



CHRISTOPHER
STIRES

PALADIN'S
JOURNEY

***The bridge and the road were paved with
human bone.***

This station was Purgatory, where souls not so sinful as to be destined for Hell yet not sufficiently free of sin they could enter Heaven, those who had truly repented their evil ways, would reside until they were purified.

The truth of the other side of the Wall was not my concern. I had immediate matters to concentrate on.

The gates of the sanctuary opened, and a man rode out on a mammoth black warhorse. The dark rider was a strong, thick-shouldered man in an iron breastplate and leggings. In one gloved hand, he held a broadsword, and in the other a spear. As he raised the weapons above his head, I saw that he had a leather patch over his right eye and a trio of scars that slashed across his face from cheek to cheek.

“I am called Memphi,” he shouted.

“I’m Novarro of Thuria,” I answered. “I come in peace at the behest of the Archangel Magdalene.”

“Demon liar! You are servant of Satan, and I will send you back to Hell where you belong!”

Also By Christopher Stives

Rebel Nation
Dark Legend
The Inheritance



PALADIN'S

Journey



CHRISTOPHER STIRES



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ISBN 978-1-61271-234-5

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stires, Christopher, 1955-

Paladin's Journey / Christopher Stires.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-61271-232-1 (print/trade pbk. : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-1-61271-233-8 (electronic (multiple format))

ISBN 978-1-61271-234-5 (electronic (epub))

I. Title.

PS3619.T576P35 2013

813'.6—dc23

2013033567

Acknowledgments

For my wonderful friends – thank you for sharing your lives with me:

Jenny and Kent Andersen, Geri and Martin Dossett, Melanie Julsonnet, Doug Kennedy, Ginny Moran, Mark Sevi, Janel Stires, Randy Stoneham, and Herb and Scott Thompson

In Memoriam: Thor Swanson

And a special thank you to an insightful editor and fellow author: Elizabeth K. Burton

Part One

THE LONG ROAD



1

That winter's night so long ago, before Satan placed his bounty on me, I was completely unaware the one I loved above all others and the life I cherished were about to be taken from me.

The rain turned to snow as I hurried from the university through the empty village lanes toward my bride and home. All was still this icy midnight. Even the tavern, usually bustling at this hour, was dark and shuttered.

Approaching the inn, the last building in the township proper, I debated taking the woods road or using the shortcut through the cemetery. The hole in my boot voted for staying to the road. My ungloved hands, clenched inside my coat pockets, and my head, without hat, wanted the quicker route across the graveyard in spite of the snowdrifts that would surely be there. I had about thirty steps to decide.

As had my father and his father before him, I taught at the impoverished university in Valon. I was in the midst of my fourth year as instructor of ancient Thurian history. My classes for that day finished, I'd retired to my alcove to work on my translation of the twelfth *Grenburke Chronicle*. I became engrossed in the work and lost track of time, as I was known to do. When I finally noted the hour, I cursed myself.

Lenore, a wonderful wife and beloved companion, would still be up and keeping supper warm. Our home, owned by the university, was a small cottage that was modest in goods and furnishings—the roof always needed repair—but much blessed.

Lenore was the cause of that blessing.

My bride was a gentle soul full of sincere kindness. I wanted to shower her with gifts, but she did not desire them. She told me that no object, whether golden or bejeweled, could compare with the joy of lying in our marriage bed, holding one another, and considering the names we might christen our children with. The only change she wanted in our lives was to be surrounded by happy, healthy babies.

I truly, deeply, loved this woman, and was amazed and thankful every day that she loved me. My life was perfect, and I wouldn't have asked for more because I needed no more.

Perhaps if we'd had troubles, if our life hadn't been so unspoiled, all would've remained as it was.

I rounded the corner of the inn and slammed into a slightly-built maiden heading into the village. She stumbled backwards, nearly going down into an icy puddle, but she grabbed at me as I caught her around slender waist.

"I didn't see you coming, sire," she said, releasing my coat. "My apologies."

I looked around. No one else was about. The girl was alone. That shouldn't be.

She slipped past me.

"Wait," I said in my most commanding teacher's voice.

The girl twisted around, but her expression was not the fearful one my students had when I used that particular tone. She was not afraid, not threatened by me in the least. That was why she was not fleeing. I presumed the hand now hidden beneath her cloak was gripping a weapon of some kind.

