



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 war-horse. 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 Stiles

Rebel Nation

Dark Legend

The Inheritance



PALADIN'S *Journey*



CHRISTOPHER STIRES



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PALADIN'S JOURNEY

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Part One

THE LONG ROAD



1

T*hat 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

T*each 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 land-locked 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 Ipau 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.”

INTERLUDE

As *Rebecca Nines stepped onto the third-story balcony, the* cool dawn breeze caressing her naked body, she heard the cart and horses in the lane below. Immediately, she knew one of those passing was damned.

She looked over the railing. Two horsemen, both male, one on a spotted stallion and the other a clay-colored steed, rode down the lane behind two women in a donkey cart. The women were the ones damned.

Rebecca always recognized mortal damned, because she was one, damned since first breath. Heaven was closed to her, but still she sent requests of protection to the angels. Had, anyway. Until last week. She would never utter prayer again.

Hot bath, she decided. Then it was time to leave this miserable city.

She walked back into the huge, luxurious bedchamber. Levi Bergg lay in his great bed, propped up by silk-cloaked pillows. Once, the wealthy Camd'n Rin merchant had possessed a strong face and body; but the decades had fled past, and his face and body had turned soft and slack. His only remaining strength was in the worlds of money. Well, that, and one other.

"Tell me," he said, "what I can I say or do to convince you to remain?"

Rebecca shook her head. They'd already had this conversation. He knew her decision was firm.

"I have never known a woman who was so enthusiastic and joyful in bed as you, Rebecca. You have ruined me for all other women."

"I've blossomed because I had a most insightful teacher. You have shown me pleasures I'd never imagined and revealed a reward I didn't know existed." She traced her fingers down between her legs. "Oh, yes, I'm truly grateful, Milord Bergg."

Levi smiled, very pleased with the compliment.

He had thought she was untouched the first night she came to his bed, but she'd surrendered her maiden innocence six winters back to a handsome gypsy drifter. Since then she'd been with a sea captain from Blackharbor and a Rivenran smuggler. But, she had been with Levi longer than any of the others, and he'd schooled her well in the many delights of the flesh.

"Stay," he repeated.

"I cannot, and if I ever do return here, it'll be with torch in hand."

Levi frowned. "You have my sympathies."

Rebecca looked at a tapestry on the wall, at the rich gold and scarlet swirling in a field of silver-green. Bram would've gazed at this happily for hours.

No tears, not now, not ever again. It happened and can't be undone.

Bram was Rebecca's brother.

We's half-bloods, he always corrected her in his stumbling tongue. *Same mam, different paps.*

Yes, it was so.

Rebecca had few memories of her long-absent father. She knew who he was, but she'd never felt the need to seek him out. She didn't want to know him.

A toddler she was when her mother became the woman of the pickpocket and workhouse telltale called Blue Jack Nines. Every summer, for the next eleven years, her mother added to the Nines clan until the last birth, a breech, killed both.

Bram was the only one of the Nines siblings she cared about. All her half-blood brothers and sisters were ugly and slow-witted, and Bram was the ugliest and slowest. But he was always sweet and happy, no matter the circumstance.

He was the third-born; Mother had turned away when she saw the misshapen face and limbs. Blue Jack announced he would drown the thing in the nearest horse trough. Rebecca took the babe in her small arms, announcing she'd call him Bram and she'd take care of him. That was the lone time she'd thought Blue Jack was going to punch her, but he didn't.

The Nines gang was low-caste thugs—pickpockets, cutpurses, snatchers, rollers of drunken seamen and soldiers, and occasional house and grave robbers. All the gang—her mother, her siblings and the other red-hand accomplices—were terrified of Blue Jack.

Yet even as a toddler, she hadn't feared him. Blue Jack had a quick temper and never shied from striking with fist or boot, with cause or without, anyone within his reach. He never hit her, however, and except for the one time, never threatened to. This she hadn't understood, nor did she comprehend why he always gave her a sleeping pallet she didn't have to share, and he never groused when she shared it with Bram.

When food was short, he still gave her a full bowl, and she was allowed first pick of any clothing swag they got. Once her oldest half-brother, Shortfoot Jack, who would celebrate his fourteenth and last spring on the Quantero gallows, had threatened to throttle her for not having a workshare like the rest and still getting the best of the plunder. As the boy advanced, Blue Jack stepped between them. He ripped off his son's left ear then kicked him senseless.

Rebecca and Blue Jack had no blood tie; even the near-blind could tell that with a mere glimpse of her among the rest of the Nines clan. She had been a pretty child who had grown into a beautiful woman with thick dark-red hair, full bosom, slender hips and sleek legs. She became aware of the lustful stares of men early on, and the incensed condemnation of their ladies. One accomplice uttered aloud a crude remark about what he'd like to do to Rebecca. Blue Jack put dagger in the man's throat.

Rebecca overheard two gang women whispering that Blue Jack was saving her for himself. They were wrong. Blue Jack never put hands on her, and he'd never said he'd like to.

But more than her looks made her stand apart from the clan. She had a good mind and sharp tongue. She taught herself to read

and write some Thurian script, and to work numbers. After the almost-beating from Shortfoot, she went to Blue Jack. She asked two things of him. First was that he teach her how to use a blade. Second was to show her how to pick pockets and locks. He agreed and was amazed at how swiftly she learned and mastered both arts. Within a year, she was bringing in more swag than all her other siblings together. By the second year, she was besting the entire gang.

The summer mother and babe died, a new magistrate declared he would make the Quantero streets safe for decent folk. The bigger gangs paid a stipend to be left alone, but Blue Jack and most of the Nines were taken in chains to the workhouse.

Rebecca avoided jail; Bram did not. He was arrested for being a gutterpup and nuisance. With a flash of thigh and one gold coin, she bought his release.

They left Quantero the next day, always on the move, never staying long in any one place as they traveled through the kingdoms and provinces along the western coast. She'd rarely thought about the clan in the years since leaving Quantero, and Bram never spoke of them at all. They did well most times.

Then they came to Camd'n Rin...and stayed too long.

Rebecca did well on the streets and in the pubs, never a hint of being caught by victim or spotted by witness. In one of the fancier taverns, she met Levi Bergg, Duke of Perl-on-Salinas. Normally, the older man would've been only a purse to collect, but to her surprise, she found him attractive. Not in looks—those days were gone—but in manner. She allowed him to believe he was seducing her into his bed. She enjoyed his lovemaking. Each time, she asked him to show her a new pleasure, and each time, he did. It was wonderful.

Every day, Rebecca took Bram to the same busy corner. She told him to stay there until she returned no matter how long she was gone. She would point to the only place he was to go if he needed to pee. Then she'd slip food and drink into his coat pockets for his midday meal, telling him not to eat it as soon as she was out of sight.

Bram would give her his biggest smile.

"I work now."

Then, Rebecca would depart, but she always looked back and said a short prayer for the angels to protect him.

Bram stood on the corner, a cup clutched in both twisted hands. He would always start facing north. Then, on his crooked legs, he'd turn east, south, and, finally, west. After completing the circle, he would do the same again and again until she returned for him. He would smile at every person—in coach or wagon, on horseback or afoot—that passed by, repeating at each turn, “Good tidin’s an’ Rapture’s embrace.” When a person dropped a coin in his cup, he’d say, “Thank ye, kind stranger. Gentle blessin’s on ye.”

A week ago, Rebecca had returned to the corner just before dark. She’d had a very prosperous morning and wonderful pairing with Levi.

Bram wasn’t there.

Dammit, she’d thought. He’s been arrested again. How much will his bail cost this time?

Then she found him.

He lay face-down, half-buried in the muddy street. He’d been run down, and it was evident that other coaches and wagons had come along after and driven over him. No passerby, not a single one, had taken the time to even drag his broken body to the gutter.

Rebecca knelt beside him and gently brushed the hair on the back of his head.

“Get yer stupid arse outta thoroughfare, woman!”

Rebecca looked up at a man with a whip guiding an oxcart.

“Move, bitch!”

She drew her dagger.

“Go around.”

The man stared at her for a long moment. Then he tapped the ox with his whip and guided the animal to one side.

She turned Bram over and moaned. Tears filled her eyes. Cupped in his hands, pressed to his chest, was a crushed sparrow.



“I have several houses,” Levi Bergg said. “I could set you up in one. There’d be servants to take care of your every need. You would want for nothing. I have a house in northern Cordoba on one of

the white-sand beaches. It is warm nearly every season. You would only have to wear clothes when it fancied you.”

Rebecca rested her hands on her hips.

“Be a kept woman and remain in one place? The first, milord, is insulting, and the other would be boring.”

“It was not my intent to offend.”

She smiled. “Forgiven. Forgotten.”

“Would you allow me to at least provide finance for your journey?”

“You already have.”

Levi laughed. “Was I generous?”

“Very much so. Your generosity surprised me.”

“Good. We should have a proper farewell before your leave.”

“We did. Last night. Three times.”

“No, my beauty, *I* said farewell but once. The others you accomplish with my faint aid.”

Rebecca pointed toward the adjoining room.

“Come with me. Perhaps I will allow you to wash my back while I bathe. If you do good work, I’ll tickle your double chin.”

Levi rose from the bed.

“I shall miss your company,” he said. “Tell me, and be forthright if you can, will any man ever capture your heart?”

“I feed, clothe, and shelter myself. I defend myself. I only need a man for one thing, and I have never lacked volunteers for that.” She chuckled, without amusement. “I have no heart to give to a man, but if I did, I say for certain, it would be to his misfortune and damnation.”

6

Satan arrived. *Angels watched, weeping, from the crests of the* surrounding hills.

The demon overlord rose out of whirlwinds and followed the barren riverbed through the valley. Without pause, he approached the scorched earth where I had been told to wait. He moved untouched past fire geysers and shredding bramble thorns, and with each step he crushed to powder the skulls and bones that littered the ground.

He was beautiful with no equal and radiated a seductive, consuming allure. He was plain and mundane, easily dismissed and forgotten. Finally, he was so terrifying my mind edged toward the pit. In his ever-changing eyes were the genesis of time and the annihilation of the future. Formless and enticing creatures hovered in his shadow—Fear and Madness, Horror and Sin.

As Satan advanced, the heavy air shifted from freezing hot to burning cold and back again. On my face and hands, blisters grew and turned to ice as they burst.

Kree had remained outside this unholy place with the horses. Unarmed, I followed the sister-witches along a twisted trail to this wide patch of burnt ground. The sisters used a stick to draw a circle and told me to stand inside then chanted in a tongue I'd never heard before.

I stood, unbowed, as he came toward me, ignoring the pleas of the angels to run, to change my determined course. The truth the warrior angel had told me to seek I had not found. I had a new plan, and it would have to suffice. I was committed, and, now, there was no turning back.

The sisters giggled, delighted, at the approach of their master.

Satan gazed on me. The air became crisp and sweet. My blisters faded as if they had never been. I clutched the medallion at my throat to give me strength, the simple oak cameo with the name of Lenore etched on it I'd had made before leaving Camd'n Rin.

Without so much as a glance, Satan gestured at the sister-witches. They collapsed to the ground, writhing, choking, fighting to draw breath. Then they lay still. A black owl landed on their body and watched me with yellow eyes.

"You hate me, Christian," Satan said. "Yet you have begged for an audience. Why?"

"To barter a covenant."

"Is that so?" The creatures in his shadow cringed.

"It is."

"I will concede to you your rightful due," he said. "You have slain several of my servants and one pet." He pointed at the dead sisters. "You convinced two who have been mine since first bleeding to betray me and to bring you here. But now that is all history. What is the offering?"

I braced myself. There was no retreat. Beseeching angel voices cried for me to stop. I would not.

"You do not know?" I said.

"No life is certain or absolute. Mortals were given free will and choice. It is a rule I cannot break and would not. I am enriched by the challenge. Tell me what you desire so deeply that you have come to this valley to stand before me."

"Lenore."

He dismissed me with a wave.

"A mere companion?" he asked. "I anticipated a more complex request from such a noble adversary. There is a woman from the South Sea who would be perfect for you. She is a vicious pleasure. Or, better still, I have many mortal daughters. Several would be—"

“Lenore,” I repeated. “There is no other.”

He frowned. “How long has she been dead?”

“Two years tonight.”

“So it is. I’d almost forgotten.”

“I want to relive the time she and I had. Then you can take me and let her live. Let her live a full life without harm from you or your legion.”

“I cannot.”

“It is well known that if one is willing to consign his soul to your service then all is possible. I am willing.”

“I cannot grant what you desire. Believe me, Christian, if I could, I would not hesitate. You would be a trophy in my realm.”

The creatures in his shadow and the owl vanished into the thick, rushing darkness. Satan turned to go.

“Tell me why,” I demanded.

Fire and ice merged. The winds exploded and howled.

“In the name of our Lord God and His Son,” I yelled, “tell me why!”

He pivoted back. I reeled from the force of his glare, clutching the cameo. My heart felt as if it were being crushed. My brain rumbled and wailed. A black mist swirled about me.

“The angel did not tell you, did it?”

I couldn’t speak, but he already knew my answer.

“Think back,” he commanded. “Where were you this night two years ago? What route through the woods did you usually take to go home? Think! Remember!

A red owl, perched on a branch, stared down at me. The hairs on the back of my neck rose as I looked deep into the winter woods. Shadows stood within the shrouded darkness.

I raised my fists and anchored my feet. I should have fled—that would’ve been the sensible course. I did not. One shadow moved, and something gleamed in its hand...

“No!”

“Yes. *You* were attacked that night. You, an insignificant scholar, were stabbed for the coin in your meager purse. As you lay dying, no doctor or shaman able to save you, she came, guided by those two crones, to this valley and knelt where you are now. She made a covenant with me. She gave me her immortal soul for your life,

and for you to live without harm from me or mine. You have defeated my servants because you are protected by my own sworn oath.”

This could not be.

No, Lenore, this couldn't be.

He pointed a claw at my heart.

“All tremble in the presence of my throne. All except Lenore. She knew what you were capable of. She knew the warrior you would become. She tricked me. She laughs at me.”

“Lenore!”

“You and I are not done,” he promised. “We will meet again, and it will be on my terms. I will not be denied your blood by my covenant with her. I will find a way to sweep it aside.”

He cursed then was gone.

Quiet weeping echoed down from the angels on the hills. I had learned the truth.

But there was now *my* truth. I would never abandon my beloved and let her spend eternity in Hell. I would not surrender until I had rescued her. I'd survive until the archangels had cloaked her in their embracing wings.

I would.

7

A *half-day's ride from the city of Daarmoor, as we traveled* east along the Spice Road, Kree and I first caught the stench of the funeral pyres on the wind. With each passing quarter-league, we saw gray and silent farmhouse after farmhouse with a warning carved on the doors.

Plague.

Still, we continued toward the city.

We had been riding for three weeks to find the mage the sister-witches had told us about, and I would not relent. I could not.

Kree twisted in the saddle. He scanned both sides of the road as we neared the outskirts of town.

"Isn't good, Novarro. 'Tis been the same since daybreak. No birds in the trees. No cattle or sheep in the fields. Not even a dog anywhere to be seen."

"Go back to that last border town we passed," I said. "Wait a fortnight. If I have not rejoined you, I'm not coming. Return to the university. Be their woodsman."

"I've thought about it. More than once."

"It's time to part. This is for me to do, not you."

Kree looked as if I'd slapped him.

"Did you all of a sudden turn into a skilled warrior since yesterday? How many shots did you fire with your pistol, and how many

times did you strike the target? Shat, I spit better than you shoot. You need someone to watch your back.”

I motioned toward the horizon and the quintet of smoke columns rising into the sky above Daarmoor.

“If you stay with me this time, I hope you’re not planning on living forever.”

“Well, yeah, I do. Live forever, be very rich, and much loved. That’s my basic strategy.”

I shook my head.

The city had grown up around the sweet-water wells of Daarmoor. Spice merchants and silk traders had traveled this trail between the western provinces and the Eastern Sun city of Jin. Daarmoor, at the southern edge of the vast unmapped frontier, had blossomed and prospered.

The other route was around the cape by ship; that took a full year. Last summer, however, our prince Aaron finished building his railroad through Thuria’s high mountains and was laying rails pointed toward Jin. The construction bypassed Daarmoor and rejoined the Spice Road a hundred leagues beyond the town. The merchants had already switched their caravans to the new transportation and this part of the trail was abandoned to smugglers and bandits.

While crossing the border, Kree and I had heard curious stories about Daarmoor. All citizens had remained within their city. Not one family or individual had moved to the new towns springing up near the railroad. Those who traveled there did not return. Their isolation was now even more curious. With plague claiming this region, there should have been a mass exodus.

As we entered the city, we saw an ox-drawn death wagon parked in the shade of a crumbling arched arcade. Hooded soldiers, exhausted, lay in the weeds. The driver dropped a water bucket beside the thin oxen. None looked at us. Corpses tiny and large filled the black wagon bed.

