slowly to its last embers. As its muted glow faded, so did his dark and amorphous thoughts. Soon he fell into a weary sleep.

With the first rays of morning the wanderer sat up and turned a keen ear to the sounds of the day. Hearing nothing to cause alarm he cast his gaze over the lake where a snag caught his attention. It rose almost vertically from the mirror-like surface to spoil a perfect reflection of the surrounding mountains.

Ripples from fish feeding near the shore caught the traveler's attention and reminded him of his empty belly. From his rucksack he extracted a length of twine. Eagerly he dug through the other contents and found some scraps of crimson cloth. These he knotted into a tiny, irregular ball, with streamers protruding from one end. He next searched his accouterments for the makings of a small hook, without success until he noticed the metal studs on his dagger

## MIND SHADOW

scabbard. After a minor struggle he extracted one of these and bent it to the required shape.

Just as the wanderer prepared to cast his crude line into the water, angry shouts and the clash of sword on shield rose from behind a nearby hill. He forgot his hunger and buckled on his weapons. With long strides he raced toward the foot of the hill. Briefly it occurred to him that sinister eyes watched him, but he did not care.

When he reached the hilltop, he saw below a small group of white-robed men in frenzied action against a larger force of wild, rough-hewn warriors. A brief glance told him that high overhead in the azure sky, the hawk once again soared in broad circles.

Clearly the white-robed men stood no chance. Their adversaries overmatched them and they could only fall back clumsily and hope to stay alive. One of the white-robbed lay wounded on the ground while a woman tried to assist him. Another fell. Then one of the attackers sprang upon the woman and lifted her roughly by the arm. She shrieked. With a malicious grin the man flung her violently to the earth, away from her bleeding comrade. The blow slammed her head against the ground and she lay still.

The traveler knew that only by quick action could he save the woman. At the top of his lungs he roared an instinctive warscream . . . and thrilled at its wild, familiar sound. All fighting stopped as the combatants riveted their attention on him. Recklessly he charged down the hill. Again

## H. WAYNE SMITH

he sounded the warscream and his sword cleaved the air in great arcs.

He closed on the man who stood above the senseless woman. Fiercely the wanderer slashed downward. The powerful blow broke the assailant's sword. A quick thrust left the man dead upon the ground. With renewed courage the white-robcs sprang at their astonished attackers and managed to kill one of them.

The wanderer rushed to confront another of the wild men. With a powerful stroke he sent the man's head hurtling from his body. The warscream roared again as he fell upon and killed a third attacker. Then he rushed at two together. One fell and the other fled from his merciless sword. Without a word the other survivors took to their heels and bounded up the trail.

Next the traveler turned his attention to the woman. In a few moments she returned to consciousness and rose on unsteady feet. She stumbled toward her companions, heedless of the stranger. But dizziness overcame her and she fell into his arms. As he broke her fall, he marveled at the beauty of her fair-skinned face. Tall and willowy of form, she felt absurdly light in his arms. Sunlight danced on golden strands of hair that peeked from beneath her cowl.

One of the white-clad men rushed to help the traveler as he lowered her gently to the ground. "She'll be alright," the man said, as other white-robcs bent to help the woman. To the traveler's unspoken question, the man answered, "She's Edain, Aowyn's daughter." He studied the stranger's

## MIND SHADOW

face. "We owe you our lives . . . but who are you? And why are you here?"

The stranger deflected his questions. "I'm . . . only a wanderer," he said. "And who are you to travel in wild country like this? And with a woman?"

"We're of the Rhaetii," the white-robe replied. "We're vates. I'm Geron the Bard, and these young men are my apprentices. We'd gone to the northern mine at Ewyr . . . we had duties there . . . and were on our way home when they surprised us." He nodded toward one of the dead attackers. "They're Teutons."

"Teutons?" the traveler asked.

"Our blood enemies," Geron replied as he extracted a small flask from his robes. "We haven't seen them in these mountains for generations."