She was fifteen, no more than seventeen. On tiptoe, the top of her head might've brushed my chin. The dirt on her face obscured her features, and the grime in her red hair made it darker than it naturally was. Her clothes, the hems of her cloak and gown crusted with mud, were heavier than mine but more threadbare and worn. She had rags wrapped around her shoes.

Lenore would be disappointed in me if I just walked away from this poor child.

“Do you have shelter for the night, lass?” I asked.

“Of course I do. I just like standing in the cold. It adds delightful color to my lips.”

She was a feisty waif, and I had no doubt whatsoever she was accustomed to fending for herself. But I knew what Lenore would want of me, for she had done similar on many occasions.

“Come to my home. My wife will have food prepared. It’ll be a hot and filling meal, and we can put a pallet near the fire for you.”

She smiled. “And what would be the cost to me?”

“No payment asked,” I said. Then I realized what she was implying. “Our house is a God-fearing, honest home.”

“So you say.”

“It is. My Lenore is a good Christian woman. You’ll be safe for the night and leave unmolested on the morrow. I give my oath. Will you accompany me?”

“Nay.”

“At least accept coin for lodging or meal then.”

The girl studied me, in my threadbare but lovingly mended attire, as if I were some unnatural thing she did not recognize.

“You do not appear to be a swell overflowing with coin,” she said.

I chuckled. “That I have never been even in my dreams. But we are willing to share what we do have. Will you accept coin?”

I knew she wouldn’t consent before she answered.

“If you change your mind,” I said, “our home is the first cottage on the other side of the wood.”

“Your kindness, sire, is rare to me. I have never done before what I am about to do.” She smiled again. “And it amuses me to do it. Just know I am the best, and earlier tonight was very profitable.”

I didn’t understand her meaning. She tossed an object to me, and I caught it one-handed. It was my coin purse, and from the weight, its few coppers and silvers were still within.

I looked up. The girl was gone into the night. No doubt the rags around her shoes aided in her silent escape across the cobble-

stones. Then I spotted her, for a brief moment, before she vanished completely at the far end of the lane. She had been joined by another—a boy, it appeared. He was her same height, but his gait was that of a babe first learning his steps. She matched her strides with his.

I started home again. Lenore would tease me about this when I told her. I could already see the smile on her face and hear her asking if the lass was pretty, if that had so captured my male attention I couldn't feel her thief fingers in my pocket. My bride had never been more than ten leagues from our village, I'd been to our kingdom's first city at Blackharbor several times and once I'd sailed on the mammoth Io River; but Lenore wouldn't have allowed her purse to be stolen. That I admitted. And that the girl had returned my coin was puzzling. Perhaps Lenore would have clue to the cause of that.

The snow became sleet, and I kept to the road. Despite not taking the shortcut, I felt ice spear my foot through the hole in my boot. I shivered, my body growing colder. I quickened my pace.

In the distance, I saw our cottage and the flickering firelight within. I heard Lenore's sweet voice singing a hymn. I knew my bride would greet me as if I were arriving at a decent hour, and she'd warm the numbness from my bones.

A mournful cry echoed from the woods. I glanced up and saw a red owl perched on a thick naked branch, staring down at me.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose. I looked deep into the woods, raised my fists, and anchored my feet. I should have fled—that would've been the sensible course. I did not. I would fight.

Shadows stood within the shrouded darkness.

2

Teach semester I teach *pre-Thurian history to four classes of* university first-years. It is a required course with the focus on our kingdom, because an overview of the entire ancient world and civilizations was much too daunting for one semester or even for a dozen. We would, of course, touch on some ancients beyond the Thurian borders but only in brief asides.

On the first day of class each fall and spring, I gaze at my new squires, who all believed the university was punishing them by making them study this miserable subject.

We lived in an amazing age. Our Good King Harold, House of Lakesnow, had ridden in the tethered basket of a hot-air balloon and gone up forty feet from the ground. The king's eldest son Aaron, who would one day be king, was personally supervising the construction of a steamcoach that would carry passengers and freight on rails. All of the main thoroughfares in Blackharbor were now stone-paved and lined with street lamps. In the neighboring kingdom of Cordoba, their army had a cannon that could hit a target more than half a league away. It was said that one Rivenran ship-builder was far ahead of Thurian master-builders in designing a workable ironclad ship.