“What’s that letterin’ say?” Kree asked, pointing at four symbols scrawled on a shattered wall.

“Those aren’t letters. They’re hieroglyphics. Ancient Grenburke. It means *Protect us from evil*.”

“Didn’t work.”

I reined Leopard to a slow walk. The narrow street before us was deserted and still. Ash floated on the breeze. The stone buildings had their windows shuttered and doors barred. In front of the tavern, three bodies lay tied and wrapped in burlap shrouds. The burlap twitched and bulged.

Two more corpses were outside the cobbler’s shop. Their shrouds were ripped wide, and fat gray-brown rats, dozens, crisscrossed the bodies. One rat, amber rimming its muzzle, sat up on its hind legs and hissed at us.

Kree sighted his crossbow.

“Save your bolts,” I said.

“Yeah, you’re right, too many,” he replied. Then, he fired. The rat dodged, and the bolt bounced off the shop wall.

I spurred the stallion forward. Following, Kree reloaded.

“I’m gonna be nicer to cats. Do you think this Yulin can do half of what they say?”

“This isn’t happening by natural means, and there is no white magic.”

We’d heard more—bits and rumors, mostly—about Yulin in the villages and farms we’d passed. One told us the mage had learned to navigate the tides of the River Styx. Another said Yulin had mapped the Nine Rings of Hell. His coffers were brimming, several claimed, with treasure looted from the Damned.

I glanced down at a child’s ball, forgotten in the gutter. Two young rats were batting it back and forth. A third, older rodent watched me.

Behind us, on the second floor of the baker’s shop, a window shutter creaked open. Kree nestled the crossbow in the crook of his arm.

“It’s him,” a voice echoed along the empty street. “He’s come.”

“Oh, merciful Jehovah, please, let it be him,” another wept.

The door of the tinker’s shop flew open. A gaunt, sallow-faced woman stepped from the shadows. She clutched the doorframe and stared us down as we breasted the shop.

Kree scowled back at her.

“Is it him, Idanna?” a man’s weak voice called.

"Don't know. Looks like two damn fools to me." Idanna pointed a skeletal finger at me. "Are you him?"

"I'm no one," I answered.

"Does he carry a weapon?" the man behind her asked.

"Yes. But I've never seen the likes of it before."

The man, raw sores etching his face, lurched into the doorway. He smiled.

"That, dear daughter, is a revolver pistol. The gunsmith of Shankur designed it, and there is none like it on the frontier. The smith gave it to the man who rescued his children from the griffin-vampire. I was there."

"The Paladin," Idanna said as if the words were a bad taste in her mouth.

Doors opened wide, and people—nearly two score—staggered into the dim sunlight from the shops and houses. They surrounded us, touching and slapping our mounts as we moved down the street. Most were weak and pale, with seeping lesions branding their faces and bared arms. Several clung to one another to keep upright.

A hunchbacked man, his left eye gone and one ear devoured to a nub, handed me a tankard. I took it, nodding thanks, and sipped the cool water.

"Save us, Paladin."

"Thank Allah you've come at last."

"Blessings on you both."

Now I understood what was happening.

Kree yanked away from the caressing, grasping hands.

"I'm not with him. Keep back. Don't touch me."

"Destroy the curse that keeps us here, Paladin."

"Save us from Yulin," the hunchbacked man said.

"I'll do all that I can," I answered.

"Damn you!" snapped Idanna, grabbing my saddle and pounding my thigh with her frail fist. "You should have been here long ago!"

The tinker's daughter collapsed, sobbing, against the stallion. I brushed the tears from her cheek. She bolted back from me.

"No!" Kree cried as a young man, his nose split from crown to tip, hugged his leg and kissed his knee. "You don't touch me."

I reined Leopard to a stop. Kree twisted toward me. His expression pleaded for us to get away. Fast.

The crowd grew silent. I rose in my stirrups, listening. On the breeze, not too far from us, I heard a lute. And laughter.

“Where?” I asked.

“In the plaza,” replied Idanna. “Those who are allowed to remain inside the plaza are safe from the plague.”

Kree trotted his horse ahead of the crowd.

“What’s in the plaza?”

“Yulin,” I said.

“Let’s go introduce ourselves. It’s the courteous thing to do.”

I rode on. Kree eased beside me as the townspeople, Idanna in the lead, followed. We rounded a bend in the street, and the music and laughter grew louder. Banners of rich orange and green stretched between the buildings.

Kree double-checked his crossbow. I motioned upward. Positioned along the rooftops were archers and musketeers.

“Anything else I should know?” he asked.

“Just follow my lead. Don’t get impulsive.”

“Impulsive? Not me.”

We rode into the plaza. The circular courtyard was jammed with at least a hundred people dressed in bright-colored silks. Kree grunted in surprise.

Tense laughter filled the space between the surrounding walls. Long tables, scattered everywhere, overflowed with meats, vegetables, cakes, and pitchers of wine. Jugglers and fire-eaters snaked through the crowd. A jester performed sleight-of-hand with scarves and flowers on a raised platform to our far right. On the left, a whimpering nobleman, his face painted like a grinning clown, knelt before a masked executioner. In the center, musicians played lute and dulcimer, and naked dancers twirled in perfect rhythm.

“Quiet!” a harsh voice ordered.

All voices and movement ceased. Straight in front of us, on the opposite side of the plaza, a man bounded onto the main table. He was short and round-bellied and dressed in a purple tunic and breeches. The right side of his broad face was fair and unblemished. The left was dark and thick with fire scars.

“Welcome, Paladin, to the Feast of Cerberus and the Minotaur,” he called. “I am your host. I am Yulin. You could not have

arrived at a more opportune time. I was becoming bored. These people die so slowly.”

He hopped down from the table, and the crowd parted between us. I dismounted. Kree glanced from Yulin to the townspeople blocking the street behind us.

“I knew,” Yulin continued, “you would be unable to resist stories about a mage who could descend into Hell. The mere semblance of a chance to rescue the Lady Lenore would bring you running.”

“That’s why you’ve done this?” I said, tilting my head toward the stricken townspeople.

“I’ve done this because it amuses me to do so.”

“You cannot defeat me.”

“Perhaps not. But my lord Satan has placed a bounty on your blood, and it is well worth the challenge.”

I stared at the mage. Yulin sauntered closer.

“Gentle people of the realm,” he announced, “our honored guest today is the hero of Shankur and Herron. He is the warrior who destroyed the necromancer of Camd’n Rin. May I present to the court the Thurian, Novarro, called the Paladin.”

Several nobles near me edged away. A lady dressed in ivory-yellow stretched her hand toward me and mouthed, *Save us, milord*.

I put hand to pistol.

“Save your round, Paladin,” Yulin said. “Allow me to do it for you.”

He signaled to the men on the rooftop. An archer fired. The arrow thudded deep into Yulin’s chest. He rotated for all to see then wrenched the arrow from his flesh. No blood spilled from the wound.

Several nobles weakly applauded.

“Shite,” Kree muttered.

Yulin gestured to a musketeer. The man sighted and fired. The bullet slammed into Yulin’s forehead, and the mage reeled backwards. He smashed into a table, sending platters and bowls spiraling to the ground, and dropped to his knees. Then, he leapt back up and bowed to the crowd. No blood appeared on his head.

He pressed his forefingers into the wound and, a moment later, tugged the round-shot from his skull. The wound closed as if it had never been.

"We are both blessed." He tossed the shot onto the cobblestones. "I tricked the Archangel Jeremiah almost as cleverly as Lenore did Lord Satan. I cannot be harmed by mortal hand or by Heaven's lackeys."

"Then we have a stalemate," I said.

"Not quite," Yulin responded. "There is a way for us to duel."

"How?"

He gestured to the crowd, and they began to chant.

"Tanith... Tanith... Tanith..."



I first heard the legend of Tanith when I was a boy. At six years of age, Tanith had perished in a blizzard. The child followed the Damned who departed the Boatman's ferry at the gates of Hell. She went into the frozen throne room of the Great Hall and knelt trembling before Satan to receive her punishment.

Satan gazed down at the child. She was pure and innocent. No traces of sin marred her white-gold aura.

"Why have you come before me, little one?" Satan asked.

"I was bad," she said.

"How were you bad?"

"Mother and Father told me not to go outside," she answered. "A storm was coming, and I knew my pony would be cold. Father said she would be all right, but I was worried. After Mother and Father went to sleep, I took my blanket and sneaked outside.

"The snow was falling hard. I couldn't find the stable. Then I couldn't find my way back to the house. I lay down and went to sleep. When I woke, I was at the Bay of the Dead.

"I disobeyed, and I know where bad people go when they die. Mother and Father told me."

Satan smiled, and the fallen rebel angels within the Hall cowered behind pillars.

"Go back to the ferry, little one. The Boatman will take you where you belong."

"I must stay here, sire."

Satan signaled Mammon to escort Tanith to the river, but the archdemon was unable to touch her. Other demons attempted to trick her into returning to the ferry. They failed. Angels beckoned to Tanith from Heaven's shore and tried to coax her to the ferry. They failed also.

I was bad, she answered all who spoke to her. Bad people go to the Bad Place. Mother and Father told me this is so.

Finally, Satan called upon the Archangel Magdalene.

"Come and get the child. If I could throw her across the river I would. You have my oath that you may enter my realm, collect her, and leave unmolested."

Magdalene, weeping, shook her head.

"It is written, and so it is, that no one can be forced to accept Heaven's embrace. All have choice, Lucifer. This you well know. Tanith truly believes she has not earned Heaven, and I cannot force or trick her to cross to us."

Satan roared, and demons, high and low, hid from his sight. He walked his realm, and all those he encountered felt his wrath. As he stood on the far shore of the Styx, where the river emptied into the Abyss, he glared across the waters at Heaven. The Archangel Magdalene knelt on Heaven's shore praying.

"I should send her into the Abyss," Satan said, "and be finished with her."

"You could have done that without calling for my assistance," replied Magdalene. "You seek another solution."

The Boatman called to Satan and Magdalene. He pointed to a tiny island in the center of the river, near the Falls of the Abyss.

"Neither Heaven nor Hell," Magdalene said, nodding. "But how shall we lead the child here when none can compel her to leave your palace?"

"Deceit is my provenance, and I have no qualms about tricking her."

Satan waved his hand, and a bridge of bones rose connecting his shore and the island. He snapped his fingers, and Hell echoed with the whinny of a pony.

Tanith came as swiftly as her small legs would carry her to the far shore of the Styx. She crossed the bridge to the island. On the island, she found a satin-covered bed grown from the rocks; perched on the pillow was a tiny pony.

As she gathered the creature into her hands, a deep trance engulfed her, and she lay down to sleep. Angels seeded the barren ground with flowers and plants. High demons placed gifts around her.

"Here," Satan said, sweeping away the bridge, "the child shall sleep until one who is not yet demon or angel comes to escort her to her rightful reward."

Magdalene agreed.

"But it must be one who is worthy," added Satan. "All pretenders will go alive into the Abyss."

Magdalene trembled. "Why? Why these conditions?"

"Because, my sister, I am who I am, and I cannot change."

And, since that time long ago, says the legend, Tanith has slept in the garden on the islet in the River Styx.



"I can induce the Boatman to take us to the garden where Tanith sleeps," Yulin said. "You and I will go there, Paladin."

"To what end?"

The mage brushed his knuckles on the cheek of a young dancer. The man shivered and retreated into the crowd.

"Where Tanith sleeps is neither Hell nor Heaven," he replied, "and from our own hands, from our own actions, the oaths that shield us cannot protect us."

"From our own hands," I repeated.

"There is but one true treasure on the island. All else is false. Choose the one, and I will be sent into the Abyss to plummet through the darkness forever. Choose wrong, and you shall meet the same fate."

"Who has told you this?"

"My lord Satan."

"Satan is a liar."

"Of course," Yulin responded, confused. "I don't understand your meaning."

I mounted my stallion. Yulin bounded forward.

"If I'm destroyed, my curse will be lifted from this city and the people freed. The plague will end. The tortures will end. If I remain, all will be dead by the rising of the full moon, and I'll have moved on to new lands. I've heard much about Valon in Thuria."

“What do *you* gain if Novarro’s destroyed?” Kree asked.

Yulin glanced at him.

“The bounty Lord Satan has placed on the Paladin’s blood is more power than can be envisioned. I can envision a great deal.” The mage turned to me. “He will observe the contest. Lenore will accompany him.”

A fiery chill settled around me.

“Wasn’t a good idea to come here after all,” muttered Kree.

“When shall we depart, Paladin?” Yulin asked.

“We don’t.”

“Coward!” Idanna yelled at me. “Damned coward!”

The lady in ivory-yellow dropped to her knees and raised her clasped hands toward me. The hunchbacked man, tears filling his good eye, stepped from the crowd behind me and touched my leg.

“Please, sire.”

“You do not fear Hell,” said Yulin. “Or the Abyss. That I know. Save these simple people. Come with me.”

“No.”

Yulin pivoted toward the crowd.

“I will open the invitation to any who are bold enough to journey with me.”

I reined Leopard around. Idanna spat. The townspeople moved away from me.

“I’ll go,” Kree said.

I twisted toward him.

“And I,” called Idanna.

“Good,” Yulin shouted. “Will you reconsider now, Paladin?”

I had no words for Kree. I spurred the stallion.

“We don’t need that coward,” said Idanna.

“Quiet,” Kree growled. “Leave him be.”

I stopped. This wouldn’t save Lenore, and if I died, she would spend eternity in Hell. I looked from the townspeople to the nobles. I had no doubt that they all would be dead soon.

But the risk was too high. This was too much to ask of me.

“Ride on,” Kree shouted, as if reading my mind. “No fault on you. Ride on, Novarro.”

I gripped the reins. Lenore would fault me. If I allowed a single innocent to perish, she would blame me. She would hold me ac-

countable despite the consequences to herself. I touched the cameo. Lenore would be ashamed of me if I abandoned these people.

I turned Leopard and trotted back into the plaza. I stopped beside Yulin. The mage smiled.

I kicked him in the face.

8

I sat in the ferry as the Boatman steered us down the center of the River Styx. Heaven to one side, Hell to the other. Kree pondered the swift, churning waters.

“Tis not one of my better plans. I heard ‘I’ll go,’ and I wondered ‘What fool is speakin’ those words?’”

Idanna tugged her cloak tighter around her bony shoulders, staring at her feet. Yulin, at the bow, drank wine from a tankard. Behind the Boatman, perched on the ferry stern, was a gray owl.

Kree turned to me.

“Why does God allow Satan to exist?”

I remained silent. That answer was beyond me.

“How did your lady trick him? No offense, but Satan is...well, the damn devil. How does a mortal trick him?”

“All I know,” I replied, “is what I have to do.”

I looked at Heaven’s shore. It was just as I had believed it would be. Paradise was warm, a lush and green landscape with awe-inspiring waterfalls and lakes, and a vibrant blue sky it would take years, if ever, to adequately describe. Winged angels and cherubs played and danced among the mortal righteous and faithful. Laughter and song floated across the river to the ferry.

As we breasted a heavenly tower, I gazed at a warrior angel in shining armor, standing watch. He saw me and saluted in acknowledgment.

I turned toward the dark underworld. Fire and ice merged within the hills. The sky was black and webbed with thunderheads. The wailing of the Damned swept toward us. We sailed past the infernal city with its flaming walls. Dragon-hounds guarded the gates. The twelve archdemons, delighted at seeing four live mortals with the Boatman, called for us to join them from the ramparts. The giant Direbeast roared as it chased us along the crooked shoreline.

A man rose to the surface near the boat. He stretched his hand toward us. Kree leaned forward to reach for him.

“Don’t,” I said. “He’ll take you in with him.”

He pulled his hand back. The man disappeared into the current.

Yulin smiled.

“Nonbeliever,” he explained. “If one truly believes in no Hell and no Heaven then that is what one receives. The Abyss. Forever falling through the darkness. All of you will soon know firsthand of the Abyss.”

Kree shifted toward me.

“Remember my basic strategy? I’ve changed it. I don’t have to be much-loved, and moderately rich will be just fine. To live forever, though, ‘tis non-negotiable.”

Up ahead, I heard the deafening roar of a mammoth waterfall. We were approaching the island of Tanith and her garden.

“I shouldn’t have let you ride with me,” I said to Kree.

“My decision,” he responded. “You told me that all in life have choice. I believe it.”

“I’m not so sure any longer.”

Idanna pointed. Yulin rose to his feet. The Boatman steered the ferry onto the beach. Huge dappled flowers and emerald-green foliage bloomed across the island. A gentle breeze brushed my face. To the east, the Archangel Magdalene and others prayed on Heaven’s shore.

Yulin tossed his tankard into the water and jumped from the boat. The fire scars on his face glowed as he motioned for us to follow.