Gently Geron held the flask to Edain's lips. She coughed when he poured a few drops of some liquid down her throat and abruptly woke wide-eyed. For a moment she sat bolt upright, disoriented. Then came a rush of lucidity and she blinked her eyes. "What happened?" she asked. "Are they gone?"

"Yes, my lady," Geron replied. "They've fled. Some did, that is. The rest lie dead. This stranger . . . this wanderer . . . got here just in time."

Geron helped Edain rise to her feet. Keenly she peered into the traveler's face.

"A wanderer?" she asked. "Don't you have a name?"

"If I ever had one," he replied, "I've forgotten it."

H. WAYNE SMITH

“Forgotten it?” she asked, half-amused. “Then where did you come from?”

“I don’t know that, either.”

By now all the vates had drawn together in a circle around the stranger. Edain peered at him even more closely.

“By your dress I can see that you’re a Celt, as we are. But no name? No home?” The stranger held her gaze but did not answer.

“Then why are you in these mountains?” She paused. “No. You don’t know that either, do you?”

The wanderer responded with a steady voice. “I’ve been asking the same questions of myself, but I can’t answer them. It’s as if the gods suddenly dropped me here from the clouds.” Edain looked deeply into his eyes as he continued. “Yesterday I awoke to find myself on the other side of that hill, by a lake. Why I was there I don’t know. The trek through these mountains is the first memory of my life, though surely I’d been born and come into manhood someplace.”

A hint of a smile formed on Edain’s lips. “Surely.” Then she looked keenly at the stranger and said, “Go on.”

“I’m certain I’ve wandered these hills for days on my way to somewhere . . . but I don’t know where. I sense that I have some purpose, but I don’t know what it is. Something drives me . . . pushes me onward . . . while at the same time something else stalks me, some evil that hides in the shadows, in the depths of the forest. It’s an evil that I’ll fight one day.” He pointed overhead. “That hawk yonder has been

## MIND SHADOW

my constant companion. Far above me, he's flown the same endless circles."

Edain let her eyes wander over him for a moment and then said, "No name, no tribe, no home, no history. And nameless fears. It's strange, but I've heard that sometimes a man can lose all memory. Often this happens from a blow on the head. Has that happened to you?"

"It's hard to say." He showed her a deep bruise on his arm. "It seems I've been knocked about, but I don't know where."

"Well, you need a name, at least." Edain thought for a moment. "We'll call you Danan."

"Danan?" the stranger repeated.

"Yes, after the wandering tribes descended from the ancient goddess Danu." She added with droll expression, "After all, you're a wanderer, aren't you?"

The stranger stared at her and then managed a laugh. "Danan the Wanderer," he said. "I like the sound of it."

"Good," Edain said. "And I mustn't forget to thank you. Without you, my companions would have died under Teuton swords. I don't care to contemplate what my own fate would have been. Maybe the gods did indeed drop you here for a good purpose."

Edain turned her gaze toward the carnage. At her feet lay the bodies of the two slain Rhaetii, their faces covered by white cloth. The bloody corpses of the Teutons lay where they fell. She turned pale yet spoke with conviction. "Geron," she said, "There's no time for ceremony. We'll

bury our comrades quickly. Then we'll go to Bilitia and warn our people. Teutons in our mountains can only mean trouble."

Edain turned to Danan and said, "Join us. We need your sword arm. We'll be in Bilitia by nightfall, and you'll be welcome there."

"As I've said, I'm just a wanderer, and Bilitia is as good a place as any to wander toward. Besides, maybe you could spare a little food. I don't know when I last ate."

The bards broke out salted meat and hard bread for Danan, who ate heartily while they buried their dead. When they were done, Geron dispatched one of the apprentices for Danan's belongings at the lakeshore.