In the midst of these incredible events and more, why would they want to learn about primitive peoples who lived thirty centuries ago?

Personally, I felt being able to start a fire at will, the creation of a good hunting bow, and the written word were as impressive, if not more so, than today's wonders. But that seemed to be a lone opinion.

Valon was the university attended by commoners—sons of successful merchants and craftsmen, sons of decorated army officers, sons of our king's household staff, and sons of nobles who had besmirched the family name. Sons of titled heritages in good standing mostly attended the prestigious university at Blackharbor; a few studied at the College of the Minds in Zar and St. Mary's University in Quantero.

My task was to engage these squires, to get them to use their minds for more than sports and wooing maidens and riding in hot-air balloons. The headmasters said that for us to know where we were going as a society, to not repeat past mistakes, we must understand our history.

As long as it supports the truth as written in the Holy Testaments, the University Bishop and his Headmaster of Ministry Studies would always add.

That first day I ask, "What do you expect to learn from this class?"

Silence is always my response.

"We will," I continue, "study the nomads who first came to settle in Thuria, and we will conclude with the founding of the first great clans."

This always receives a groan.

We would stop before the good part. Every boy and girl in the realm knew the story of King D'Arth and his black mage, le Faye. D'Arth had, six centuries before, united the warring Thurian clans under one banner to battle the invading Memphi armies of the Pharaoh Imun-Ra and had stopped the great southern dynasty's march to conquer all of the north. D'Arth was the first monarch of what we now call Thuria.

At this point, I always walk to the map of the known world on the wall. It shows two continents, one in the northern hemisphere and the other in the southern, with an isthmus 280 leagues long and a mere 60 leagues at its widest point connecting the two. That region is the Sacred Lands, and it is where the Holy Testa-

ments suggest the Garden of Eden was. It is where four of the world's five major religions came from.

I am forbidden from discussing the politics of the Sacred Lands, and that is fine. The Cradle of Mankind, for centuries, has been in desolate ruins after countless armies reclaimed the land in the name of God from the previous in-the-name-of-God army. Some in the north say with conviction that when Cain was banished to the land of Nod after the slaying of his brother Abel, he was sent south; and the southern populace is descended from the Exiled One. Of course, in the south they said the Wanderer was sent north.

I would start at the top of the map with the Arctic Crown then move to the sparsely populated frozen Badlands that stretch across the continent from east to west. Then I would point out the provinces they knew on the western coast: the northern Kingdom of Rivenran, the tiny ten-league-wide Principality of Quantero, our own Thuria, and Cordoba. Of course, I wouldn't neglect the landlocked kingdoms of Zar and Cimera Plains.

The class would still be silent when I commented about the mysterious Sun Kingdoms along the eastern coast, and the two cities that it was not forbidden for westerners to visit—the great Ipaü port of Shoi-ming and the Okudara Mountain town of Jin where the Spice Road ends.

Between the Thurian-Rivenran Alps in the west, the Sun Kingdoms in the east, and the farming lands of Cimera Plains in the south lies the unmapped 5000-league-wide Frontier.

I am never allowed to finish my highlights of the southern continent. Usually, I would point out on that first day the still-powerful dynasty of Memphi and the Great Desert that is home to the fierce horsemen, the Rashid. Sometimes, on rare occasion, I would mention Mukilteo or another southern kingdom. I never reached the southernmost landmark at Cape Horn where the great Io River empties into the ocean or discussed the Arctic Boot. Never on that first day.

This was usually when a nervous squire would rise beside his desk and wait for permission to speak. The first is always studying for the ministry. Their comment is always the same:

“Master Novarro, if we are to discuss heathens and their multiple gods and demonic idols then I must be excused from this

class without penalty. There is only one true Lord and Savior and to speak of others is blasphemy.”

A few of the smarter squires would nod in agreement. They believed a loophole for escape had been found in the university rules.

I would thank the squire for voicing his concern. Then I would repeat what my own pre-Thurian instructor once said.

“There are still regions to this day where the old deities are prayed to. Some say these peoples should be put to the sword, others insist they must be saved. I have great admiration for the Brotherhood of Friars. These men forsake all worldly possessions, dress in clothing a beggar wouldn’t accept, and spend their entire lives spreading the Gospel.