“Stay here,” I ordered Kree and Idanna. “This is for me to do.”

Idanna climbed from the boat onto the beach. I stepped ashore. Not too far from us, the river cascaded into the Abyss. The man we had seen earlier plunged silently over the falls into the pit.

Kree sighed and hopped from the boat to my side.

To the west, along Hell's shoreline, loomed towering cliffs. Flames curled from the ice-filled crevices. Low demons scampered along the upper rim.

Suddenly, they prostrated themselves on the ground as Satan stepped to the edge of the highest cliff.

He was beautiful this day. No sculptor or artist could have captured the seductive charm of the banished angel. Thick golden hair feathered around his chiseled-perfect face and down to his massive shoulders. A gossamer fire-yellow tunic was molded over his lean, muscled torso and arms, and ice-black breeches clung to his long legs.

As he stood on the cliff rim, he peered, damning and unforgiving, down at the garden.

Beside him, chained to him, was Lenore.

My voice failed as I attempted to call to her. A cyclops demon crept behind her and stroked her hip with its hoof. Lenore swiveled and slugged the beast in the eye. It screeched and scurried away as other demons cheered.

Lenore looked toward the garden.

"Patrick!"

I rushed into the river, the current clutching at my boots and legs. Satan waved his hand. Flames erupted from the water, and I reeled backward.

Kree grabbed my arm.

"Not today," he whispered. "Someday, but not today. There's too many, and they're ready for us."

I nodded, tears stinging my eyes. Demons pranced along the rim and mocked me.

"C'mon," Kree said. "Let's go introduce ourselves. It's the courteous thing to do."

As I continued gazing upward at Lenore and she down at me, Kree and I walked from the beach into the garden. My heart felt as if it would implode. My hands and legs trembled. Kree held me upright.

Idanna and Yulin waited beside a tiny bed rooted to the clover-seeded ground. A child, innocent and sinless, lay sleeping on rose-colored satin sheets. On the pillow near her head was a tiny pony. Scattered along her sides were four treasures the high demons had left—a small crown designed to fit a child, bejeweled with shining rubies and bright sapphires; a crimson-flamed diamond the size of a titan's double-fist; a golden angel with ebony wings and ivory lyre; and a silver chalice filled with amber liquid.

Yulin tapped the headboard with his fist.

"There is one true treasure before us. If you choose wrong, the river will claim you. You shall go over the falls and into the Abyss alive. No judgment day. No balancing of the scales to determine if you have earned Hell or Heaven. Only falling through the darkness of the pit forever. If you choose correctly, I shall suffer the same fate."

"You don't pick?" Idanna asked.

The mage shook his head.

"I lose only if you win. Who shall be the first to choose and perish?"

"I will," I replied.

"No, Paladin. You will be last. My Master wishes it so."

Vines exploded from the rocks, ensnaring my legs. I grabbed at the thick boughs as they tightened, burrowing into my flesh. I sank to my knees.

"Why?" I yelled.

"You will watch the others perish," Yulin said. "And the odds will be in your favor when it is your turn. But it won't make any difference."

I twisted toward Kree and Idanna.

"Don't choose. Go back to the ferry."

Idanna, without a single word, circled the bed. She snatched up the jeweled crown and raised it in her fist above her head. Her eyes blazed as she stared at Yulin.

"A popular choice," said the mage.

The crown sailed from Idanna's hand back to its place on the bed.

"But wrong."

A savage, hot wind slammed into Idanna. She fell, windmilling her thin arms, into the river. Black whirlpools surrounded her.

I struggled against the vines. They burned deeper into my muscles. Kree jumped to the shore, and thrust his hand toward the tinker's daughter.

"Take it!"

Idanna glared at him as the current sucked her out of reach. A moment later, she careened over the falls.

Angels wept.

Demons danced.

I lowered my head. Idanna did not deserve this fate. Nor Kree. I did, but no other. I should have forced Yulin to leave them behind. This was for me to do.

"Patrick," Kree said, using my given name for the first time.

I looked up at him.

"May your Savior guide us," he said.

I held out my hand.

"Tom, you are my good friend as well as true companion."

Kree shook his head and smiled, as if saying he knew better than to allow me to take hold of him. Then he marched to the bed. He straightened his shoulders and traced the back of his hand across Tanith's tangled hair.

"Diamond, angel, or chalice?"

I rose to my feet. Kree nodded to himself and, with both hands, picked up the pony.

On the cliffs, the demons applauded.

Kree glanced at me. "Shite."

The pony glided back to Tanith's pillow.

The ground under Kree buckled and collapsed. He tumbled into the river. The whirlpools engulfed him and pulled him away from the island. He fought against the current as he neared the falls.

"Patrick!" he cried.

I knew what I had to do. He couldn't go into the Abyss alive. I drew my pistol and fired twice. My aim was true, and the bullets ripped into my friend's breast, shredding his heart. He sank facedown in the water. The limp body swept over the falls.

“You can’t—” Yulin pivoted toward the cliffs. “That’s not... damn you!”

Satan stood motionless on the cliff rim. Demons scurried, cowering, away from him. Lenore smiled and nodded.

The vines uncurled from my legs and retreated into the rocks.

“Put the pistol here,” Yulin ordered, pointing at the corner of the bed. “You will not use it on yourself. You won’t cheat the Abyss.”

I holstered the revolver in my belt and limped toward the bed.

“Take it from me.”

Yulin looked upward. Satan shook his head.

I studied the sleeping child and the treasures beside her. Not the crown, not the pony. Diamond, angel, or chalice? Choose the one and only treasure. Or walk away. I could still do that.

I glanced toward the Boatman. He nodded his gray head in approval.

“The moment of truth, Paladin,” Yulin announced. “You will have forever to regret your decision.”

I looked again to the cliffs. Lenore had gone to her knees, her head bowed in prayer.

“Choose,” demanded Yulin. “The citizens of Daarmoor await my return.”

I brushed my fingers along the angel. There was only one true treasure. One. High demons had placed these gifts beside the sleeping child...

Of course. I understood. Sweeping all the treasures from the bed, I gathered the child into my arms. Tanith murmured, and her tiny arms encircled my neck.

“No!” Yulin screeched.

The earlier wounds on the mage’s chest and forehead burst wide. Then other, older wounds erupted. Dark blood spilled from him. He screamed as vines from under the water wrapped around his legs. The scars on his face peeled and bubbled.

He grabbed the bed’s headboard. Bones cracked and shattered as the vines pulled viciously on his legs. He held tighter, his fingers locked.

“Not by mortal hand shall you be harmed?” I said. “Like hell.” I smashed his hands with my boot heel.

Shrieking, Yulin released the headboard and plunged into the river. The black whirlpools churned and swirled about him. A vine arrowed around his throat. The current claimed him.

“Master!” the mage cried. “Save me!”

I turned to the cliffs. All were gone—the demons, Satan...and Lenore...were gone.

I hugged Tanith against me. Yulin, screaming, hurtled over the falls. Into the Abyss. To fall through the darkness forever.

I walked to the shore and stepped into the ferry.

“Shall we take the child to the angels?”

The Boatman nodded.

I motioned toward the falls.

“Tom Kree?”

The aged ferryman shook his head.

“Where then?”

He pointed toward Heaven’s shore.

That was good, but still, there would always a deep sorrow on my soul for what I had done.

Brushing a curl from Tanith’s face, I said, “At your convenience, sire.”

The Boatman was looking behind me. I turned. Satan waded into the river. The water, on fire, caressed his body.

“I knew you would succeed where no other had. Now the little one will be where she belongs.”

“Lenore,” I whispered.

“Lenore will not be harmed. This time you have done my bidding. Until we meet again, Paladin. I believe that will be sooner than we both envision.”

Then he was gone.

The Boatman steered away from the island, and as Tanith began to wake, we sailed upriver to where the Archangel Magdalene and the other angels waited.

INTERLUDE

Risa Malluca stood terrified as the ferry eased onto Hell's grim shore and the Boatman pointed for the three passengers, all recently deceased, to go. The two men obeyed, but she remained rooted where she was. The Boatman touched her shoulder, and she was ashore; the Boatman guided the ferry back along the River Styx toward the Bay of the Dead.

One man, dressed in a fine surplice of First Church, shook his head in disbelief.

"This cannot be," he cried. "I have spent my entire life doing the chosen work of God. I should not be here."

The other man, clad in rags, appeared wary but resigned that he was where he was supposed to be.

Risa fell to her knees, clutching her hands together, pleading.

Allow me to right my sins. Please. If given a second chance, I pledge my oath to be proper and true.

Thunder cracked overhead. When the rumble ceased, they were naked, and Risa saw those who had arrived in Hell before them. She knew their sins and crimes and was witness to their fates, their eternities. She saw the lustful, their flesh torn to ragged strips as they were savaged by horned demons; and the gluttons, their mouths staked open, drowning in pools of rotting garbage and urine. Shrieking murderers dangled by their necks from barbed ropes as spiders nested in their eviscerated bowels.

"I do not deserve this fate," the witch-hunter Cassian Longshanks shouted. "I am an instrument of His mighty sword."

"Our judge has arrived," Blue Jack Nines said.

Risa looked up as the archdemon approached. She was horrifying, her true name unpronounceable by human tongue. She was called Croell in the mortal world.

Risa did not know how she knew this, but she did.

Croell was one of twelve who had pledged themselves to Lucifer when the rebel angel renounced Heaven and established his own kingdom in Hell. Her zealous hatred of mankind was without limits. It was she who had corrupted and damned the Five Cities of the Jordan Plain to their apocalypse, the werewolf and the gargoyle were her offspring, and she and her twin brother Sulthoth had murdered the warrior angel Elias. It was said that she moved about the human world by stealing the bodies of mortals. Only her master, Satan, could curtail her and the other archdemons.

Croell went to Longshanks first. He collapsed, sobbing, to hands and knees.

"I should not be here. I am a soldier of God."

Croell chuckled.

"You, witchfinder, do belong here. It is always a pleasure to see evil condoned by the hypocrisy of the church."

"I rooted out those who had joined Satan's army. I proved they were sorcerers and punished them accordingly."

Croell crouched in front of him.

"There are witches and warlocks walking the mortal world, but you never captured or punished a one," she said. "Not even the first. I had possession of the girl. She had no idea why you were killing her."

"They were *all* witches!"

"You bound them with stones and tossed them in water; you tied them to the rack and tortured them for hours, for days, until they would say anything to stop the agony. Those who survived the torture you burned alive. All were *innocent*."

"Lies! I was a righteous servant of the angels."

"The angels wept for the innocent you slaughtered," she replied. "You relished your power, Longshanks; you became filled with lust when you killed; and you recited scripture to justify your actions."

I *truly* enjoyed that. It is a shame you succumbed to the coughing disease; otherwise, if you had ten years more, you might have murdered double the number of innocents you did.”

Longshanks shook his head violently.

“This is not true.”

Croell raised her taloned hands. Cassian Longshanks, with a huge crushing stone bound to him, levitated above a pool of black fire. Crows and ravens attacked him, ripping flesh and bone. Then, he was lowered feet-first into the fiery pit. He screamed as he vanished from view.

He rose from the pool, healed, and all began again.

The archdemon turned toward Blue Jack Nines. He bowed his head to her.

“I did as Lord Satan commanded me to,” he said, “and I was promised reward for it.”

“I am unaware of your covenant with the Master. As one of the Twelve, I have knowledge of all pacts made with mortals. All. I do not know of yours.”

Nines looked as if he’d been slapped with an iron glove.

“Tell me what your covenant was,” Croell urged.

He stared at her, confused, bewildered.

“I don’t know...I c-can’t remember.”

“Of course.”

“Did as commanded,” he repeated.

“Who, besides the Master, knows about this forgotten accomplishment of yours?”

Nines raised his hands, helpless and unknowing.

“We are done then.”

“I was promised reward!” he cried.

Croell smiled.

“You did raise one child well. Rebecca Nines is a thief who has never been to jail or even been detained; one of the most skillful pickpockets I have ever seen. You taught her well with blade also. With dagger, a fortnight ago, she killed two men who tried to rape her, and has no qualms about doing so again. You *did* assist her onto her life’s road.”

“Lord Satan promised me reward,” he begged.

“If he did,” Croell answered, “he lied.”

Risa Malluca knew treachery was the way of all worlds, and this was their lot.

The archdemon continued. "Blue Jack Nines, you are thief and murderer. Your fate was written long ago and shall be until the Master's chosen one releases the damned back into the mortal world. However, I have decided to give you a small reward for parenting Rebecca."

She raised her hands again. Blue Jack Nines appeared in the field of the thieves and the murderers. He hung by the neck from a barbed rope, his feet almost touching the ground. Clawed demons stroked his body gently, lovingly, and then they crushed his hands to pulp and tore out his ribs one by one.

Croell beckoned to Risa.

"Come to me, crone."

She crawled forward, trembling, to prostrate herself at the archdemon's feet.

"You were a petty, sad woman with a vicious tongue your entire existence," Croell stated. "Not a single mortal mourned your passing, not husband, child or neighbor. You made certain all those around you were as miserable as you were."

She wept.

Croell grasped her by the chin, raising her face and compelling the old woman to look into her eyes.

"Answer me true. Do you believe in mortal love?"

"Nay."

Croell smiled, pleased.

"What the Master bestows upon you is rare for a mortal," she said. "You may choose to join the low demons, become one in appearance and power. You will not remember your mortal life. You will be sent back to your world, where you will be immortal until slain by blade. If that happens, your soul will go into the Abyss. Do not allow that."

Risa trembled with relief. This couldn't be. Yet it was. She'd been given a reprieve. But why her? The men had clearly been stronger than her. Didn't matter. She would serve the Master, and well.

"You shall have one task. It is to seek mortals who are kind and loving, who help others without thought of recompense. You will lead them to the Master's kingdom, or you will destroy them.

“You will walk among them unseen unless you wish to be seen. You can take possession of their bodies; you can heal their infirmities and illnesses, if it assists in your task. If you pledge yourself to the Master, lick my feet.”

Risa brushed her tongue over Croell’s spiked, cloven feet. Croell sprinkled ash on her.

“You are now baptized Ris Mal, low demon.”

Sulhoth appeared with his three winged, black wolves.

“Brother,” Croell called with delight, rushing to him.

— *I have missed you these past seasons*, Croell said.

— *And I you, sister. When you finish here, the Master commands your presence.*

Croell frowned.

— *I do not like the scent coming from you. What has happened?*

— *Bowden the Elder from Cape Galatea and his companions have seized our sanctuary at Ananyas. It may fall. Novarro rides there as we speak.*

— *Novarro, she snarled. And the Master sends us to destroy him?*

— *K’yur was sent.*

— *That low succubus? Why? Why not the two of us, or Mammon, or one of the other most devoted? We should have the glory of defeating Novarro.*

— *The Master does not share his plans with us*, Sulhoth reminded her. *He only tells our part in them. He sent K’yur. He stroked a claw along his sister’s arm, drawing black blood. I am to go to mountains of Monbet. There is a warlord there I am to seduce.*

Croell moaned with pleasure.

— *Good hunting, brother*, she said. *I shall go to the Master and accept with gratitude what task he gives me.*

— *Perhaps the Master will partner us in a future undertaking. That would please me.*

— *As it would me*, the archdemon agreed. *If you need me, think on it, and I will be at your side before your thought finishes.*

Sulhoth nodded.

— *And I will be there for you, my sister.*

Croell looked down at Ris Mal.

“Why are you still here?” she growled. “Go to the outlands of Thuria and begin your task. Go!”

Sulhoth licked the black blood oozing from her arm. She closed her eyes in ecstasy.

— *Yes!*

Then she bit savagely into his breast.

9

As I spurred Leopard along the Northern Badlands trail, his hooves raised a gray-black specter of ash into the chilled air with each step. Long-dead embers, rimed with ancient frost, sheathed the rolling landscape in all directions. Scorched oak and sequoia stood frozen with meter-long icicles clinging to their barren branches. A wide glacial stream ran parallel to the trail. At one bend, submerged in the ice-dark waters, still clutching shield and sword, was the headless skeleton of a Mukilteo warrior.

Once, in a time before the first spoken word, this land at the far edge of the northern continent was said to have been green and lush and blessed. Then Satan claimed it as his.

It was told that the great Rashid shaman, Loradas, had dueled with the banished angel for this ground; that Quon, the poet-soldier of the Eastern Sun Han kingdom and the Titan Thanos had both attempted to reclaim this valley. All had perished.

The original name of this land was forgotten. For as long as could be remembered, this had been Ananyas, the Land of Lies.

And at the end of this trail, my destination was a sanctuary of the Damned.

A snow scorpion scurried onto the trail. I reined the stallion to stop and turned in the saddle toward a twisted, seared oak. On a thick bone-white branch, among the ice crystals, a solitary bright-green leaf blossomed. Twin stalks of grass spiraled up through the

ash at the tree's base. I smiled. New life. Satan's claim on this domain was in jeopardy. Someone had challenged his right of possession.