Next they piled the Teutons upon each other like cordwood and heaped brush on their bodies. Danan observed the roughness of their clothing, their lack of personal grooming and their general uncouth appearance. At the same time he noted the poor quality of their swords and daggers, which the bards had heaped in a pile. Then Edain set the pyre ablaze and the party started briskly down the trail, Geron in the lead.

The spring sun blazed as it rose in the sky, and Edain drew down her hood. Danan saw for the first time the full glory of the flowing golden tresses it had concealed. Moreover, the intense blue of her eyes and the supple grace of her tall figure arrested his gaze continually along the way. But Danan also observed the strain in Edain's face and wanted to distract her from the morning's events. Further, he

## MIND SHADOW

hoped to learn more about his strange new companions. He asked what had drawn them into the mountains.

"We were returning from to Bilitia from Ewyr," Edain told him. "Every spring we go there to perform a ritual blessing at the Mine of the Northern King. As vates, it's our duty to . . ."

"Vates?" he interrupted.

Dumbfounded, she halted for a moment to stare at him. "You don't know about vates?" Then she shook her head and continued. "Of course you don't. You don't know anything. Well, we're second-order druids with a course of study yet to complete until we earn the first order. We're prophets and keepers of our people's learning and lore. In other words, we're priests and scholars of a high order." Again Edain began to walk. As she stepped around a large boulder she continued, "It's a grave crime to attack a druid or a vate. But of course, the Teutons are heathens and one wouldn't expect anything better from them. They worship their own gods and don't respect the natural order."

Danan asked, "What does it take to become a druid?"

Edain replied, "The few who are invited spend a lifetime in study to pass through the orders. I'm a junior initiate, and these boys," she gestured at the white clad young men who followed, "are just apprentices. But they've already studied bardic art and lore for years. And they've got more years to go before they'll be accepted as full vates. They'll have gray hair and grandchildren before they become first-order druids."

H. WAYNE SMITH

Edain intrigued Danan. She seemed so vital and full of life, and yet at the same time so sober, so serious. It was hard for him to imagine why a maiden like her would dedicate herself to a life of rigorous study. "Why did you do it? Become a vate, I mean."

Edain gave a small laugh. "It was easy. My mother, Aowyn, is our high priestess, a first-order druid. It was only natural that I should follow. She answers only to our king, Connarthe. But the truth is she's even more powerful than he, especially now that he's old."

"How so?"

Edain sighed. "Connarthe's mind betrays him, although his body is still strong. Sometimes he's like the Connarthe of old, and at other times . . . and now more and more . . . he's lost in the world of the past."

"Tell me more about your mother," Danan said.

"We call her the mother of our people," Edain replied. "Lug, our patron god, favors her and has blessed her with the healing gift. But that's not all. She can conjure a plentiful harvest from the ground and sing the chant that brings a fertile spring to the goats." Edain noted Danan's skeptical expression. "It's true. I've witnessed it."

She continued, "There's more. Aowyn sits as high judge. She places the Collar of Truth around the neck of a miscreant and causes it . . . through the very force of her will . . . to choke the criminal until he gives up his lies."

Danan allowed himself a little smile. "You forgot to mention that Aowyn has a beautiful daughter."

## MIND SHADOW

Edain smiled back at him. "Maybe it's been too long since you've seen a woman."

This caused Danan to laugh out loud. "I really can't remember." Edain threw him a look. "Really. I can't."

"Well . . . as you say. Anyway, my people have always regarded my mother . . . and not her poor daughter . . . as a great beauty."

Danan replied, "Then I would truly like to meet this mother of yours."

"You will, soon enough."

"And your father?"

Edain sighed. "He was a prince of our tribe. Before I was born, the Teutons murdered him. After his death my mother vowed never to take another lover. Instead, she devoted her life to knowledge. Before long, the strength of her gifts caused the druids to raise her high among them."

The sound of Edain's voice drove the dark thoughts from Danan's mind. He wanted her to talk more, in fact never to stop talking.

"Edain," he said, "tell me about your people, these Rhaetii who send a woman into wild mountains protected only by boy-priests."