“Most of what we know, most of what we will study in this class, about the ancient religions and beliefs comes from their writings. They believe you cannot convert people to the True Word if you don’t understand their ways of life. The Archbishop of the Church of Thuria and the High Vicar of First Church have praised the friars’ work.”

Then I stare into the eyes of the questioning squire.

“If you believe the work of the friars is blasphemy, you have my leave to go to the Headmaster of History and request exemption from this class. I am sure he will grant it.”

No squire, ministry student or otherwise, not even the wastrels from noble families, save one, has accepted the offer to request exemption from class. Grandfather chastised me loudly and vigorously for it, with the bishop and two headmasters as chorus. I was told I was arrogant and ungrateful and several more undesirable traits.

Father did not chastise or lecture me. He took me on a short journey to the ancient temple at the Loch. He talked about life and his own beliefs and dreams. In the end, I agreed to commit myself fully to all my classes. I had no idea then that the path Father guided me onto would lead to my current station.

The sluice has now been opened in class. The squires begin asking questions. I enjoy this even though the first are always similar:

“Are all the ancient gods related to some part of nature? Like sun, moon, and wind?”

“Did they believe in Heaven and Hell as we do?”

“Did they know where the burial tomb of the warrior angel Elias is?”

“What did the ancient people say was on the other side of the Wall of Fog?”

“Is it true that the Hebrews only believe in the first half of the Holy Testaments?”

Then, from a grade-conscious student: “Is there a final examination, and how much is its weight on our final grade?”

“There is a final,” I reply, “and it counts for half your grade.”

This, too, receives groans.

“But,” I say, “there is a challenge open to all. If accomplished, that squire is excused from taking any examinations and will receive the highest grade in the class.”

Several smile.

Then I add that no one has accomplished it thus far.

I move to the latest wall sampler Lenore sewed for me. I tell the squires I am one of many translating the Grenburke thousand-year calendar. Currently, I am working on the twelfth chronicle, I continue.

I had hoped it would give hint of what had befallen the early people who built the magnificent temple at Grenburke Loch. It has not. Their long-ago disappearance from our lands remains a mystery. The twelfth chronicle is only more prophecies.

I point at the sampler. I’d been deciphering this quatrain, the ninth, since the previous spring. Hieroglyphs I’d never seen side-by-side before and two unknown symbols challenged me. But I would not relent. I would prevail, and I would understand.

The challenge to the squires was to correctly translate one of the symbols I hadn’t been able to.

Some mysteries, Father told me when I was a child, remain mysteries and have to be taken simply on faith alone. I have difficulty accepting that. I sometimes wonder if the ninth’s creator was mad, a jester or under the influence of an opiate.

The ninth had read until only a few days ago:

The *hieroglyph/hieroglyph* Prince shall come,
Riding a *hieroglyph/hieroglyph* horse,

Wielding a *hieroglyph* broken sword,
And *hieroglyph* shall follow with him.

The two hieroglyphs with *horse* could mean *ashen* or *ghostly*, I tell them, or as one superior suggested, *yellowish-green*.

I have concluded the meaning is *pale*.

Riding a pale horse.

Even with one line translated, the quatrain as a whole made no sense to me.

By this time, the class is nearly finished. I walk to the squire who first spoke. Usually, he has his head down and is tracing the grains in his desktop with fingertip. I ask his name, even though I already know it. When he replies, I squat so we are at eye level.

“At mid-semester, I will ask for your opinion. Others will give theirs, but from you I believe I will receive a well-thought response.”

“What is the subject I am to speak on, Master Novarro?”

“From the earliest cave drawings to the paintings and sculptures of more advanced societies, we have found images of heavenly angels. The renderings all show the celestials the same as we believe they appear to the chosen. I have never been satisfied with the interpretation of this I’ve been given by clergy or scholar. Perhaps you will be one who teaches the teacher.”

“I shall do my best, sire.”

“If chance to visit the temple at Grenburke Loch ever arises,” I tell the class, “seize it. The structure is an architectural mystery and marvel like no other I have ever seen even in books and paintings. The journey is worth taking if only to view the mesmerizing wall carving in the hidden library. In superb detail, it depicts the Lord God banishing the archangel Lucifer and his twelve allies from Heaven.”