"Paladin."

I pivoted toward the feral voice, drawing the revolver from under my long coat as I spotted the creature squatting in the fork of a dwarf sequoia. She was four feet in height, I estimated, and the same in width. Violet-and-crimson hair, mangled and snarled, curled down her spine to a massive scabrous tail. Black eyes peered at me from ragged slits in her bearded jackal's face. Her hands and feet were talons. A spiked hauberk covered her heavy breasts and broad hips.

She pointed at my pistol, amused.

"I see that you still carry that useless weapon, Novarro. Do you not wonder why there is none other like it? Because it is a useless trifle. It is inaccurate and fouls the wind with its stench when fired. Cannon and musket have their place, I suppose, but a true gentleman—one of your reputation and accomplishments—should prefer the elegance of the sword. Or, at the very least, the bow."

"Let's see how useless it is," I replied, squaring the pistol on the bridge of her nose.

"Wait!" she cried, covering her face with her talon-hands. "I am the one who sent for you!"

I cocked the hammer, my hand steadfast.

In the railroad town of Zoya, a prophet had requested an audience. The woman, half-mad, said she had received a message for me from Satan's palace on the River Styx. She did not understand its meaning, but she would pray to the archangels for my safety.

The simple message was written in both ancient hieroglyphics and the Thurian alphabet, and that had brought me to this valley.

The prize—Lenore. Come to the sanctuary
at Ananyas at once

The scorpion edged closer.

"Why have you summoned me here, K'yur?"

K'yur lowered her hands. She grinned, and her tail flicked from side-to-side.

"You know who I am?"

"You're the succubus demon K'yur. You are a favored concubine in Satan's stable. I have seen Omusa's unfinished portrait of the Nine Rings of Hell. You are pictured devouring a fallen pilgrim."

K'yur hissed.

"I hate that miserable scrawl. I look bloated, and my hair is the wrong color. Most important, I should be nearer the Master's side, not down among the dragon-hounds and gargoyles."

"If you say so."

"And the Lady Lenore is shown in the Master's throne room. That should not be! The bitch does not deserve that honor!"

I squeezed the trigger.

The round notched the demon's ear, and she shrieked, grasping the bloody nub and retreating behind the sequoia. The scorpion bolted forward, and Leopard stomped it into the ground.

A triad of ice cobras rose from beneath the ash. K'yur peeked at me from behind the tree. As I gripped the reins, Leopard wiped the remains of the scorpion from his striped hoof on the ground.

"My sincerest apologies, Paladin," K'yur whispered. "I will not defame the Lady Lenore again. To you, my word may be worthless, but nonetheless, I give it to you in this matter."

I stared at the demon. Black blood bubbled from her maimed ear and webbed down her jaw into her thick beard.

She fears me, I thought, stunned. It also appeared I could injure her. This should not be. Was it an illusion? Hell's sleight-of-hand? Was it possible that in the Land of Lies she was unprotected? If so, why would Satan allow her to come here?

K'yur edged back into the open.

"I'll ask only once more, demon," I said. "Why have you sent for me?"

"The Master sent me here to kneel before you."

"Why?"

"The Master requests a service from you."

I laughed. The sound echoed, jarring and harsh, off the surrounding hills. The cobras recoiled into the ash.

K'yur stared at me, uncomprehending.

"Satan wants a favor from me?" I said. "Go back to Hell, demon. We've both wasted our time."

K'yur scampered farther onto the branch.

“Hear me out, Paladin. You have nothing to lose by listening to the request.”

“And nothing to gain.”

“That is not true.” K’yur curled her tail around the branch and lowered herself to hang upside down. “If you accomplish the service requested, the Master will pay.”

“There is only one thing I want from Satan, and that, as we both know, I’ll have to take from him.”

“A covenant cannot be undone once sealed except by agreement of both parties. And that, as we all know, will never happen. So, what can you hope to accomplish? The quest you have undertaken is pointless.”

“I believe different.”

I holstered my pistol and reined the stallion around. K’yur swung back onto the branch and rose to her talon-feet.

“The Master will pay for the service,” she repeated.

I nudged Leopard with my knees.

“The Master will reunite you and the Lady Lenore, in all her mortal glory, without hindrance of any kind or untold stipulation, for one hour.”

I swung Leopard back to face the demon.

“What?”

“Yes. For one mortal hour, Paladin. How long has it been since her death? Three...four years?”

A deep chill pierced my heavy coat and collected around my shoulders.

“Why should I trust Satan to keep his pledge?”

K’yur nodded, pleased to have gotten my attention.

“The Master knew that would be your response. That is why he sent me. In this land, for this time, if I die, by your hand or by any other, my soul will not be returned to the Master’s kingdom. If I die here, my soul will drop into the Abyss. That alone should eliminate any misgivings or doubts you have.”

“It doesn’t. What is your fate to me?”

K’yur sighed. “Very well,” she said. “I will bond myself to your service for your lifetime, Paladin. I will perform all requests without question. Even those requests that benefit ...Heaven.”

“Not interested.”

The demon danced angrily on the branch.

“You spurn me? I am K’yur of the Eight Thousand Pleasures. Mortals collapse in fleshly rapture at my touch. Kings and queens have given their entire realms for one night with me. Knights and nobles have sacrificed their honor to lick the sweat from my ass. And you...you spurn me?”

“Without second thought.”

“Damn you,” she growled. “Damn you for what you force me to do.”

I slipped my hand back under my coat and around the butt of my pistol.

K’yur, trembling, turned toward the east and lowered her head.

“You may enter at your convenience.”

A circular rainbow bloomed in the gray sky. K’yur winced, shielding her eyes with her hands from the light. Leopard’s ears perked, and he wheeled toward the eastern horizon.

The rainbow’s shadow sliced a path along the flatlands toward us. The snow along the shadow’s multi-hued course dissolved, and green clover sprouted from the scorched, frozen ground. In the center of the rainbow, a vision crystallized.

K’yur spat.

“Paladin, this is—”

“—the Archangel Magdalene,” I finished.

“Unfortunately,” she said.

The archangel glided from the circular rainbow down onto the clover path. As she approached us, her luminous robe flowed and her glorious wings framed her.

K’yur shuddered.

The archangel gazed at me, and, an embracing warmth touched my flesh and caressed my bones.

“I regret, Patrick Novarro, most deeply, that you have been called here,” she said, sorrow etching her delicate features.

“How may I be of assistance?”

K’yur bounced on the branch.

“I want to tell.”

“This is the Land of Lies,” the archangel replied. “In this matter, however, you must tell the truth.”

K’yur sighed.

“I will.”

“Proceed, then.”

I looked from K’yur to the archangel, then back at the demon.

“The sanctuary here has been seized,” K’yur said. “Three fanatics gained entry. They killed the keeper and a visitor. They captured another visitor and are planning to execute this man. We want you to rescue him. Ready to go?”

“You’re a wealth of details,” I said. “Mortals may only enter a sanctuary of the Damned by invitation or escort. How did these three get inside?”

K’yur waved her hands.

“That’s unimportant. The man must be saved.”

“It was you, wasn’t it? They tricked you, and you took them inside. That’s why Satan sent you to deal with me. You have to redeem yourself or go into the Abyss. Satan must be very pissed at you.”

K’yur crossed her arms over her chest.

“I said it is unimportant how the three got inside the sanctuary. It remains that they did.”

I looked at the archangel.

“Is it the wish of Heaven also that this man be saved?”

“Yes.”

I turned in my saddle and stared down the trail. I was confused. Demons were accepted into the sanctuary at Ananyas. Mortals who were damned, who were beyond redemption, were allowed entry. There, they could relax and feast and plan their next sacrilege without fear of harm from Heaven or Heaven’s mortal soldiers. Upon occasion, a demon would use a sanctuary to help entice a mortal to swear allegiance to Hell. It was an unholy place where demons and damned were safe except from their own kind.

I applauded the three who had tricked their way inside and seized it. I was tempted to ride to the sanctuary to ask if I could assist them. Yet, I was being asked, by emissaries of Heaven *and* Hell, to rescue one of the Damned.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Unimportant,” replied K’yur. “But he must be saved.”

I turned to the archangel.

“The Exiled Son,” she said.

“Cain?”

“Yes. It is written, and so it is, that a mark was put upon Cain so that all who encountered him would know him and shun him. He will wander the face of the earth until the end of time without home and hearth to give him comfort.

“It is also written that no harm shall befall him. He is vulnerable whether on blessed ground or cursed. But whosoever slays him shall reap the terrible vengeance of Heaven and their descendants shall be cursed for seven-hundred generations.”

“He’s one of the master’s favorites,” added K’yur.

The archangel continued. “The three warriors, in their honest zeal to do Heaven’s work, have forgotten this proclamation. They must be reminded. They must be stopped from proceeding on the course they have taken. This is the task we ask of you, Patrick Navarro.”

I shifted in the saddle.

“Who are these three?”

“I’ll tell,” K’yur said, bouncing on the branch. “The leader is one Bowden the Elder from Cape Galatea. He drove the Gorgon witches from the mountain township of Aeryn and slew the Enyo bull of Delos.”

“I know of him,” I said. “He is praised for his unswerving devotion to Heaven and his protection of the weak and innocent.”

K’yur frowned. “He’s not the honorable man I thought he was,” she complained. “He’s deceitful and conniving. The two mortals accompanying him are Pilar Molina from Shankur and a knight known only as the Memphi.”

I looked at the archangel. She knew who the others were but remained silent. Perhaps K’yur knew also, but for the moment, the succubus demon was mute.

Pilar was the oldest daughter of John Gabriel Molina, my friend and the great gunsmith of Shankur. The last time I saw her, she was growing from girl to woman and was to begin her studies at the Shankur abbey. Now, it seemed, she had abandoned her family and studies to follow Bowden the Elder on his quest to the edge of the world.

“Is there anything else I should know?” I asked.

“No,” answered K’yur.

"Yes," the archangel said.

"Can't keep anything a secret with you around," K'yur muttered. "You don't have many friends, do you?" She huffed. "It's a minor complication, Paladin. Nothing to worry about. Because of the Lady Lenore's covenant, you are shielded by the Master's oath. You may not be harmed by the Master or by any who serve him."

"This I know," I replied.

"The three who have seized Ananyas do not serve Hell. They are not possessed. They can kill you."

Ride away, I thought. That was the intelligent thing to do.

Before the prophet in Zoya contacted me, before I came here, I had been searching the fertile plains of the Cimera for an elderly monk who rumor said knew where the tomb of the murdered warrior angel Elias was hidden. With his flaming sword, once I found one of the eleven passageways into Hell, I could slay any demon I encountered when I went to rescue Lenore. I could, and should, return to that hunt.

"Archangel."

"Yes, Patrick Novarro."

"If I'm killed, will you continue to negotiate on Lenore's behalf?"

"We shall never forsake her."

I twisted toward the demon.

"I want longer than an hour with Lenore."

"The reward is one hour. No more, no less."

I sighed. "All conditions and rewards mentioned are acceptable."

K'yur chuckled.

"Done. Let's go, then."

"Heaven rides with you, Patrick Novarro," the archangel said, bowing her head in prayer.

"I hope so," I whispered.

10

S*he reined the stallion around as the archangel glided back toward* the circular rainbow. K'yur jumped down from the sequoia and bounded happily across the ice drifts to the trail. The demon stopped beside me, her tail swishing, and raised her talon-hand for me to lift her up.

"Don't need you with me," I said.

"The sanctuary has been seized, but it hasn't fallen yet. You cannot enter without escort."

"You're lying."

"No need this time." She wiggled her talon-fingers at me.

I shook my head.

"Shape-shift."

K'yur rocked back on her tail, pleased.

"What outward appearance would you prefer, Paladin? Would a Horus falcon or a Fenrir wolf best suit your needs? Perhaps, the great Direbeast. No, no. I have the perfect exterior."

Dark moths appeared, surrounding her; her flesh rippled and pulsed, her bones cracked. Her scabrous body imploded, her arms and legs and tail receding into her torso. A swirling, fire-tattooed cocoon engulfed her.

Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the burning vapor vanished. K'yur's flesh had turned human. Her height had increased,

and her width had decreased. She stood nude before me and, as glacial spears spiked my heart, raised her arms to me.

K'yur was the mirror image of Lenore.

"Weasel," I said.

"What?"

"Change into a weasel," I ordered. "Or stay behind."

She tilted her head.

"Perhaps I could retain this mortal form until we reach the sanctuary gate. It wouldn't be a hardship on me."

I spurred Leopard and trotted down the trail. A minute later, a brown weasel bounded across the ice bank beside me.

"Okay, okay," K'yur called. "I've done what you requested."

I reined the stallion up.

"Don't shape-shift into Lenore ever again. Understand?"

"Yes," K'yur agreed. "Mortals shouldn't be allowed to talk to archangels. The fun is sucked right out of them."

I leaned over and stretched out my hand. She scampered up my arm to my shoulder, licked my cheek, then dropped into my lap. She giggled as she nuzzled my crotch. I grabbed her by the scruff of her tiny neck and placed her on the other side of the saddle horn.

"Play dead," I ordered.

"Haven't done this game in a long time."

"Silence."

"Your lap was much more comfortable."

"Shut up."

K'yur collapsed onto Leopard's neck. Her tongue protruded from the corner of her mouth.

The stallion snorted.

The winds whipped about us. Snow-ash furies danced across the landscape. As we traveled onward, the trees vanished, replaced by steaming geysers erupting from jagged crevices. The sky darkened to twilight gray.

Leopard trembled, or was it me who was quivering?

K'yur opened one eye and looked at me but remained silent. I stroked Lenore's cameo.

Rounding a bend, we approached a bridge across the stream. Lightning flashed like the fingers of a broken hand across the sky. I heard the thunder call my name.

Two albino dragon-hounds rose from their nests beside the bridge to meet us. K'yur whispered to them, and the beasts withdrew. The stallion trotted onto the bridge. Both the deck of the bridge and the road beyond were constructed of a yellowish-white material I didn't recognize. It wasn't stone or wood. It wasn't brick or petrified sod. It was...

My stomach folded in on itself. K'yur smirked.

The bridge and the road were paved with human bone.

I inhaled. Before me, walls and turrets rising thirty feet high, was my destination—the Sanctuary of the Damned at Ananyas. The walls were human skulls, and from the spiral turrets hung a dozen mummified corpses. Among the remains decorating the outside of the sanctuary were those of the great warriors Loradas, Quon, and Thanos. I wondered if I would earn a place beside them, or if I would be just more raw material for the road.

Beyond the sanctuary, rising above the rear battlement into the high clouds, was the Wall of Fog. We had come to the very edge of the known world.

The Wall encircled the earth from Arctic Crown to Boot and back to Crown. Seamen said if one sailed due west from Blackharbor into the Western Sea, the Wall appeared 2300 leagues from our coast. Sailing from Shoi-ming into the Eastern Ocean, the Wall rose 1200 leagues from the Sun Kingdoms shoreline. No one knew what lay on its other side. No passage through had ever been found, and no adventurer sailing into it had ever returned.

Some said it was the home of forgotten gods or the palace of great warriors who died in battle; others, in recent years, had pronounced there was a fourth station in the afterlife along with Heaven, Hell, and the Abyss. 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!”

He spurred the warhorse, and the animal bolted into full gallop.

As I whipped Leopard around, I felt his hooves slipping on the bone road. K’yur shrieked as she grabbed for the saddle horn with her weasel-paws, missed, and tumbled to the ground. She was on her own.

I raced back toward the bridge. Behind me, the pounding hooves of the Memphi’s mammoth warhorse echoed like cannon fire. I glanced over my shoulder and saw K’yur flatten herself against the ground and cover her weasel head. The Memphi rode over her without pause.

At the bridge, the dragon-hounds jumped up from their nests and blocked the road. One roared, and the other spat a plume of flame. I yanked hard on the reins, and Leopard skidded to a stop, nearly going down. I leaped from the saddle, throwing off my coat and drawing my revolver, then stepped to the middle of the road.

Cocking the hammer, inhaling and holding my breath, I aimed and fired. The round whizzed past the warhorse’s ear. Nothing; the animal had been trained for battle.

The Memphi cocked the arm with the spear as he thundered closer. I fired again. The round thudded off his breastplate.

He sailed the spear at me.

“Forgive me,” I whispered.

The spear pierced the road beside my boot. I gripped my pistol double-fisted, aimed, and fired.

The round smashed into the Memphi’s patched eye. He fell sideways, his left foot tangled in the stirrup. The warhorse galloped past me and onto the bridge, dragging its rider behind it.

The dragon-hounds retreated.

“You left me!” snapped K’yur, scurrying to my side.

“Yes,” I said, grabbing up my coat.