"We're an old clan, Danan. A very long time ago we gave up the wandering ways of our forefathers and settled in these mountains. We draw wealth from our mines, which provide the strength of life."

"The strength of life?"

H. WAYNE SMITH

“Yes, the salt from the heart of our mother, the earth, without which we can’t live.” Edain turned her attention to the trail for a moment and then continued. “According to legend, the Northern King first found the salt beneath the Cliff of Gloomy Caves. He built the town of Evwyr there, whose men still bring up the rocks from the bowels of the earth. In later days our people also dug mines in the mountains near Cawen, Usk, and Wydon. We trade the salt with other Celtic tribes and with some of the barbarians on the plains. This makes the Rhaetii the richest people in these mountains. We buy the finest iron for our weapons and our plows, and our larders never run empty.”

All this talk seemed utterly strange to Danan. Yet it all made sense, somehow. He said, “A treasure like that must be ripe for the picking. Why don’t the Teutons or some other clan come into the mountains and take the mines away from you?”

“Two reasons,” Edain answered. “First, the Rhaetii, while not a large clan, are famous warriors. Living hard in these mountains breeds strong and brave men. And we know our own mountains and how to fight in them.”

“The second reason?” Danan said.

“We’ve allied ourselves with the Vindelici of the plains. They’re Celts like us, and we have an old bond of friendship and cooperation. They buffer us from the Teutons and the other Germanic tribes. To reach these mountains, an enemy would have to march through Vindelici lands. Their king won’t allow it because he craves the wagon loads of

## MIND SHADOW

salt we pay in tribute each year. Also, our warriors give good service to him when he calls upon them. That's how our young men learn the warrior's art. This arrangement dates back many generations."

Thus occupied in talk, the morning passed swiftly for Danan and mercifully freed him from the questions that dogged his mind. Their journey took them downward from the lofty elevation where they had fought the battle. The party traveled swiftly, and inevitably fatigue wore on them. After a while they halted in a clearing beside the trail, where a grove of ash trees encircled a tiny glade and sunrays peeked brightly through tender spring foliage. Though remnants of winter snow lingered in the hollows and deep shadows, the place afforded a warm and comfortable place to rest.

Danan watched Edain as she found a sunny spot and settled comfortably in the soft grass, her back against a large rock. The others spread themselves out in cozy niches in the little clearing. They talked quietly and allowed themselves to take pleasure in the beauty of the mountain meadow. Wildflowers, golden yarrow foremost among them, adorned the soft carpet of green grass. The white bark of the ash trees added to the brightness of the scene while the blue sky, dotted with fluffy patches of white, arched above.

Soon the apprentice bards produced more of the hard bread that Danan had sampled earlier. They also passed around wineskins and a wheel of hard cheese, and the party

enjoyed a simple but pleasant meal. To Edain's delight, Geron softly sang a warrior's ode.

As he ate, Danan sensed Edain's pensive gaze. He turned to look at her. "When we reach Bilitia, what do you plan to do?" she asked.

Danan put down his morsel. "As best I can tell, I've traveled a long way and lived roughly." He gestured toward where the hawk still soared high above. "That bird of prey has been my only guide. My plan? I don't have one, except to continue on."

"Then maybe," Edain said, "you could stay with my people for a while. After what you've done for us, you'd find a warm welcome." Edain continued to regard Danan thoughtfully. "You don't wear a golden torque about your neck, so I assume you weren't born of a noble class."

Danan forced a smile. "Who's to say? But I seem to have a strong sword arm."

"Yes, clearly you've been trained in war," Edain replied. She was silent for a moment. Then she said, "My people sometimes take in outsiders. And we have a custom, rarely exercised, in which a worthy man can rise to the rank of knight when no gold torque came with his birthright."

Danan peered at her keenly. "I'm game," he said. "After all, I have nothing to lose."