3

The snow became sleet, and I kept to the road. A red owl, perched on a thick naked branch, uttered a mournful cry. For a moment, mayhaps for longer, it seemed that a cold pit swallowed me then vomited me back out. I was suddenly light-headed, with black spots appearing and vanishing in front of my eyes.

Then I was whole again. I pressed my hand to a burning throb in the center of my chest and heard the owl take wing. The woods, as well as the cemetery, were still and quiet. No other, man or beast, was about.

Looking behind me, wiping sweat from my brow, I saw my lone footprints in the snow on the road were nearly filled in with fresh fallings. I squeezed the bridge of my nose. What had happened to me, and how long had I stood here?

When I was a small lad, my grandmother's never-to-wed sister experienced, at unannounced times, vision spells from what the family called her third eye. I only saw two eyes on her head, and I looked hard from every angle for the third one.

Sometimes, her trances would last for a minute; once it was for two days. She would sit with palms up, humming, eyes half-closed and yellow drool seeping from her mouth down her warted chin. Nothing could arouse her from her fugue until she was done.

I know this because I was punished more than once by Mother for poking and pinching her.

When she did return, she always had messages from the saints and from our clan in Heaven. She would point at one of the family and say things like, “The shoe suckles the moon’s teat among the orange goats at midday.” I was always thankful that she never pointed at me. Well, she often pointed at me and called me a nasty boy and a disrespectful child, but it was never after a vision spell.

I couldn’t recall the last time I had thought about that long-dead woman, yet now I was. I prayed quickly to Lenore’s respected Trinity pleading that I hadn’t inherited the woman’s eye. Despite being only twenty-six years old, I hoped I was only turning feeble-minded, like some of the elders at the university.

I touched my coin purse inside my coat. Frowning, I drew it from my pocket and opened it. The coppers and silvers had melted into one mass.

Suddenly, in my mind’s eye, I saw a flash of a vile man with knife in hand. On the wind, I heard Lenore shout my name. I threw the purse aside.

And I ran.

Snow grabbed at my boots, but I didn’t slow. I ran, my arms and legs pumping with fierce determination, the cold burning my lungs and dreadful thoughts rising in dark detail in my mind.

Finally, I saw our cottage. Fear stabbed me to my core. The front door stood wide open. No candle was lit inside as was Lenore’s custom until we were both in our bed. The only light was wandering ribbons from a receding fire in the hearth.

I stepped through the doorway and whispered Lenore’s name. Snow skimmed past me to join what had already amassed on the floor. Our table lay on its side, along with one chair. I moved toward the table and felt pottery crunch under my boot. The bowl we put coins in for our weekly church tithing lay shattered on the wooden planks.

My gaze went immediately to the mantle, where Lenore displayed her family’s marriage gift to us—a silver ladle. It was gone. I moved to the other side of the table.

Lenore lay on the floor. In a flare from the hearth, I saw blood soaking the dress beneath her bosom. Dropping to my knees, I put hand to temple. She was as cold as the winter night.

I took her body into my arms and cradled her against me.
I wept.



How long I held Lenore in my arms—an hour, a day, a week—I do not know. I was told later that no one could persuade me to release her. Finally, the village magistrate—my cousin—cold-cocked me with his billy-stick, and Lenore was taken away to be prepared for burial.

The village women, mostly relations to either Lenore or me, cleaned and scrubbed the cottage. Some brought food I did not eat. My cousin the magistrate came and placed the silver ladle and tithing coins before me. He'd found a man, reeking of ale and piss, passed out in the smokehouse of the farm a half-league from our cottage. This vile man had the ladle and a knife still stained with dried blood on his person. The man had cried that he wasn't a murderer and thief. My cousin hanged him from the nearest stout tree.

The day of the funeral, the women shaved, washed and clothed me. Lenore was dressed in her best frock and wrapped in clean white linen. I insisted that stockings and shoes be placed on her; Lenore's feet were often chilled in the evening hours.

I do not recall the funeral other than some of the priest's words, which burned through my soul.

"...we do not know why our Lord God allows heartbreaking events to befall the faithful and innocent. We are not privy to His Plan for us, but we must retain our faith..."

Afterwards, the magistrate took me to the tavern and placed a bottle of rum in front of me.

"I do not drink hard spirits," I said.

"Today is the exception," he replied.

I drank.