She frowned. “Fine. As long as you are aware you did.”

“I am. And I have no problem with it.”

I walked over to Leopard and ran my hand down his legs. He was unhurt. Good. I slipped my coat on and mounted.

As I studied the sanctuary once again, I reloaded the pistol. K’yur hopped onto my boot and scampered back to the saddle horn.

“Are you feeling sorry for the Memphi?”

“He didn’t deserve this fate.”

“The Memphi was a murderer. Four score have fallen under his blade. He looted the burial caverns at Laguna Ness. His sentence in Hell was determined long ago by his own hand.”

“If his fate was already sealed, why was he here?”

K’yur giggled.

“He was seeking redemption,” she said. “His wife and child are quarantined at the leper colony in Xadag near Shankur. He was hoping this would earn them some comfort in their miserable existence. The Memphi was a fool.”

I spurred the stallion forward. K’yur draped herself across the horse’s neck again. We trotted toward the open gates of the sanctuary. Ghosts rose from the fields on both sides of the bone road to watch us; some were praying, others chanted. No one, mortal or otherwise, appeared at the gate or on the walls.

Carved into the gates was a symbol that beseeched Satan for merciless strength. The winds ceased as we moved into the shadow of the sanctuary wall.

“Is Cain still alive?” I asked.

K’yur sniffed the air.

“Yes.”

A thousand eyeless skulls studied us as we rode through the arched gateway into the courtyard. The square was deserted except for the ashy remains of two demons that lay scattered near a fountain in the center. They must have been the keeper and the visitor Bowden the Elder and his companions killed when they seized the sanctuary.

Past the fountain, his arms rope-tethered to a hitching post, was a mortal man. He looked at me. A soul-chilling shudder cut my body.

Cain—the Exiled Son.

As I dismounted, I could feel more eyes watching me. Someone was up on the high catwalk of the rear battlement. Another was inside the lodge directly behind Cain. I removed my coat and hung it across my saddle. I slipped the dagger from my boot sheath then stepped away from the stallion.

“Show yourselves,” I called. “You know me, Pilar. Your father and I are old friends. I’m Novarro of Thuria. The Archangel Magdalene has asked me to speak to you.”

A tall bearded man wearing an amber cloak stepped from the shadows of the rear turret and moved along the catwalk. He tugged his cloak back and revealed two wheel-lock pistols holstered on his hips.

“You say you’re the Paladin, and the Archangel Magdalene has sent you to us.”

“Yes.”

“Satan can quote holy verses if it suits his needs,” Bowden said.

“He’s Novarro,” a young woman announced, stepping from the lodge doorway. “I know him, Bowden.”

I pivoted toward the lodge. As Pilar walked toward Cain and the hitching post, a knife in her fist, I could see the Molina gait in her stride.

This was the girl I had rescued, with others, from the griffin-vampire. The one who gave me the scar on my forehead with a well-thrown stone. She had grown into womanhood and joined the order of the abbey at Shankur. The abbey was well known for offering shelter to all who knocked on its door. Not a single individual, regardless of their sins, was ever turned away.

“What he once was, Pilar,” Bowden said, “he is no longer. He has been corrupted. He is in league with Satan.”

“No.” She stopped behind Cain. “He would not be.”

Bowden stared down at me.

“Ask him if he killed the Memphi?”

“I confess,” I said.

From the corner of my eye, I spotted K’yur, who had shifted into a rock-colored python, slithering up the stone steps to the catwalk. “The Memphi attacked and left me only two choices—to kill or to die. I wish he had given me a third option.”

“You’ll take his place, of course,” Pilar said. “With you at our side, Satan will never reclaim this land.”

I pointed at Cain.

“He must be released.”

“No,” roared Bowden. “He is the first murderer. As it is written, eye for eye and blood for blood. He shall forfeit his life for the one he took. Do you know how many others have followed in his wake? He must be punished. He will be a warning to those who break Heaven’s laws. The angels will sing our praises for what we do here.”

“If that is so, then why have you waited?”

Bowden did not answer.

I glanced at Pilar. She stared at the knife in her hand as though wondering why she held it.

“Whether this land remains in Satan’s dominion or not depends on what you do now,” I said. “If you execute Cain, you’ll undo all that you’ve accomplished and curse yourself and your descendants.”

“He must reap the harvest he has sown,” cried Bowden.

“He has already been sentenced,” I reminded him. “He is despised and shunned, as he should be. He lost his family in the Time of the Flood. Until time ends, he will wander alone and find no peace or comfort anywhere. It isn’t your place or mine to change that judgment.”

“What about the ones who do as he has done?”

“They shall be despised and shunned also, and they will continue to be judged and sentenced by their fellow man.”

Bowden howled in rage and frustration. Pilar stepped behind Cain.

K’yur slipped onto the catwalk.

“You have seized this sanctuary and destroyed its keeper,” I continued. “It should have collapsed into dust. Why hasn’t it?”

“Lord God, give us strength to do what must be done,” prayed Bowden. “Pilar, slay him!”

I whipped about, and saw Pilar, her eyes ablaze with the fervor of the righteous, raise the knife in both fists above her head. As I grabbed my revolver, I heard a pistol fire. The bullet struck my side, and I fell, twisting in pain, to the ground.

Up on the catwalk, Bowden aimed his second pistol, and K'yur launched toward him, shifting from python to jaguar in mid-leap. She slammed into him, and he staggered backwards, crashing into the wall and flipping over the rim into the Fog.

His scream echoed long in my ears as I raised my revolver and rolled toward the hitching post. Pilar was faster. Much faster. She thrust, and the knife sliced the bonds holding Cain's left arm.

I lowered the revolver. Pilar, tears glistening on her cheeks, cut the remaining bonds. Then she tossed the knife aside and dropped to her knees in prayer.

Cain rubbed his arms and stood. Lightning flashed, near blinding, across the horizon. A moment later, the sky was cloudless blue, and the sanctuary had turned to dust. Green poked through the ash and ice. Trees appeared, full grown, along the stream.

Cain came toward me. I rose, clutching the wound in my side. He looked at me with haunted and hollow eyes. I saw the Mark he bore, burned into his brow—a cross with its lower limb curved into the sickle of Death's Reaper.

It was as though I were looking in a fine mirror. Except for his eyes, he could have passed for me.

Cain turned to Pilar and she to him, and I watched his features become hers and understood.

The Mark is within us all, ready to appear if pride and jealousy are allowed to consume us.

Neither Cain nor I said a word, nor made a gesture. We only stood gazing at one another for a long moment. Then, he turned and headed down the road. As far as I know, shunned and despised, the Exiled Son still wanders the earth alone.

K'yur, shifting back into her original form, waddled over to me. She poked at my wound.

"Just a crease. You'll survive."

"You saved my life, demon."

"No," she answered swiftly. "The first shot was for you. The second was for Cain. I let him fire the first round."

"Uh-huh." I squinted at the succubus demon. "Those three did not slay the keeper and visitor. They couldn't. *You* slew them. Why?"

K'yur pointed at a magnificent oak down near the stream.

"All rewards will be fulfilled. When the sun reaches its apex, the Lady Lenore, in all her mortal glory, without hindrance or stipulation of any kind, will meet you there. You have one hour. Not a breath longer."

"And the other reward?"

"What other reward?"

"Your bond of services to me for my lifetime. All requests performed without question."

"Oh, yes," she said, giggling. "That, too, Paladin. I will administer pleasures to you few mortals have ever known."

I pointed to Pilar.

"First, you will escort her back to the abbey. You will protect her from all harm during the trip. You will not attempt to seduce or beguile her in any way, and you will protect her if others try."

K'yur pouted. "That will be a boring journey. But it will be done as you've instructed. No need to tell me where to find you after—I'll know."

"Don't find me," I said, limping toward Leopard.

"Why?"

"Go from the abbey to Xadag."

"The leper colony?"

"Yes." I mounted the stallion. "For my lifetime, you will serve the inhabitants there. You will treat them with kindness and a gentle hand. You will ease their pain and suffering. You won't harm them or jeopardize their souls in any manner. You will pay special tender attention to the Memphi's wife and child."

"I won't do it!" K'yur stomped her talon-feet. "You can't make me do this despicable thing!"

I reined Leopard toward the stream.

"I won't! I won't! I won't!"

I glanced at Pilar, still deep in prayer, then rode toward the oak.

"*I won't!*" K'yur shrieked.

Later, in the inns and taverns along the frontier, I heard the story of a woman known only as Kay who had arrived unannounced at Xadag. It wasn't known where she came from or how she had received her training in the medical arts, but she was blessed for her kind and gentle work among the inhabitants at the colony.

I dismounted beside the oak near the stream and turned Leopard free to graze. I bandaged the wound on my side and waited for Lenore to arrive. I drank the cool water from the stream, and I waited for Lenore to arrive. I scanned the blossoming landscape, and I waited for Lenore to arrive.

At the sun's zenith, she came as promised, without hindrance or stipulation.

The hour was glorious.

11

It's coming, Paladin," Fabiyan said.

The lass spoke the words in a rush to warn me, but I already knew. It was too quiet, no sound except for Leopard stomping his hooves and tugging anxiously at his tether.

That, and a sour dead-meat odor suddenly tingeing the air.

Yes, I knew. I sat up and opened my eyes, rubbing the sleep from them. Time to earn my champion's pay.

It was shortly after dawn, but sunlight barely penetrated the clouds and darkness. Rain seemed certain before the day was done.

But the Beast was oblivious of the weather. It was only eager to feed, eager for its pint of blood.

Fabiyan handed me a mug of cool water. I rinsed my mouth then spat the liquid into the dirt.

Lyoness is a town on the farthestmost northern coast of Thuria, situated between the Rivenran border and the principality of Quantero. Once, it had been a rich, flourishing fishing community. The seamen of Lyoness were renowned from kingdom to frontier. At one time, King Harold would only allow Lyoness lobster and crab to be served at his court celebrations. At one time, the sea captains of the great port cities of Quantero, Thuria's Blackharbor, and Corboda's Francisco de los Angeles would only set sail if they had a Lyoness navigator aboard. Once, it was said, a Lyoness

boat named the *Maidenhead*, with the fearless Burian as pilot, had sailed the length of the Wall of Fog around the world.

But no more. The good fortunes of Lyoness had ceased.

The town was now home to ghosts.

Thirteen autumns had passed since the Beast arrived in Lyoness; most of the townspeople had fled to Quantero down the coast. Since then, fifteen townsmen and six hired champions had gone to battle the Beast.

The Beast remained.

I had come here round about. I'd been riding southeast toward the kingdoms there. While at the tavern in La Traversée on the frontier side of the Io River, the owners, my friends John and Lydie Hostel, told me the rumors of a rectory in Quantero where Galen monks had meticulously translated ancient Thurian scrolls. One scroll was said to contain the exact location of a gateway to Hell.

Immediately, I changed my direction and headed for the northern coastal principality of Quantero.

It took me five weeks to reach the destination, only to discover, on my first day in the city, that the rumor, like most repeated tales, was myth. There were no translated scrolls; there was no rectory of Galen monks. There was no map to a gateway to Hell. Knowledgeable folks did tell me they'd heard stories the Othell cleric in the Sun kingdom of Ipau on the eastern sea had what I sought.

I knew from the beginning the odds of the rumor's being even half true were against me. Still, I'd had to try. Lenore deserved no less.

I offered my services to a lady of the landed gentry. The woman, a widow for two years, was skeptical of my motives and intentions. I didn't blame her. Sweet-talking frauds and well-heeled cheats tend to bloom around a woman of means with no husband or family.

She lowered her guard in my case. Accepted my offer. I do believe, however, that had more to do with Leopard's haggard appearance than my winning smile and quotes from the philosophers. In my youth, I would have bristled at this realization, and my pride would not have let me continue. I am no longer young and filled with righteous purpose. And pride does not fill the empty bellies of man or his animal companion.

Job offered and accepted. Payment—a full bag of oats and two carrots for Leopard and one plate of potato stew for myself.

I was mucking out my fourth stall when they entered the stable—eight men of middle age and a dozen younger men and boys. The three stable hands fled, undoubtedly to tell their mistress a mob had arrived seeking the drifter she had hired.

I continued raking out the stall. I hoped the potato stew would be hot. Hot or cold, I intended to savor it.

A muscular thick-bearded man stepped away from the others. His one arm, the left, was missing from the bicep down. The tattoos on his bared legs, between his sandal boots and the hem of his kilt, told me he was a seaman and warrior. The left leg documented he'd sailed around Cape Horn, had walked the Arctic Boot and Shoi-ming, and had seen the Wall of Fog. The right said he had battled, and been victor, against the Great Desert's Rashid horsemen, Khartoum pirates, and the Sun Kingdoms' Ushido samurai. He was a man who did not know the word *fear*.

"You cannot be the one called the Paladin," he said.

I did not reply. I worked.

"You're covered in shat and mud. The Paladin would not be so."

A disappointed murmur swarmed among the others. I raked the pile to the center then scattered fresh straw across the stall. All, except the man who had spoken, turned away. That man studied me still.

"The Paladin is the hero of Shankur and Herron," he continued. "He is a man I would be honored to call friend."

"I have work to finish, and you are disrupting it," I said, moving to the next stall.

"Look here," a small voice demanded.

The man and I turned. So did all the others. A grime-cloaked lad of maybe ten years stood beside my long coat. He had pushed it aside to reveal my pistol.

The man pivoted back toward me.

"A revolver pistol," he said. "You *are* the Paladin."

As I eyed the lad more closely, I realized I'd made an error. The filthy urchin was not lad. She was lass.

She would not meet my gaze. Instead, she covered the pistol with my coat as it had been.

"I am Vas," the man stated. "I am descendant of the great Burian." He extended his right hand.

"Patrick Novarro," I said, shaking the hand with my dung-covered one. "Please go. I have work to finish here."

Vas remained, ignoring the dung.

"We wish to retain your services. We need a man of your experience."

"I am not ronin or mercenary. You need to take your troubles to the king's magistrate."

"You have not yet heard our proposal."

"Others have come to me as you have. Others have insulted me."

Vas frowned.

"Some can make words sound like poetry," he said. "I am not one. We need help. Two king's magistrates have told us they cannot aid us. Fifteen of our own people and six hired warriors have already been defeated." He gestured at his stub. "I survived my attempt. Barely."

"What makes you think I can help you?"

"You are protected by Satan's own oath."

I looked away.

"You are perhaps the only one who *can* help us."

"Why do you say that?"

"Our troubles, as you called them, are because of a demon. Please, sire. Please, just listen to us."

No, I wanted to say. *I have heard enough tales of misery and sorrow to last me well into eternity. No more.*

Vas dropped to one knee. The others, even the grimy lass, followed his lead. I stared at them. A heaviness settled around my shoulders. I could hear Lenore whispering to me.

Give them a few minutes. Hear their story. Perhaps you can help. If not, then walk away without apology.

I sighed. *Very well, my love. You would be disappointed in me if I did not grant them an audience. That I will not allow.*

"Tomorrow," I said. "I will meet with you tomorrow. Now, go."

"Thank you, sire," replied Vas.

They left. I returned to the mucking. The lady of the property appeared moments later with the trio of stable hands. She gave me a bag of oats and two small carrots for Leopard then ordered me to leave.

The stallion devoured the oats. I stole the carrots from him. I still went to sleep hungry that night.



“The beast came thirteen years ago,” Vas said the next day.

The entire surviving population must have been in the clearing to meet with me. The elders and the children, the strong and the weak, the once well-to-do’s and the never-had’s. All, it appeared.

“We believe the Beast is a punishment,” Vas continued. “We people of Lyoness became too prideful and arrogant. We did not give proper thanks for our blessings and good fortune. We acted as if we were entitled to what we had, and those with less were lazy and undeserving.”

I chewed on a blade of straw, considering his words.

“How do you know you brought this on yourselves? Perhaps a sorcerer, jealous of your town’s success, brought forth this demon.”

“Would that it were so, Paladin, but alas, ‘tis a demon of our own making.”

“Tell me why you believe this.”

“First, he has grown smaller since we have repented. He has not departed, but he is lesser in stature than when he first came.”

I nodded. I knew they truly believed this to be so. Perhaps it was.

Vas massaged the end of his stub.

“But most tellingly are the rules of challenge. Any person or persons may challenge him. They have choice of weapons. They are given first strike. He will only strike second. A third has never been needed.”

“Tell me more. Leave out no detail.”

He did. Other men and women joined in.

Thirteen years before, the Beast had appeared from the mountains above Lyoness. He lived in a deep cavern but claimed the town as part of his domain. Said that the people within his domain would

have to pay tribute or perish. The tribute would be gold and silver coins, wines and silks. He had a mammoth appetite, so three-quarters of the Lyonesse ocean harvest would go to him. The payment would also include a new bride each winter.

Torr was the first to challenge the Beast. He was killed, and his wife, the beautiful and vain Kia, became the first Bride of the Beast.