"But it's perilous," she went on, a look of concern in her eyes. "It's not something to be undertaken lightly. The man must prove his worth. The rite takes him to dark places. He learns all the secrets of my people, and even deeper

## MIND SHADOW

secrets that threaten his life and sanity. Only the strongest can pass the test. And it is the law of my people that anyone who fails must be put to death.”

Danan thought of the nameless shadows that plagued him and of his purposeless journey in the wilderness. He looked above to where the hawk, his constant companion, rode the wind. “As I said, I have nothing to lose, and maybe everything to gain. I don’t fear the unknown. How can I when the whole world is unknown to me?”

Edain regarded him for a long moment and then turned away.

As the sun arced well past its zenith, the little group turned onto a smooth and well-traveled road. Prints of men and horses marked the dust, as did the tracks of iron-rimmed wagon wheels. A short walk brought them to an emerald-blue lake, skirted by a small cluster of thatch-roofed blockhouses. Danan learned that this was the hamlet of Cawen, whose men Edain had said tunneled their mines deep into the surrounding hills.

A rushing brook fed the lake. At its lower end, clear, icy water cascaded over the top of a dam constructed of logs and rocks. Past the dam the water continued in a frenzied and turbulent rush toward the flat plains which Danan had learned were not far below.

Danan watched as men fished from the bank and women drew water, which they carried toward their houses in great bronze vessels. Near the center of the lake, two

young boys slowly paddled a round boat, made of skins, toward the far shore. Other boats lay beached near the place where the women drew water.

"We call this Sky Lake," the bard said, "because it mirrors the blue of the heavens. When my father was a boy, the Rhaetii built the dam and made the lake larger. Milk Brook feeds it."

"Milk Brook? You call things by strange names."

Edain laughed. "Legend has it that a careless milkmaid once toppled her pail, and a kind sorceress transformed the waters so she could refill it."

As they continued down the road, Danan noticed how Edain's steps quickened with excitement. With increasing frequency they passed travelers . . . freeman merchants, farmers and miners . . . who stared after them. Soon more houses came into view, some of them nestled in trees near the sloping hills that cradled the road, others on the crests. Danan smelled smoke from the hearth fires, an inviting aroma that portended of warmth, for the afternoon had worn on and the air had begun to grow chill.

A bend in the road brought them to a small but sturdy structure of logs. Outside, a soldier stood by the edge of the road. Like Danan himself, the man had blond hair and aggressive mustachios. He wore chain mail, and on his head sat a great horned helmet. He cast hard eyes on Danan as the party approached and placed his hand on his sword hilt.

Edain said to Danan, "This is the toll station. Everyone who passes this way must pay the chieftain's toll.

## MIND SHADOW

Except druids, that is.” She gave him a meaningful look. “And knights of the clan.”

The guard bowed his head to Edain as a sign of respect. "My lady," he said, "where's the rest of your party? Did they stay in Evwyr?"

Edain told the man what had happened, and his eyes grew wide in surprise. “Go and tell Connarthe that we’re coming. And tell both him and my mother that I’ve brought a stranger.” She gestured toward Danan. “I owe this man my life.” Without reply the soldier mounted a horse and galloped at full tilt down the road.

As the travelers moved on they soon heard the noise of considerable bustle. After another sharp turn in the road, they found themselves within sight of the citadel of the Rhaetii. It stood at the base of the great wall of mountains that stretched beyond sight, from northeast to southwest, and commanded the pass that led to into them. Milk Brook, which had escorted the weary party along the road, entered the town through an iron grate in the near wall. The walls of Bilitia consisted of a log framework filled with rubble, twice the height of a tall man. A masonry exterior served as protection against fire, and a deep ditch surrounded the citadel. Behind the walls, raised earthen ramps allowed defenders to launch deadly missiles and to fend off scaling ladders.

As they neared the gate a sentry called, "Hail, Edain.”