Tom Kree, no relation, arrived at the cottage the following day-break. He was a strong lad, apprentice to the university's woodsman, and his main task was to keep the headmasters' kindling piled high and tinderboxes stocked year-round. He walked into the cottage without waiting for permission to enter. He stared with his dirt-brown eyes at me in pity—or was it disgust?

“What do you want?” I snapped, my skull pounding from last night’s rum.

“The headmasters have ordered me to come each day,” he replied. “I’m to see how you’re farin’ and ask if you’re ready to return to your classes.”

I shoved the tithing coins at him.

“Ask me tomorrow. Bring rum.”

He did both. I repeated the second day what I’d said the first. This time he said no.

The women eventually stopped bringing meals I barely touched. Kree, however, was like a loyal, irksome dog. He kept coming each day. I yelled, cursed and physically attacked him, but he did not sway from his task.

When I no longer had any coppers or silvers, I sold my belongings and household furnishings and, lastly, the ladle. None were worth much, and swiftly I had nothing left to sell. Then I would go to the tavern hoping some kind Samaritan might buy me rum or ale. A few did, from time to time.

Mostly, I stood in the corner. When a table of men left, I would gather their mugs and pitchers and take them to the bar. My pay was any dregs left in the cups and jugs.

Some days, I woke in the cottage with Kree poking me and asking the same damn question: *How you farin’, Patrick Novarro, and are you gonna return to your classes?* Some days, I woke lying atop Lenore’s grave. Some I was found leaning against the outside wall of the tavern, or in the gutter, or in a pigsty with my magistrate cousin kicking me with the toe of his shoe.

Once, I awoke outdoors and found, half-buried in the mud beside me, a dagger with a pale bone handle. I decided it was a sign and didn’t sell it.

Thus winter turned to spring.

I was retching up nothing when Kree came that day to the cottage.

“Good, you’re awake,” he said.

I hurled a violent curse at him.

“The headmasters have hired your replacement,” Kree announced. “He and his family are to live here. You’re to be gone

by the morrow. If not, I am to put you out. I'm to insure you don't return and disturb the new people.”

4

I spent the rest of the day and most of the night collecting my possessions. I gathered all the discarded bottles and jugs of rum, ale, and whisky from inside the cottage and out. I upended them in the slop bucket and was pleased at how much liquid there still was. The dark horizon was turning to light as I sat outside the cottage, drinking from the bucket and watching the fire grow swiftly inside our home.

I put the dull dagger blade to my wrist, debating whether it was best to cut the flesh down or across. Blood rose on my skin...

It was at that moment the warrior angel came to me.

This cannot be, I insisted. I wasn't one to have visions, not even in my stupors. I didn't see angels or demons or any other spirits.

The angel appeared as male, in bright silver armor with huge wings rising around him. Flames curled along the blade of his sword. Perhaps he came as he did, as so many artists had portrayed angels, so my mind would accept him.

I laughed. Not for me was a visit from a mere everyday angel. No, a warrior angel called on me.

Dammit.

I cupped more spirits from the bucket in my hand. I swallowed then licked my palm.

The angel said, "Lenore is ashamed of you."

Tears coursed down my cheeks. Life was unjust and evil. There was no divine and righteous plan.

“She needs you now more than ever.”

“Lenore’s dead and in Heaven,” I replied. “She is in Grace.”

He laid his hand on my arm. The spirits left my body, my mind cleared. Suddenly, I was terrified and trembling. The angel touched my temple. The shakes vanished.

“Lenore’s soul is not in Heaven,” he said. “She is in Hell.”

“No.”

“Your beloved stands chained in the flaming palace on the River Styx, there for Satan’s amusement.”

“If Lenore’s in Hell, if *she* couldn’t earn God’s embrace, then none will earn the reward of Heaven. All that we believe is a lie.”

“The Archangel Magdalene and others have negotiated on her behalf,” he continued. “We will never forsake her, but we have been spurned at every attempt. It is foretold that one, a mortal, can rescue her. However, that one has proven unworthy so far, undeserving of Lenore’s faith in him. Once again, Satan has said, it had been shown that true mortal love is fraud and myth.”

I did not understand.

“Go from here, Patrick Novarro,” the angel commanded. “Seek the truth. Once you have discovered it, you will decide your destiny. And Lenore’s fate.”