They told me about each battle. The beast had survived sword, crossbow, and axe. He had endured musket and blunderbuss. Vas recounted his fight, and how the beast had taken his arm and the life of his oldest friend. I was told about the three village cousins who fought the beast together and perished together.

They related how they had hired Haj the Rashid ronin, and Ephemias, who claimed Amazonhenge heritage. The beast had won each encounter.

It was always the same. The challenger attacked, the beast countered. Twenty-one challenges; twenty-one defeats. Thirteen women and maidens taken as Bride to perish within a fortnight.

I examined their faces. They swore an oath to me. Some vowed to the Trinity, others pledged to the old gods. Vas gave his personal word of honor and offered to speak my praise in the after-life's Hall of Warriors if he were to arrive before me. If they regained their village, they said, they would work hard and live decent and pious lives. For the most part—no people are all good or all bad—but they would try to do right.

It was enough. Lenore would've appreciated their vow and sincerity.

"I'll face your Beast," I said.

Several voices shouted at once that they would accompany me to Lyonesse.

"We will all fight at your side," Vas stated.

"I believe you," I replied. "One, however, will be enough, I think."

Vas straightened his broad shoulders.

"Choose, Paladin. None, not a single man, youth or elder, will decline to assist you."

He would clearly be the best choice of warrior. And I found I liked the seaman—he could become friend.

But I scanned the crowd. Finally, I saw the one I wished to accompany me.

Vas looked in the direction I was looking.

“Are you sure ’tis the rat-catcher you want?”

“Yes.”

I would’ve sworn the filthy lass who had revealed my revolver was going to faint or flee. Her name was Fabiyan, I would find out later that morning. She was an orphan, and she survived by catching rats for which the Quantero sheriff paid a quarter-penny apiece bounty.

“As you wish,” Vas said. “Now, before we shake hands on the deal, we must discuss your reward.”

“I am expensive,” I responded.

“We will not barter. We have all agreed on this. Name your price. If we cannot pay all you ask at this time, we will pay a yearly tariff till ’tis paid in full.”

I knew what I desired. I could already picture the prize in my mind’s eye.

“Who is the best cook in your village?”

A bewildered expression crossed Vas’s features. For a long moment, he remained motionless and speechless. Then he turned to the others. They conferred and deliberated. Then they debated and discussed some more.

Finally, they reached a consensus.

The people separated until a woman of perhaps forty years stood alone in their circle.

“Not I,” she argued. “You are wrong. I am but an unremarkable cook.”

The others disagreed.

The modest woman looked at me. She was at a loss for words. It was obvious she never knew the others felt this way.

I smiled at her. My empty stomach gurgled.

“Can the lass and I have supper with you, milady?”

It was a wondrous meal.

12

It's coming, Paladin," Fabiyan said.

I rose to my feet. Despite the moist chill in the morning air, I removed my long coat and handed the coat and my revolver to the lass.

"Strap these to Leopard," I said. "Then stay with the animal. Talk quietly to him. Keep him calm."

"What if...?" Fabiyan did not finish. She let the two words hang heavy in the air.

I grinned. "If the beast wins, mount Leopard and ride. Ride fast."

"Yes, milord, if your horse lets me."

As she went to the stallion, I turned toward the winding road from the mountains. The Beast came in sight—it was half-human and half-creature. Some would say it had sprung forth full-grown from a madman's nightmare.

It moved in a crouch, its powerful hands smacking the ground and propelling it forward. The Beast had no shield; it wore no armor. The muscles in its arms and legs were large and chiseled. Its flesh was covered with dusk-colored scales and wiry bristles. Even from a distance, I could see that its eyes were black-yellow and a short curved tusk protruded from its forehead. Gray drool hung, web-like, across its wide bearded chin.

I was in trouble.

Battlescars crisscrossed the beast's head, neck and torso. They gleamed in the morning dew as if they were golden badges of honor.

I understood without doubt or uncertainty that this Beast was not Hell's spawn. It did not pledge allegiance to Satan. Man had created it, and it wanted revenge for its birth.

I also knew it could beat me. This Beast could accomplish what Satan had been unable to do thus far. Still, I could not run. I would help the people of Lyonesse. Lenore would not be ashamed of me this day.

So, I waited, unarmed.

The Beast came nearer. It looked at me then glanced at, dismissing instantly, Fabiyan. It snuffled the air. It surveyed the empty homes and shops behind us.

It smiled, amusement touching the deep creases of its face.

"So, you are these people's new champion."

"Yes."

"And you think you can defeat me?"

"Maybe, maybe not."

The amusement vanished from its features. It was surprised.

"A humble and modest champion," it said. "You are the first of that breed I have ever encountered. The others have all been bold and decisive warriors. Haj the Rashid stated exactly how he was going to take my head. Ephemia of Amazonhenge said she would sup on my liver. The others made similar claims. Alas, they were not warrior enough. Tell me what your name is, my shy and meek fellow?"

"Novarro."

Talons eased from its fingertips. Behind me, the stallion neighed and stomped.

"Are you the one called the Paladin?"

"Sometimes."

"Satan's oath will not protect you here. I will use your skull for a piss-pot."

From behind me, a pistol fired. The round whistled past my ear. Dropping low, I pivoted.

The Beast rose to full height. Fabiyan was clutching my revolver in her small hands. Bellowing, attempting to the cock the hammer, she rushed forward. Her eyes were wide. Sweat drenched her tiny brow.

The Beast roared.

As Fabiyan came even with me, I tripped her. She slammed hard into the dirt. The revolver skidded from her hands.

I looked up at the charging Beast.

“Not yet.”

The Beast sidestepped us. I yanked the lass to her feet.

“What is your task?”

“S-S-Stay...” she stammered.

I pulled her closer. Our noses nearly touched.

“What task did I give you?”

Fabiyan fought back tears. I could feel her entire body trembling. It was all I could do not to hug her.

“Tell me, girl,” I said.

“Stay with the horse,” she whispered.

“And?”

She was bewildered, speechless.

I frowned. “‘Tie my coat and revolver to the horse. Stay with him and keep him calm.’ Did you misunderstand the words I used?”

She shook her head.

“No, sire.”

“Then why are we standing here?”

“I-I-I thought...” She could not finish the sentence.

I sighed. I turned toward the Beast.

“My apologies,” I said. “This was not of my planning. If you do not believe me and find me unworthy to fight, I understand. I will call off the challenge.”

The Beast chuckled.

“The challenge remains.”

“Thank you.” I turned back to the lass. “Defy me again, and I’ll give you to him.”

“Appetizer,” the Beast said.

Fabiyan nodded. She understood.

I released her. She grabbed my revolver and dashed back to the stallion. I rose. Looked at the Beast.

“Shall we get the formalities out of the way?”

The Beast studied me.

“Formalities?”

“Yes,” I responded. “I am the champion of the people of Ly-oness. I, and I alone, have come here to challenge you. There is

no one fighting with me.” I looked at Fabiyan. “No lads or lasses or armies. No one but me. I am alone, and I will fight you alone. Do you accept these terms?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Good. I understand that I am given first strike. Is this correct?”

“With any weapon you choose.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why do you give me first strike?”

“Because no one can defeat me.” It gestured at its scars. “These prove that.”

I shook my head, my expression concerned.

“You may want to change that for this challenge. I could get lucky, and you’d be defeated. I know you did that with all the others because I was told, but I won’t hold you to that covenant.”

“I do not need first strike to defeat you, Paladin.”

“Very well. I want you to know, however, that if you suddenly decide to take first strike, I will understand. Everyone has fears.”

“I fear no man,” it growled.

“Fabiyan,” I called over my shoulder. “If the Beast takes first strike, it does not change anything.”

“It changes all, sire,” Fabiyan answered, her voice quivering. “If it takes first strike, it will no longer be who it was. First strike must be yours.”

“No, I won’t hold it to that pledge.”

The Beast bellowed. The anguished sound echoed off the houses and shops. It clenched its fists at its sides. Veins pulsed on its neck.

“Understood,” I said, relenting. “Only you and I will fight, and I have first strike.” I glanced at Fabiyan. “It’s a beast. It doesn’t have to keep its word.”

Suddenly, a mammoth shadow loomed over me, and hot breath seared my neck. Fabiyan stood rigid beside the stallion.

“I-If the Beast breaks its word in this matter, then it’s a common bully and murderer. It can claim it’s great, but it will no longer be true.”

“Fight me,” it snarled in my ear.

I turned and stepped back. I studied it from head to toe, from left to right.

“Fight me, Paladin.”

“Oh,” I said. “Now I understand. That’s how you win. There’s a time limit on the first strike. The challenger rushes and makes a mistake in his haste.”

The beast shook its head.

“No. I want you to take your time. I want you to choose your weapon carefully. I want you to plan your attack. I await your convenience.”

“All right,” I agreed, extending my fist.

“Oath.”

The Beast tapped my fist with its.

“Oath.”

I turned. I walked toward Fabiyan and Leopard.

“Mount up.”

“Where are you going?” the Beast demanded.

Fabiyan scrambled onto the stallion.

“Fight me!” it roared.

“I have to pick my weapon,” I responded. “I have to plan my attack. I’ll return shortly.”

“Fight me!”

I swung into the saddle with Fabiyan behind me.

“I shall return in a day,” I told the Beast. “Maybe a fortnight. Maybe longer. Wait in your cavern until I return. Remember, you took an oath to only fight *me*. I’ll call when I’m ready.”

Fabiyan’s small hands clutched my belt.

“You did well, lass,” I said quietly. “Just as we planned.”

She whispered, “What will keep the beast in its cavern?”

“Pride and arrogance created it,” I replied. “Those same sins will keep it waiting for me to return. You have your village back.”

“It’ll not attack again?”

“If the people of Lyoness repeat their sins, it will be released. If they attack it, it will be released. Be as good as you can and leave the beast alone. Make the others understand.”

Fabiyan pressed her face against my back and nodded. She would tell the others. She would make them understand. Perhaps she’d show them that sometimes the best handling of a situation was to think then walk away. The young rat-catcher now had a new job; she had a new role in her society.

We rode down the trail toward Quantero and the awaiting people of Lyoness.



For many leagues, as I planned my ride back to the Io River crossing and learned of the best trail to Ipau, we heard the Beast's voice echoing across the landscape.

"Fight me! I am the greatest there is! I am undefeated! Fight me!"

As we came within eyesight of the principal city, we noted that we heard the Beast no more.

INTERLUDE

Jeb Li gripped the bottle of aged Zan honeywine in his damp hands as he moved along the interior palace passageway and approached the Royal Library. He hated meeting with Father in the room brimming with books, scrolls and ancient texts. It was a reminder that no matter how long and hard one studied, no matter how much one learned, one's knowledge, as Grandmaster told all his novices, would only be a ripple of what there was to gather and understand.

The Royal guard outside the library bowed.

"Your Royal Highness, Our Emperor awaits within for you."

Jeb Li started to reply, to utter a cruel response to the guard for announcing what was obvious to all. Then he felt ashamed. First, the guard was only doing his job. More important, he needed to learn to speak only when the words were worth saying and not merely fill the air with the sound of his voice. He was having difficulty with this lesson, as Grandmaster continuously reminded him.

Had reminded him, he corrected.

He was no longer a member of the Ushido training house. He, the eldest, had been ordered to the palace to assist Father in matters of the realm. He had been one moon-cycle, one final test, away from becoming an honored member of the Ushido; but as an obe-

dient and loyal son, and also believing to his core that Father was a true hero of the people, he had complied despite his own wishes.

Stepping into the entry, Jeb Li discovered his father...dancing. The sight gave him pause. He had seen Father happy, even jubilant, but never like this.

Akira, Emperor of Ipau, Royal House of Ryoushi, moved about the room with delighted abandon. His silver robe, untied, swirled upward, giving the illusion he had wings. He spun in one direction then the opposite. Leaping into the air, he touched palms to toes.

Father finally spun in a full circle on one foot and stopped. Laughing, he waved for Jeb Li to come farther into the library.

"I see my tailor finally captured you. That is a fine color, fitting for a prince. I must say, I had grown weary seeing you in those black warrior's garments."

Jeb Li bowed.

"It is good to see you in such high spirits this night, Your Majesty," he said. "I know the duties of the realm weigh heavy most days."

"It is a *very* good day. I am witness to my dreams becoming reality." Arika grabbed a cloth and wiped the sweat from his trimmed hair and beard. "I may pass an edict that allows men to dance in public."

"That is against scripture, Your Majesty."

"I will change it if I wish." He tossed the cloth aside. "When we are with only family, or alone as now, Jeb Li, I wish you would call me *fuqin* or *ba*, as you did when you were a boy."

"You were not emperor then, Your Majesty," Jeb Li answered; then, he pointed toward the open balcony. "And we are not alone."

Out on the stone gallery in the moonlight, the hooded mage Regent Counsel Tash-Ke stood studying the ocean waves below and the many ships anchored in Shoi-ming Harbor. A pigeon landed on the railing near him.

"My shadow accompanies me also. I insist you call me *fuqin* now and then." Arika turned toward the balcony. "Tash-Ke! What does the message say?"

The hooded mage joined them.

"My final task is completed, Your Majesty. Before the rising of the next full moon, General Singun will achieve a proud warrior's death. The men who will ensure this outcome are steadfast and dedicated, as are the ones who will slay *them*. Only we in this room and Lord Nyutsu will know the truth. I would suggest that after Lord Nyutsu fulfills his part of the agreement your new regent counsel make arrangements to assist him into the afterlife."

Arika wrapped his arm around Jeb Li's shoulders.

"I could not have a more trusted counsel than my eldest child."

"Lord Nyutsu told me—" Jeb Li began.

"Wait. First, ceremonies must be done."

Jeb Li nodded. Tash-Ke dropped to one knee, head bowed. Arika stepped in front of the mage.

"Tash-Ke, you have been a most valued regent counsel, and you have done all you pledged to do. When you said you would only serve until I was emperor and then one who was better suited for the task would step forward to be my counsel, I did not see the wisdom in your statement. This day, I overwhelmingly do. I, Arika, Emperor of Ipau, Royal House of Ryoushi, proclaim that our covenant is completed and wish you well on life's journey."

Tash-Ke rose. Jeb Li lowered to bent knee. He set the wine bottle on the floor beside him.

Arika placed his hands on his son's shoulders.

"Do you, Jeb Li, son of the Royal House of Ryoushi, pledge on your life's blood and honor to protect this realm and its citizens from all who would do them harm, whether outside the kingdom or within?"

"I so pledge," Jeb Li vowed.

"Rise, Prince Regent Counsel," Arika ordered, smiling.

Jeb Li took the bottle in both hands and stood. Tash-Ke nodded to him.

"You, my prince, are only two-and-twenty but a man firm in conscience and integrity. I believe you will be the regent the realm deserves. You will do what is necessary, and that is not always an easy choice." He paused. "Does the new counsel have any last requests of the old?"

"One," replied Jeb Li. "In all the years you have served my father, you have kept your face hidden. I wish to see you."

Tash-Ke lowered his hood. The mage's face was plain and unremarkable.

Jeb Li nodded. "Thank you. My curiosity is quenched."

Tash-Ke bowed to Arika.

"Farewell, my emperor," he said. "I shall long treasure my time in your realm. May I take leave?"

Arika granted permission, and Jeb Li waited until the mage, hood still lowered, reached the entryway.

"Mammon," he whispered.

Tash-Ke looked back over his shoulder, and Jeb Li swore for a half moment his eye sockets were voids crusted with ancient blood. A blink, and the mage was plain and unremarkable again.

Jeb Li shivered as Tash-Ke closed the door behind him.

Arika tapped the wine bottle.

"What is this?"

"A gift from Lord Nyutsu," he replied. "He understood why the two of you could not meet and I came in your stead. He has the mate to this bottle, and they are the last of the vintage. If you both drink this wine tonight, he said, it would be as if you sealed the pact in person."

"Open the bottle, allow the wine to breathe. Then, you and I will share a goblet."

"Shall I call for the taster?"

"Do you believe Nyutsu wishes me harm?"

"No. He wants this marriage. He is most greedy for it."

"Open the wine, then."

"He did repeat that the high priests must grant your divorce without stipulation, and his daughter must have a suitable mourning period when her husband, General Singun, passes."

"Of course," Arika said, annoyed. Then, he frowned. "Your disapproval is apparent on your face, my son. Your mother will be well taken care of. I pledge she will want for nothing."

"*Muqin* will be crushed. Her body will still be with us, but the person inside will be no more. The disgrace will keep her sisters and friends away. She will be as a leper, but without other lepers to find solace with. Is there no dissuading you from this, Your

Majesty? Perhaps you could adopt the Western practice and designate Babylon as Royal Courtesan."