## H. WAYNE SMITH

The party passed through the portal and into the midst of an unruly assemblage. Soon a stately woman caught Danan's eye as she made her way through the crowd with queenly bearing. All fell back before her. Like Edain she wore a robe of white, and a cowl covered her head. About her neck she wore a torque, a great pendant of gold in the shape of a knotted rope.

The woman took Edain into her arms and spoke with her softly for a few moments. Then she turned to Danan and said, "My daughter says you saved her life today, and the lives of these others, too." She reached out and touched Danan on the arm. "I'm Aowyn, and I'm forever in your debt. By way of thanks, I'll see that you have hero's feast tonight in the hall of Connarthe."

"My lady, I'm unworthy of such attention," Danan said as he appraised this powerful personage, spellbound by the power of her presence and by dark and radiant eyes that regarded him warmly. He saw what Edain had meant about her mother's beauty. She looked hardly older than her daughter. "I'm just a traveler who stumbled upon a fight. I did what any man would."

She smiled. "You did it well, then. If you hadn't come to the rescue, we would have mourned behind these walls tonight. I give you into the care Balor, who is of the house of Connarthe. He'll take you to his lodgings where you can rest and refresh yourself before the feast."

At this a young, gold-torqued knight stepped from the crowd and nodded courteously to Danan. Aowyn

## MIND SHADOW

whisked Edain away, and Balor led his charge through the gawking crowd to a log house that stood nearby. The structure, like all the buildings Danan could see inside the walls, was sturdily constructed of heavy timbers and roofed with a thatch of straw and wheat. Upon entry he saw that a framework of sturdy rafters, secured by leather thongs, supported the roof. Inside the single large room, a fire burned in a central firepit. A ventilation hole atop the structure failed to convey the thick smoke that permeated the air. Sleeping ledges made of hardened clay lined the walls. Wolf skins covered the ledges and sitting places on the rude floor. A great pot hung suspended over the fire pit by a chain from the ceiling. Implements of war and rich brocade tapestries, held in place with iron hooks and brooches of gold, lined the walls.

All this was new to Danan, and yet familiar. The dark thoughts flashed again across his mind, but flitted away when Balor spoke.

"This is my home. You're welcome to share it with me for as long as you like."

For the next hour, Danan washed away the dirt from the journey and outfitted himself in clothing provided by Balor. During this time, they talked of the Rhaetii and of the battle with the Teutons. Soon someone hailed softly at the door. Balor grinned broadly and went to answer.

He admitted a tall, slender woman who moved gracefully into the light. "This is Goronal."

H. WAYNE SMITH

The woman drew back her hood and Danan studied her face as the flickering firelight danced on smooth skin and dark hair. She, like Edain, was tall and lithe. He found captivating the expressiveness of her large, brown eyes. She spoke with a soft, melodic voice. "All my people give you our thanks, and I give you mine, especially. You saved my friend. Edain is closer to me than a sister."

Goronal glanced warmly at the young knight who stood beside Danan. "My father was a freeman farmer. When I was a young child, he sold me to Aowyn as a lady's maid and companion for Edain. But Aowyn brought us up as sisters. I'll serve Edain all my life . . . from love, not from obligation."

"We'll be married soon, Danan," Balor interrupted. At Danan's questioning look, he added. "Yes, we'll marry even though I come from a noble house and Goronal doesn't. My father wed the daughter of a freeman, and his father before him." He smiled. "So I'm just carrying on a long tradition."

Danan looked appreciatively at the young woman. "You couldn't find a finer bride."

Goronal blushed and said, "Connarthe sent me to tell you that the feast will begin shortly."

Balor laughed and said to the maiden, "Knowing you, I suspect you also want to be sure that Danan and I are outfitted properly. You want us to meet with your approval before we walk into the great hall."

## MIND SHADOW

Goronal smiled. “Yes. That, too.” As she turned to go she appraised the pair. “I suppose you’ll do.”