“H-How do I find this truth?”

“There are many paths from which you may choose.”

“Will I know the truth when I find it?”

“You must hear it from him. Until then, you will never genuinely believe.”

“Him?”

“Satan,” the warrior angel answered. “Within his lies and deceit, you will hear the truth.”

As I rose, he retreated into the sky.

“Go from here, Patrick Novarro,” the angel repeated. “Seek the truth on Lenore’s behalf.”

The roof of the cottage, engulfed in flames, collapsed. I stared at the empty horizon. My mind had fled me. I was sober, but crazy.

Tom Kree stepped beside me. He gazed at the horizon, too. Neither of us spoke, or even moved, for a long while.

“I’m leaving, Tom,” I said at last. “I won’t be back.”
“Yeah, I know. I’m comin’ with you.”

5

A *spear of flame cut the air above my shoulder, singeing my* long hair. Yelling, I swung the broadsword two-handed. The necromancer's body fell left; his head tumbled to the right.

I turned.

Kree smashed the face of the necromancer's apprentice against the stone floor one last time. He stopped, panting deeply. Then he lifted the dead man's head. The features no longer resembled a face.

A second apprentice lay outside the door of the house with one of Kree's crossbow bolts through his heart. A third, a woman, lay curled dead in the corner with her guts spilling from her belly.

Kree rose. Blood traced down his cheek and jaw from the wound near his eye. He sucked on his bruised knuckles as he walked to me. He frowned, confused, looking at the decapitated necromancer.

"I thought the plan was to take this miserable git alive?"

"You didn't listen to me," I replied. "Again."

He shrugged one shoulder.

"You're an intelligent and learned man. I'm not. I listen, but I don't understand many of the words you use."

"The necromancer was a fraud."

“Fraud? He shot fire from his damn fingers.”

“A trick he was taught. *Fraud’s* the wrong word. He was the shill.”

“What is *shill*?”

“The necromancer pretended to be master of this house to protect the true one.”

I walked outside. Kree followed, picking up his crossbow and loading it

“The true master of this house is a woman,” I continued. “Actually, two women. Sisters and witches.”

“I hate witches,” Kree said. “Where are they?”

“In a room built into the barn.”

He smiled. “Let’s go introduce ourselves. It’s the courteous thing to do, and we should always be polite.”

I headed across the yard toward the barn.



We were in the beginning of our second winter since leaving Valon. Most roads we’d taken had led us nowhere. In Herron, there had been a depraved cruel man, but he had no demonic powers or knowledge of doorways to Hell. The villagers begged me to end his reign of terror. I answered no. They outnumbered the villain by more than a hundred. They didn’t need me to defeat him.

But before Kree and I could depart the village, the man, along with a fearsome lackey, confronted us, issued a challenge, then attacked without waiting for reply. No one was more surprised than I when he lay slain in the street; Kree, battered and bruised, had sent the lackey running in coward’s retreat.

The cruel man had deserved his fate—of that I am certain. Still, my hand had ended a life, and something within me turned to stone with the deed.

When we arrived in Shankur, we were told the night before a creature had abducted several children. The monster, we learned, was a griffin-vampire, and the captured were to be its food for the winter. Kree and I joined the hunters.

The creature’s trail turned cold in less than a league. Kree and I followed a faint trail separate from the others. Soon after, we came upon the children. Pilar, the oldest girl, sixteen years, hit me square

in the forehead with a rock before she realized we were not the monster returning.

A few minutes later, the creature, I believed smelling my blood, did return. It brushed Kree aside, breaking two of his ribs. Then it faced me. The creature nearly disemboweled me twice before I plunged my bone-handled dagger into its black heart.

We took the children back to town. Pilar's father, John Gabriel Molina, a master gunsmith, in thanks presented me with his latest weapon design. I had never seen a pistol like this one anywhere. It was not a flintlock; it had a turning cylinder that held six cartridges. He showed me how to fire it and how to make new cartridges. I have become fairly fast at drawing the pistol from my belt, but to hit what I am aiming at, I need much more practice. Much.

Molina also told me he'd heard stories about a necromancer in Camd'n Rin who it was said was in union with Satan and knew a doorway to Hell. Camd'n Rin was the largest city in Cordoba. The Basilica of First Church, where the High Vicar and his cardinals resided and worked, stood at the heart of Camd'n Rin. I disbelieved that a Satanic magician lived in the outskirts of the Holy City. That could not be.