"I will discuss this once with you, and then we will never speak on it again. Your mother was a good fisherman's wife, but she has remained a fisherman's wife. A true emperor needs a true empress at his side. Babylon, of the Royal House of Huang, is the woman to hold that station, and I will have her there. I did not come to this decision lightly."

"Does Babylon want you?"

"Yes. I will spare you from hearing how I know."

Jeb Li cut the wax seal on the bottle then set it on the table. He gathered two goblets and placed them beside the bottle. His belly felt ablaze. Babylon was a regal beauty, that was true, and the traces of Western features that touched her face gave her a mysterious quality that added to her allure.

She had been raised in a house that knew proper court etiquette and protocol; she could oversee the running of the emperor's palace as if she had been doing so from birth. Yet he knew it was not duty that was leading his father to forsake his good wife and plan the murder of a woman's honorable husband.

"Starting tomorrow, when we meet with those outside the family," Arika continued, "I want you to wear a hood as Tash-Ke did. I need to know your thoughts, but others do not. You have not yet learned how to conceal your feelings. They are written on your face for all to see. You would not do well as a gambler."

Jeb Li nodded. "It will be done, Your Majesty. I give oath to master my expressions as I mastered the longbow."

Arika laughed, pleased.

"None are your equal with the longbow, my son. The day I saw you shoot two arrows at the same time with one bow and hit center on two different moving targets, I thought it was fluke or illusion. Then you repeated the feat. With you at my side, I do not need guards."

Jeb Li forced a smile to his lips as bile burned in his belly.

Arika poured the honeywine into the goblets.

"You were with Lord Nyutsu much longer than I anticipated you would be. Was there a problem?"

“No. He likes to talk and show guests his possessions. He insisted I see the painting by Omusa that he recently acquired. It depicts—in accurate detail taken from the holy scripture, he said—the battle between a young fisherman and the pagan giant Hasar on the Fields of Shinto.”

Arika laughed again. “Tell me—how big is the giant and how young and skinny am I in this painting? I swear some artist will soon portray Hasar the size of Mount Wei, and I will only be half out of the womb.”

He handed a goblet to his son.



This is the father I love, Jeb Li thought. The brave man who jests about the role he played in the remarkable feats he accomplished. And it was not a politician's false modesty. No, Father truly believed he had only done what others would have if placed in the same situation.

Jeb Li knew the story of the battle on the Fields of Shinto. He'd heard it his entire life. He knew the legend it had become, and his father's version of the event. He guessed the truth was some-where in the middle.

Father had been Jeb Li's age at the time. He was a poor fish-erman with an ailing wife and a newborn son. From the wilds of the north, from the mountain land called Monbet, the pagan raid-ers had cut a wide trail of death, pillage, and rape until they came to the outer gates of Ipau. The two armies faced each other with only the flat field between them. The officers, samurai, and sol-diers knew if they lost their families and homes would not see a new day. But the whispers also said that the barbarians had never been bested in battle.

Hasar, warlord of the raiders, strutted across the field alone to-ward the Ipau ranks. He stopped just out of range of the best archer. Hasar was a big man, head-and-shoulders taller than the tallest in Ipau. He was naked save for the warrior's red paint that colored him from head to foot. The pagans worshipped Cithah, the Monbetan goddess of war, pestilence and chaos. They needed no armor, they bragged, for they had her protection.

Hasar thrust the barbed swords he gripped in each hand sky-ward and shouted that no mercy would be given and none was expected. The raiders, crowded in ranks behind him, clapped

their weapons together. The sound was terrifying.

As the Ipau generals bickered over whether they should attack or defend, Arika stepped out of the first line of Ipau soldiers. The young fisherman moved steadily, without pause, across the field toward Hasar. He held a sling in his hand and six stones rubbed smooth by the sea in his pocket.

The legend said that Hasar watched Arika approach as a cat might gaze at a field mouse that challenged it—surprised, amused, then irritated.

Arika stopped when he could see the ringed piercings decorating the warlord's face and anchored his feet. Hasar screamed his war cry and charged. Father insisted that he'd set his *second* stone firmly in the sling's pouch—the first one had fallen from his trembling fingers into the pool of piss that was between his feet.

Arika swung the sling in a tight loop then, with a flick of his wrist, released the stone. It sailed straight and true, slamming into the warlord between his brows. The giant fell like a cut tree. Arika rushed forward and hacked Hasar's head from his body using one of the giant's own swords.

Then he held the head up high for the pagan raiders to see.

Father said he expected to quickly resemble a porcupine with all the arrows that would find his body, but that did not happen. The barbarian invaders withdrew and returned to their homelands.

Arika was hailed as hero throughout the kingdom. The Dowager Empress bestowed upon him the title Royal House of Ryoushi, had her personal physicians tend to his wife and son, and gifted him with a fine fishing boat and new nets.

Alas, Arika's days as fisherman were done. His services were needed more and more by the palace.

When the kingdom's charmed talisman, the Sapphire Peacock, was stolen, Arika captained the ship *Shui Hu* with nine samurai, two fishermen and the mysterious Tash-Ke as crew that sailed to the island of Khartoum and battled pirates, blood ghouls and a mammoth dragon-cobra. Three returned with the talisman.

Arika negotiated treaties with the shoguns of the Sun Kingdoms of Inoue, Han and Okudara, that ended centuries of conflict and border disputes. He convinced the Dowager Empress and

her Counsels to open the port of Shoi-ming to Westerners. The people of Ipau prospered beyond what they had ever believed possible.

When the last kinsman in the bloodline of the Dowager Empress died, the kingdom stirred with uncertainty. Who would be their supreme leader when the empress entered the afterlife? Fear and insecurity seeped into every station of the kingdom. Matters turned ugly when highborn houses and other personages began to vie for the blessing of the empress.

It was she who calmed all. She announced that the name of her successor had come to her in a dream. All the people in the kingdom would vote for their new leader. They would cast their choices in the temples and have to swear on their honor that their choice was truly theirs and had not been bought or coerced.

So it was. The high priests announced the name of the succeeding emperor. They said the choice was unanimous.

Arika.

Father said that he knew for certain the vote was not unanimous. He was not worthy of the position, and he and his wife had not voted for him. *Muqin* later whispered to the children that she had, in fact, cast her ballot for her husband.

Arika the fisherman, the beloved hero of the people, would be Arika, Emperor of the Sun Kingdom of Ipau. Celebration filled the streets and roads of Ipau from border to border.



Arika finished his wine.

“Much better than I anticipated it would be.” He frowned. “You haven’t touched yours.”

“No, *Fuqin*...*Ba*, I haven’t,” Jeb Li said quietly.

He took the goblet from his father and set both beside the bottle. Arika gasped, a sudden, tiny sound, and Jeb Li lowered him to the floor. He took the wine bottle and goblets to the balcony and pitched all into the ocean. Then he rushed back to his father’s side.

Arika clawed at his throat as fought for breath. Jeb Li grasped his father’s hands. Tears filled his eyes.

“Do not fight, *Ba*. Allow death to come as sleep takes you after a hard day’s work.”

Arika's eyes widened in disbelief.

"I pledged to protect the kingdom from harm, from those outside and within," Jeb Li continued. "The people need the man you were, not the dishonorable one you were going to become. Today, when a person needs courage, they ask *What would Arika do in my place?* Children are named after you. Artists paint portraits of your bravery, and storytellers spin grand tales of your deeds. The people need a hero to admire and emulate much more than they need another name listed among the hundred on the wall behind the royal throne."

Arika struggled to rise. He could not.

Jeb Li touched his father's cheek.

"Your funeral will be grand. People will line the streets in mourning; the other kingdoms will send dignitaries in your honor. *Muqin* will be a respected widow. I will invite General Singun to stand with our family because of your respect for him and that will elevate his status. This is for the best, *Ba*."

Arika was suddenly still.

Jeb Li closed his father's eyes with his fingertips. He would insure that all burial ceremonies were completed; then he would slip away, leaving behind his name, heritage, and culture. Leaving behind his lover, Dionysus Lok, to never again see his morning smile or feel his tender embrace.


For he would never return to Ipau. He would journey west into the lands of the heathens. Perhaps he would find deeds that in small ways might atone a little for the vile evil he had done this night. Perhaps. When he knew the journey was done, he would put blade to belly and perform seppuku.

But first...

He turned toward the door.

"Guard! Help! Guard!

13

 *On the first day of the standoff, King Ulrich ordered his best* guardsmen to dress in dark clothing and, after nightfall, to assault the stone cabin. The demons barricaded inside kept their promise. As the soldiers edged past a wagon twenty yards away, the demons opened fire with muskets. One guardsman was killed. The others, two of them wounded, crawled back to the perimeter sanctuary.

When I arrived on the third day, the body of the dead man was still lying where he had fallen.

The rain continued its relentless tattoo as I rode Leopard up the muddy trail toward the king's tents. The storms had been coming one after another and had been pounding the Principality of Zar since I had crossed its border a fortnight ago. Reports in the outlying villages were that the River of the Seven Sisters had crested its banks in the northern region and the mammoth Io River, to the southeast, was expected to do the same.

A whip-thin soldier, rain sluicing from his helmet brim, stared up at me as I neared the royal tents.

"We heard you were coming," he said. "You are him, aren't you?"

"I'm no one," I replied.

"We've captured demons."

I knew the look I saw on the soldier's face. There were more than two hundred people surrounding the cabin, and all the ones

I had seen thus far had worn the same weary expression. The excitement and thrill of capturing the demons was gone. It had vanished because, while the they were caught, the demons weren't in custody. They were also warm and dry.

The royal army, meanwhile, was standing in the rain and muck and doing nothing hour after hour except stare at the body of a dead comrade.

Zar had not been at war in more than one hundred years. It was a merchant state and remained neutral during all of its neighbors' conflicts. This army, except for a handful of seasoned professionals, was made up of farm lads and shop clerks and trade apprentices who served only for short periods. They are not considered a true militia by other regions' armies.

I appraised the situation. The cabin, built half below ground, was in a clearing with fifty-plus yards of open ground on all sides. The walls appeared to be granite, and the roof, dotted with shards of broken arrows, was hand-cut slate shingles. The windows were covered with heavy shutters.

Butted to the west side of the cabin was a corral holding four horses. Three saddles were lined up on the top rail of the fence. Several bundles—food and gear, I reasoned—were stacked on the ground near the gate. It appeared the demons had been surprised while preparing to head out on horseback.

Smart plan.

North of the cabin was Titan's Anvil, a million acres of mountain-and-lake wilderness. Once in there, it would take an Amazonhenge hunter to find them. No matter which direction they went, they would be gone.

Very smart plan.

My question was why demons needed muskets and horses and food.

I dismounted, moved onto a rise, and surveyed first the evergreens encircling the clearing then the corral. There were three saddle horses and one packhorse. On the ride up here, I'd been told there were nine demons.

"Are you Novarro the Paladin?"

I looked over my shoulder as a broad-shouldered woman in her late twenties limped toward me. She was wearing a shoulder-caped

greatcoat and a long-tailed hooded cap. As she trudged through the mud, she favored her left leg; it appeared that the knee was giving her havoc. It also seemed she was used to and accepted the condition.

"Are you Novarro?" she repeated.

"Yes."

"I'm DeQuinn Mercy. Got word yesterday you were headed our way. The king ordered that you were to be brought immediately to him upon arrival."

"You're the Sheriff of Gaul," I said.

"And tax collector, milord."

I would later learn her story.

A few years ago, Jason Mercy, Sheriff of Gaul, a big homely man almost too shy to be magistrate, took his savings and traveled across the Io River to the lawless frontier settlement of La Traversée. He went there for the annual wife market.

At this auction, poor families with too many daughters and no dowries—at least, so it was promoted—would put women on the block to go to the highest bidder for marriage. "For marriage" was how the families soothed their conscience. The slavers and whoremasters in attendance, of course, only cared whether they could turn a profit on their purchase.

It was said a woman walked onto the platform and studied the gathering of men below. Then she pointed directly at Jason Mercy.

"I will grant you my hand and loins. Do not lose."

Jason, unnerved by the bold woman, red-faced, just nodded his head. Before long, the bidding was only between Jason and a farmer who needed a wife and a plowhorse and had decided DeQuinn was both in one. Jason re-counted his savings as he slowly called out his last bid.

The farmer began to reply when DeQuinn whipped toward him.

"I am very efficient at gelding."

The farmer withdrew his bid.

DeQuinn and Jason returned to Gaul to be married by the village priest. People said the pairing could be compared to the perfect key and lock. DeQuinn became Jason's unpaid deputy. Any

misdeed, brawl or quarrel would instantly cease when they arrived. They were well-respected by most of the law-abiding.

While camping in the Anvil a summer ago, DeQuinn and Jason were caught in a mountain avalanche. DeQuinn's leg was broken. Jason was killed. The elders of Gaul asked DeQuinn to stay on as sheriff. She agreed.

I continued to study the cabin.

"You were the first one up here, weren't you?"

"Yes. Tillerman has lived here for thirty years. Lived here with his wife and three sons. When I heard what happened at the villa, I came with a couple of friends to check it out. Never figured anything would come of it."

"But something did."

"The sons were preparing to saddle the horses when we arrived. Never got a chance to say anything. They saw us and rushed inside."

I nodded, picturing the scene in my mind.

"We all went for positions and fired a few rounds at each other," she continued. "Didn't hit anything I know of. Ferris stayed with me, Oliver went for help. He came back with some guardsmen. The king showed up the next day. The joke's on Tillerman and his sons. There was just me and Ferris pinning them in there. They could have stomped us with little fuss and been on their way into the Anvil before the guardsmen got here."

"How many did you see?"

"Just the three sons and the father. Saw him standing in the doorway as the boys ran inside."

"Four? I was told that there were nine."

"The tale is growing. I only saw four."

I nodded. "Tell me Tillerman's story."

DeQuinn tugged at the cape of her greatcoat.

"Tillerman is a horse trader," she said. "Has always been a horse trader—just workingman's stock, nothing a noble or soldier would want. They're poor people. We've never had any trouble with them until recently. All of a sudden, Tillerman the Patriarch was telling anyone who would listen that Lord Amondo was a dishonorable blackheart who would steal from the angels themselves to increase his purse."

“Who’s Amondo?”

“The richest merchant-lord in these parts.”

“Why was Tillerman vilifying his lordship?”

DeQuinn sighed.

“A few months ago, Tillerman’s wife left the family. She became Amondo’s...maid.”

And thus a blood feud began.

I noted the horses were huddled together under the eaves of the cabin.

“Why aren’t those animals crazed? They haven’t eaten in over three days?”

DeQuinn cleared her throat, studying the mud.

“I’ve been feeding them.”

“You have?”

“Yes. Had some hay brought, and every day about mid-day, I walk out there and feed them.”

“Tillerman agreed to that?”

“Yes. I go unarmed, and someone inside watches me the whole time, but I don’t do anything except feed the horses, and they let me be.”

“Tillerman won’t let you collect the dead body of the soldier, but he’ll let you feed the horses.”

“He likes horses.”

“Interesting.” A notion began to take hold. “So, DeQuinn, how did we end up here?”

A few days ago, she told me, Tillerman went to the merchant-lord’s villa. He attempted to see his wife. Forced his way into the household, intended to drag the wife back home. Amondo had his guards rough Tillerman up and pitch him, battered and bloodied, back into the road. Witnesses said Tillerman’s wife saw it all and laughed. She jeered that her life scrubbing Amondo’s chamberpots was a thousand fold better than the miserable life she’d had with him.

I shook my head. How sad, how cruel, for all.

DeQuinn continued, “The next morning the bodies of Amondo and Tillerman’s wife were discovered. Their throats were slashed, and they had been knifed through the body. No one in the house-

hold heard anything out of the ordinary during the night. Nothing.”

“No one heard anything,” I finished, “and only a demon can murder without making a sound.”

DeQuinn scanned the people surrounding the cabin.

“Ask any of them. We have captured demons.”

I walked Leopard toward the tents. I’d heard a legend about Gaul during my ride south from Lyonesse. It was said that a changeling demon lived among the people here. That it moved about in human form unnoticed, unrevealed. It snatched the breath from newborns and memories from the elders; it ruined the dignity of good men and women with rum and promises of easy fortunes.

“I came to Gaul,” I said, “because I was told that a demon resided here.”

“We have our demon stories,” DeQuinn agreed. “Ours aren’t as grand as the ones coming of late from Capital Town, but we have them.”

“Like the demon thief who appears out of the night fog wearing an executioner’s mask and robs decent folk of purse, and sometimes life, then disappears back into the mist?”

“The latest fright tale from our capital is that a vampire demon is hunting maidens in the city and draining them of blood.”

I shook my head.

“Shall I present you to the king?” DeQuinn asked.

“Yes.”

She hesitated. Pondering.

“Ask, DeQuinn. Just ask,” I said.

“Is it true, Paladin, that you have been on your quest for four years now?”

“Almost five.”