Suddenly carynxes . . . great, boar-headed war horns . . . sounded from the walls to summon the knights of the tribe. Balor escorted Danan from the hut, and the two men strode through crowded streets toward the gathering feast.

Connarthe’s great hall dominated the center of the town. Like the other structures Danan had seen, it was a sturdy construction of logs with a sloping thatch roof. Next to the hall, partly sunk into the ground for insulation, stood the cookhouse. Wooden poles, each mounted with the carved figure of a human head, bordered a circular courtyard. Some of the heads bore two faces. It seemed to Danan that one face looked forward into the future while the other looked back toward the past. Like me, he thought, uncertain of where they came from or where they are going.

At the door stood an honor guard of twenty young warriors. Balor explained that these were the youngest of the Rhaetii soldiers, trained in the skills of war, but yet to taste battle for the first time. Helmeted and mailed, each stood tall and haughty with the invincible pride of youth.

Balor led Danan toward the center of the great hall, where a rowdy circle of men sat upon wolf skins spread upon the ground. They surrounded a large fire pit, above which boars turned on huge spits. Great iron pots also hung from chains above the fire. Young maidens tended an enormous bronze mead cauldron and continually moved about to fill the drinking horns of the boisterous throng.

As Danan and Balor drew near the carynxes sounded again. At this a man stood to greet them. The revelry ceased, and all eyes turned toward the newcomers. The man who stood was silver-haired, but still fine of form, clad in rich brocade with a tunic of silk. Clear, penetrating eyes peered from under bushy silver brows. Mustaches waxed to protrude horizontally provided a roof for his smiling mouth. About his neck he wore a heavy torque of gold, studded with precious stones.

"Hail, O Danan the Wanderer," the man said with jovial formality. "I'm Connarthe. When I was young these people chose me as their king, and so I remain . . . at least for a while longer. You honor us by joining our feast, and we thank you for saving our young priests today."

From some recess in his mind, the proper formal words found their way to Danan's tongue. "Mighty Connarthe, the honor falls upon me to accept the friendship and hospitality of your house."

Connarthe smiled broadly. "Well spoken. Though you don't wear a gold torque, you bear yourself ably. They say you're a stranger, but you'll be a stranger no more. It's also said that you come to us without a past or even a name . . . except the one bestowed on you by the Lady Edain. But it doesn't matter. Warriors accept a man by the merit of his deeds. Come and feast with us, and take the hero's portion of the boar as your own."

He motioned for Danan and Balor to take seats at his left side. A serving maiden placed a great thigh piece of

## MIND SHADOW

the finest boar in front of Danan. He took the steaming meat gratefully and began to sink his teeth into it when he noticed for the first time the two young warriors, identical in visage, seated to Connarthe's right. Fair haired, sun-bronzed and strong, they glowed with the zest of youth. The twins, like Connarthe, wore about their necks massive golden torques decorated with precious stones. Elaborate silver clasps fastened their brocade tunics. Both possessed Connarthe's clear, blue eyes. Danan wondered if ever before there had been such a noble pair.

The din of good fellowship rose in the hall as the merrymaking began. Connarthe turned to address Danan, but harsh words from one of the brothers interrupted him. "This is wrong! Father, you yourself decreed that the hero's portion is to go to your own kin. That this wanderer should claim it . . . a man who doesn't even have a torque about his neck . . . insults my honor and the honor of my brother."

"By Lug and all the gods my people swear by," Connarthe bristled, "this man has done me a noble service today. I won't have him insulted under my own roof."

"Then maybe I should offer my challenge in the open air," the young man said as he rose and faced Danan.

Danan saw for the first time that a hideous scar ran down one side of the man's otherwise fair face, from forehead to jaw. The scar, which had not been visible to Danan while the youth sat with the marred side turned away, assumed an ugly purple hue as the blood of anger rushed to the man's face.