Still, Kree and I traveled to Camd'n Rin to see for ourselves.



There were two corrals beside the barn. In the largest were six horses, in the other only one—a leopard-spotted stallion had that enclosure to himself. Earlier, from hiding, we had watched two of the apprentices attempt to saddle and ride the black horse with white markings. Mistake. The saddle never touched him. But one apprentice was touched, very solidly, by the horse's striped hoof, and the other had a chunk of shoulder bitten off.

As we passed, I looked at the stallion, and I swear the horse looked straight back at me, not intimidated for a moment.

"I think we should ride from now on instead of walk," I said.

"My feet agree wholeheartedly with you," Kree replied. "I like the clay-back."

"The spotted stallion."

Kree shook his head. "I'll carve on your grave marker *Novarro—brave man but bad judge of horses.*"

Up ahead, the barn loomed. I cocked my pistol; then we edged into the dark-filled structure. To my right, inside the doorway, a large furred sow suckled her young. Several horned goats moved about in front of us. A necklace of human skulls dangled from a rafter between two each of animal and bird.

Kree pointed at the rear. A closed door stood revealed by candlelight from inside the room beyond. I motioned for him to stand where he was. From behind stacked crates, four eyes stared at us.

I turned as the sisters charged together. One, shouting, stabbed a three-bladed knife at me. The blades skimmed my shirt, missing flesh. I grabbed her wrist, twisting. She screeched and dropped the knife. I released her. Clutching one another, they backed up against the wall.

“It was foretold that the Paladin would come seeking us,” one said.

“Paladin?”

“The shadows have given that name to you and your quest.”

Kree lit a candle in a lantern hanging on a post. I looked at the sister witches and was taken aback.

“Shite,” muttered Kree.

They were joined from shoulder to waist. Their torso had one arm on each side but four legs extended below. The face of the sister to my left, the one who had attempted to knife me, the one who had spoken, had only two holes for a nose. The other had a gaping-slash mouth with no tongue or teeth.

The mute sister signed a hex then jabbed her crooked fingers at me.

Nothing happened.

The sisters recoiled. Sweat and terror etched their features.

They twisted toward Kree.

“Raise your hand again, and I’ll cut it off,” I announced.

The mute sister lowered her hand. Both were clearly afraid.

“It was foretold that the Paladin’s coming would begin our end days,” the other said. “And you have come.”

“If you can truly see into the future, then you should see that you can survive our meeting,” I responded.

“How?”

“Take me to a passage from this world to Hell.”

The mute sister wept.

“We have been given many gifts by the master. But the knowledge of even one of the eleven doorways is not among them.”

Kree stepped closer.

“There are ways to kill without sheddin’ blood,” he said. “Perhaps the survivin’ witch will take us.”

“Yulin knows a passageway. He was this house’s most able apprentice. He is in the village of Daarmoor on the Spice Road. He could take you.”

I shook my head. “Why should I believe this from you?”

“We shall gaze into the mists of your future, Paladin. We cannot lie about what we see.”

“That I don’t believe.”

“We shall, nonetheless.”

The mute sister pulled aside their blouse, baring her breast. A blinking eye looked out from where the nipple should’ve been.

The eye peered straight at me.

Kree staggered back toward the door.

“Shite me,” he said. “I’ll get the horses ready. Call out if you need my arrows.”

The mute sister frowned and covered her breast. Then the other frowned, upset.

“Tell me your lies,” I said.

The sisters looked at each other. Then, they nodded.

“We will guide you to a hidden valley in the Sacred Lands. Mortals cannot enter the valley with no name unless escorted by demon or damned. In our vision, we saw you meeting with the Master and speaking of blood covenant.”

“Have you ever been to this valley before?”

“Once.”

You must hear it from him, the warrior angel had said to me. Until then, you will never genuinely believe. Within Satan’s lies and deceit, you will hear the truth.

I tapped the barrel of the pistol against my thigh, thinking, debating. A new plan began to take shape in my mind.

But the one thought that kept nudging forward was that the sister witches had agreed too easily to take me to the unholy valley. That was unsettling. Still...

“Paladin,” the witch pronounced. “You will regret the answers you find.”

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