## H. WAYNE SMITH

As Danan eyed his adversary coolly, the other twin leaped to his feet and restrained his brother. "Barl, don't dishonor our father. It's unseemly to insult a guest, especially before the chiefs of the warband. Sit down! Honor this man. He saved someone who's precious to both of us."

With a scornful word to Danan, Barl shook himself free of his brother's grasp and stormed out of the hall. Several of those present followed as the assembly watched in stunned silence.

The man who had sprung to Danan's defense then said, "Stranger, I'm Brade, Prince of the Rhaetii. My brother spoke rudely, and I apologize for him. It's true that by decree, the hero's portion is always to be his or mine until one of us ascends to the place of our father. But I insist you take it, instead. By all accounts you're the hero of the day." He then took the sword from his belt and extended it hilt-first to Danan. "And I offer you my sword to make amends. It's the finest in Bilitia."

Danan stood and took the blade. He admired its exquisite balance and saw in it a masterwork of craftsmanship. Long, narrow and sharp of edge, it balanced perfectly in his hand. A warrior's head, adorned with a crown and beset with ruby eyes, graced the end of the gold-covered hilt. Elaborate filigree, replete with whorls within whorls and the image of a hound-pursued stag, etched the length of the blade.

"O Prince," Danan said. "If I had a father I would respect him, as you do yours. And if I had a brother like you,

## MIND SHADOW

I would stand by him in honor. Clearly, the one who insulted me doesn't know what gifts he has." Danan inspected the sword. "I admire the skill of the smith who made this weapon," he said, "and I accept it from you as a token of friendship. I pledge to wield this blade with honor and courage."

"Again well spoken," Connarthe said. "When the days left to a king become few, the gold-torqued princes climb over each other to see who'll be next in line. My eldest son would uncrown me before I take my last breath. Already he defies me in my own hall before my captains."

He continued. "The Rhaetii choose their own kings, and young Barl didn't advance his cause tonight. By birthright he's first among equals since he came into the world moments before his brother. But he's always shown himself niggardly in hospitality, a poor sign for a future king. And now he's insulted a guest in my hall. I'll speak harsh words to him later. But now I have something to say to you, because you are indeed the hero of the day."

From beneath his cloak he brought forth an elaborately inlaid golden torque. "You came here without a home or a torque about your neck. So I have a choice to bestow upon you, Danan the Wanderer. I do this at the request of the lady Edain. First, you may choose to be our honored guest tonight and then be on your way when the morning comes. If you choose this path, you'll go with our gratitude and rich gifts from my own treasury . . . and our

## H. WAYNE SMITH

bards will sing of your deeds as long as songs pass the lips of men."

Connarthe then held the torque high in the air for all to see. "The other path is a perilous one, but the rewards are great. As an alternative, I offer you the rite of initiation as a knight of our clan. You've shown us your courage. But bravery alone isn't enough to earn you a place among our nobles. Show us now enough strength of mind and soul, and I'll elevate you to the status of a noble. You'll have a fortune that befits a senior knight, and I'll place this torque about your neck as a sign of my special regard."

A murmur went up from the celebrants, and Connarthe continued. "Hark to my words, wanderer. This way is fraught with danger. If you fail you'll be put to death in accordance with the law of my people, for the secrets you'll learn cannot be shared by a man who would remain an outlander. You'll face a difficult trial. You'll go to dark and uncanny places. You'll see things that will shake you to the very marrow of your bones. Rare is the time when we allow a man from outside to undertake the challenge, and rarer still is it for one to succeed. But should you pass the test, you'll win great rewards. You will be one with us and will receive all that we have to share with you."

Danan answered in a firm, clear voice. "The choice is simple, O king. Put me to the test. I wish to stand with your people."

Connarthe said, "I thought as much." Then every man at the feast rushed to shake the hand and pound the back

## MIND SHADOW

of Danan the Wanderer. They made a great merriment that night, the absence of Barl and his retinue forgotten, and Danan's cup was ever filled.

*Mind Shadow* is available on Amazon.com.

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