14

King Ulrich was sleeping; the ongoing siege of Tillerman's farm had exhausted the fourteen-year-old monarch.

As the king was awakened, DeQuinn introduced me to the merchant-lord Amondo's younger brother, Edwin. I had learned over the years not to make judgments based on first impressions; I had been wrong too many times when I had. Still, something was amiss about Edwin, and the few words that passed between us left a sour taste in my mouth.

I also noted that DeQuinn's demeanor changed when she saw Edwin waiting inside the king's tent. Her posture turned stiff, and her sentences became short and curt.

With Edwin were his two bodyguards. I would later learn that their names were Wilson and Math. I knew immediately these ronin were from the Daarmoor region—they wore the short broadswords and chain-mail vests that were common in the army there. Both carried a Cordoba flintlock pistol in their belts. Wilson had a large brass armlet covering the bicep of his right arm. Thieves, deserters, and laggards were branded on the bicep before being turned out of the army. Math's ears were notched. That, along with dismissal from the army, was the Daarmoor punishment for being drunk on duty.

Someone should warn Edwin about the untrustworthiness of his bodyguards. That someone would not be me.

Near the king's sleeping chamber, never speaking but observing all, was a Zar master-at-arms. He was a big man with a shaved head and thick mustache. A flanged mace dangled from a leather strap around his wrist. I knew his kind. He was one of the rare true soldiers in the Zar army; other men would step aside when he walked down the street. He was clearly a man to be respected and not trifled with, and he would be accepted readily into any army in the known world. If I were ever in a military battle, I would want him leading my regiment.

We studied one another.

It was immediate and mutual dislike.

King Ulrich, dwarfed by several advisors, smiled as he approached us. He was a slender young man with a boyish face and thick brown hair. Edwin stepped toward the king to speak to him, but Ulrich waved the merchant back. It was clear Edwin was not pleased that an untitled commoner was being received before him. He barely contained his scowl.

DeQuinn and I bowed as the king reached us.

"Your Majesty, may I present Patrick Novarro," DeQuinn said.

"You are Thurian, are you not?" asked Ulrich.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Then we are already allies. Your King Harold is a good friend to Zar."

Ulrich held out his hand. I started to kiss his signet ring as was the custom in this kingdom, but he pulled the hand back.

"No, no. Greet me as you would a fellow warrior."

He held out his hand again. I placed my forearm along his and grasped him around the elbow as he gripped me. We shook, and a wide smile appeared on Ulrich's face.

His advisors applauded.

He pointed at the pistol holstered in my belt.

"Is that the pistol I have heard about?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." I drew the pistol and handed it to him. He examined it closely.

"I have never seen a revolver pistol before. It is an impressive and frightful creation. My gunsmith has attempted to design a revolver, but thus far he has failed." He returned the pistol to me. "Walk with me, Paladin. You, too, DeQuinn."

The king moved to the opening in the tent and gazed out at the cabin.

"You must be honest with me. I will never learn if all I hear are complements. The other day my advisors praised my farting prowess."

I chuckled.

DeQuinn gave me a warning look. I'd broken a rule of royal etiquette, it appeared.

But Ulrich smiled again.

"No one in my court laughs when I make a joke. Not until I laugh first. You did. We are now friends as well as allies, Paladin."

"We are, Your Majesty," I agreed.

"When we arrived, I had my soldiers surround the house," he explained. "The door we see is the only one, but there are windows in the other walls. All are covered with heavy shutters. All are being closely watched, and all who were inside when we arrived are still inside."

"Very thorough, Your Majesty."

"We do not know how stocked the house is food supplies. They could have enough to last for weeks or even months."

"That is possible, sire."

"My attempt to talk them into surrendering was rejected. The elder Tillerman called out that he would not receive a fair trial. My personal assurance that he would was met with silence. My plan to swarm the house under the cover of darkness failed and cost the life of a brave soldier." Ulrich sighed. "I would prefer not to lose any more lives in our capture of the Tillerman clan."

"You could take your people home, Your Majesty, and let Tillerman and his clan go. My guess is that they would head into the Anvil and never return."

"My brother's murderer must pay for his crime," snapped Edwin from behind us.

Ulrich turned and gazed evenly at him. Edwin lowered his head.

"My apologies, Your Majesty, for my outburst. My emotions overcame me."

Ulrich looked back at me.

"Murder, whether of noble or of beggar, will not go unanswered in Zar as long as I am monarch."

I nodded.

“A question about the attack. When the clan fired upon your soldiers, sire, did they shoot at the same time or was the shooting of the muskets spread out?”

“What difference does that make?” Edwin growled. “Why are we wasting time, Your Majesty? When the cannon arrives from Cordoba, we will end Tillerman’s defiance and send the demon murderer to Hell.”

I knew it was best not to speak. But...

“No one saw Tillerman inside his lordship’s villa a second time. No one saw the murders take place. There are no witnesses to testify that he actually committed the crimes he is accused of.”

“I say he did,” Edwin said. “That is enough for all. Are you challenging me, drifter?”

I smiled. “I lack the skills of a tarot reader or politician to disguise my meaning, milord. If I’d challenged you, you wouldn’t have to ask if I had.”

The veins pulsed in Edwin’s neck.

“No one talks to me in that manner any longer.”

“Stop.”

Ulrich raised his hand between us. Behind Edwin, Wilson and Math stepped closer to him. Wilson slipped his hand to his pistol. DeQuinn rested hers on my shoulder.

“Master Edwin,” the king said, “because of your grief, I have allowed you some latitude in my presence today. But my leniency does have its limits.”

“Please, pardon me, Your Majesty,” he responded quickly.

Ulrich turned to me.

“Disrespect to my people is disrespect to me, Paladin.”

I bowed. “I ask humbly for your forgiveness, my lord. It’s no excuse, but I am uneducated in the ways of court and ask for guidance so that I do not unintentionally offend.”

Ulrich heard the words *unintentionally offend* and clearly understood my meaning. He decided not to explain to Edwin.

“DeQuinn will assist you with proper court protocols, Paladin.” He looked back at Edwin. “You may retire and regain your composure.”

Edwin bowed. He and his bodyguards moved away from us.

Wilson looked at me and nodded. This was not over, he seemed to be saying.

Edwin and his bodyguards moved away to a corner of the tent. The big master-at-arms had moved with surprising swiftness to within striking distance of them.

Ulrich studied the cabin again.

“You wouldn’t have to ask if I had,” he repeated. “I may say that the next time I meet with my council. I can already picture the looks on their faces.”

I remained quiet. This time.

The king pointed at one end of the cabin then at the other.

“Four or five shots were fired from inside the house.”

“The shots were spread out and not fired in a volley, Your Majesty,” the master-at-arms supplied.

“I agree, McShane. Single fire. What does that tell you, Paladin?”

“Perhaps nothing. I am just gathering as many facts as I can.”

“I’ve devised a new plan to get the Tillerman clan to surrender. My hope is that it will succeed and I won’t have to use the cannon,” he said. “My plan is intended to create a diversion. While the clan is distracted, McShane will sneak onto the roof of the cabin. He will drop a smoke mortar into the chimney then cap it. The smoke will fill the cabin and force them out. I would like your opinion of my plan.”

“I believe that would force them outside.”

“Am I mistaken, or do I hear a ‘but’ in your response?”

“If I may, Your Majesty,” DeQuinn interjected, “It is likely the clan would exit, but they would come out shooting.”

“Yes, McShane advised the same.” Ulrich sighed, disturbed by the possibility. “Three lives have already been lost, and it appears that more will be lost no matter what I do.”

“Perhaps not, my lord,” I said. “With your permission, I’d like to go talk to Tillerman. I’ll need one unarmed volunteer to accompany me.”

“*Unarmed* volunteer?”

“While I speak with Tillerman, the volunteer will retrieve your fallen soldier. I would consider it an honor, Your Majesty, if you would safeguard my pistol while I go to the cabin.”

"I'll go with you," DeQuinn said. "I can carry the body back."

"I do want you to accompany me, but you're needed for a different task."

"What task?"

"I need a witness to my conversation with Tillerman. So tell me again, when do you feed the horses?"



The rain had stopped when I joined DeQuinn and McShane outside the tent. We were all unarmed. Several yards behind us, Ulrich watched intently. Edwin stood beside the monarch, and the king's advisors and guardsmen surrounded them both. I noted that Wilson and Math were not among the gathering.

DeQuinn lifted a bundle of hay onto her shoulder.

"A short while ago, we received word from the capital. Two servants now claim they saw Tillerman inside the Amondos' main house after midnight."

"Of course they did," I said.

"I asked around. Amondo had no wife or children. His entire estate and business goes to the younger brother."

"How fortunate. Now no one will speak disrespectfully to Edwin any longer."

"Yes. And he will no longer have to live on the meager stipend Amondo gave him."

I nodded. "Shall we go?"

We three sloshed across the saturated clearing toward the cabin. McShane was perfect for the task. He was neither a hero nor a fool. He would do what he'd been asked to do and no more. Or less.

Each step in the clinging mud was a chore as we continued toward the wagon. There would be no swift run across this ground. DeQuinn slipped and fell to her good knee; one of her boots had been sucked off by the mud. McShane retrieved the boot. He did not jeer or make jest. He just took the hay from DeQuinn as she put it back on.

We surveyed the cabin door and windows, looking for a rifle to appear; but no movement came from within. One of the horses whinnied as it smelled the hay.

DeQuinn separated from us and headed toward the corral. McShane and I reached the wagon. The master-at-arms moved to the body of the dead soldier.

"Tillerman," I called, "I ask to speak with you. We come unarmed."

The door cracked open.

"Go back, or I'll shoot you dead, armed or not," Tillerman said. "Nothing to talk about."

McShane lifted the body of the soldier.

"Didn't mean to kill the soldier," Tillerman called. "I aimed for his shoulder and missed. For that I'm sorry."

"I accept your word on your intent."

McShane carried the soldier back toward the tents. DeQuinn slipped inside the corral with the horses.

"You have the body," Tillerman said. "Nothing more to say."

"There's plenty. First, you and your sons aren't demons."

Tillerman did not respond.

"Second, your sons escaped three days ago into the Anvil. DeQuinn had the front of your cabin covered but not the back. They went out the rear windows to saddled horses hidden in the trees. You have accomplished what you set out to do. You kept the king's army here. Your sons won't be found unless they wish to be, so they are safe."

The door opened wider.

"Come closer. Keep your hands where I can see 'em."

I moved toward the door. The inside of the cabin was dark; I could not tell where Tillerman was.

"I didn't kill Amondo or me wife," he said.

I stepped down into the doorway.

"The king will listen to you. He has given his word."

"The king's a boy. He still believes in honor and justice. He hasn't yet learned how men can do evil then lie about it and get others to do more evil for them."

"On this we agree. Man doesn't need demons to entice him to wickedness, he does quite well on his own."

I stepped inside and stopped beside a table till my eyes had adjusted to the dim interior. Tillerman stood across from me, a rifle tucked in the crooks of his arms. Four other rifles, primed and loaded, I assumed, were scattered around the cabin near windows.

From the corner of my eye, I saw DeQuinn's shadow cross the cracks in the shutter of the corral-side window. She was listening.

"I didn't murder them," he repeated. "But how do I prove it? I threatened both of them. I killed the soldier." Then he added bitterly. "I'd rather die in me home than choking for a day on the gallows. The king's young hangman is not yet a master of his profession."

I stared at Tillerman. Something was amiss about him. Outside, I heard voices calling out, but their words were unclear.

"If you do that," I said, "people will believe you murdered Amondo and your wife, and the true murderer will win out."

"How do I prove I did not?" he asked again.

I studied him. Then I saw it. I knew what was amiss. I could prove that he hadn't murdered Amondo and his wife.

I stepped closer to the table. In the middle was a bowl of apples. Picking one up, I juggled it in my hand. Then I tossed the apple to him. Tillerman was startled, but without dropping his rifle, he caught the apple in the crook of his arm.

I nodded. "Did a horse break the bones in both your hands? How long has it been since you could hold a fork and spoon?"

"I can still shoot me rifle. That finger works fine."

"But you cannot grip a knife," I said. "Your wife and the merchant-lord were murdered with a knife. Put the rifle down and come with me."

Tillerman did not respond.

"Restore your name for your sons."

At last, he lowered his head then nodded. He stepped to the table.

"Novarro!" DeQuinn yelled.

I spun about, dropping low as I turned. Wilson and Math moved into the doorway with pistols raised. They fired. The rounds thudded into Tillerman's chest; he gasped and collapsed to the floor.

Math retreated into the muddy yard as Wilson reloaded. Even the best marksmen need at least fifteen seconds to reload.

Fifteen seconds. A long time.

I grabbed the rifle leaning against the wall near the door, cocked it as I aimed and pulled the trigger.

It misfired. Wilson laughed as he finished reloading.

I jumped across the room and grabbed the rifle the dead Tillerman still held. I aimed the already-cocked weapon as Wilson aimed at me.

I fired first.

The round nailed Wilson under his right eye, beside his nose, and exited the back of his skull. He fired into the ceiling as he went down. I jumped to the doorway.

Math stood ankle-deep into the mud. He had given up reloading his pistol and drawn his broadsword. From the corral, DeQuinn raced across the yard toward him.

Math swung the sword at her. She ducked under the stroke and gripped his wrist in one hand then punched him squarely in the midsection with her right. Then she followed with a quick left and another right to the face. Math grunted, and the sword fell from his hand as he swayed but, rooted in the mud, remained upright. DeQuinn spun completely around and hammered him with a sweeping high kick to the side of his head. He dropped unconscious, his jaw clearly broken, to the ground.

The rain began to fall again as I sloshed from the cabin to DeQuinn's side. Across the clearing, I saw that the king had my revolver aimed at Edwin, and McShane had the man's arms pinned between his shoulder blades. Edwin protested he had not ordered his bodyguards to attack the cabin. Ulrich plainly did not believe him. He ordered him arrested.

Edwin met his fate on the gallows, executed by the hangman who, as Tillerman had said, had not yet mastered his profession. He was hanged four times before it was done right.

The Tillerman sons never returned to Zar, but the horses they raised in Titan's Anvil became much sought-after mounts throughout the kingdoms and frontier.

For the long reign of Ulrich, he was always known as an honorable and just man. He was admired by his people, both noble and commoner, until the end of his days. The high regard was deserved.



"I'm glad you are unharmed, Paladin," DeQuinn said. "I didn't see the cowards until they'd reached the cabin."

“Being mortal has its limitations. I suggest you sink your boots down into the mud before it is seen that you are standing above it.”

DeQuinn quick-snapped her head toward me. Then she lowered her feet down into the mud.

“I’m usually more careful.”

We didn’t speak for a long moment.

Finally, Ris Mal said, “I did not harm DeQuinn and Jason. I was following them as they traveled in the Titan’s Anvil. I admit that I intended to wreck havoc upon them, but the avalanche occurred before I could. They knew it was coming. There was a crevice to hide in, but it was only large enough for one. Both pleaded with the other to use it, but neither would. They perished embracing each other.”

I nodded. I understood.

“I had never seen such a thing,” Ris Mal continued. “I had heard the story of the Lady Lenore and you, but I did not believe. I was overcome with sadness. I had never felt that emotion before. Mortals such as Amondo and Edwin I recognize and understand, but mortals like DeQuinn and Jason I did not. I took DeQuinn’s body just as her soul left it. I healed the body and made it my own. I wanted to walk among other mortals and see if more such as they existed.”

“And?”

“There are others. Many more. I was surprised that I formed friendships. Knowing them has brought me happiness and pleasure. Those emotions still feel strange but I savor them. Someday, I hope to experience love for myself.” The demon sighed. “I shall miss the sensual delights of inhabiting this female body. I’ll miss living among these people. I have learned much from them.”

“Then why leave? You’re no longer what you once were. The people here are safe from your old ways.”

The demon stared at me, confused.

“I have no proof that you are a changeling, and I rarely participate in gossip. Never had the knack for the art.” I turned the collar of my coat up against the falling rain. “Is there an inn where we might share a meal? Perhaps your friends can join us.”

“The doorway I once used between this world and the underworld no longer exists. I cannot help you with your quest.”

“Then I continue my search.”

I started to leave. DeQuinn stepped beside me.

“Someday, Paladin, you will find a passageway into Hell. When you do, send word to me. I would be honored to ride at your side to free the Lady Lenore.”

We shook hands as friends do.

One day, I *would* send word to DeQuinn Mercy, once called Ris Mal, to accompany me into Hell to free Lenore.

I knew I would.

15

As *I ate my plate of hot stew, McShane entered the inn and* tavern called the Three-Legged Crusader. A harsh curse crossed my lips. Two dragoons, their short wheel-lock rifles at the ready, stepped inside behind the master-at-arms and closed the door. Two more came in the rear, and a fifth emerged from the kitchen shoving the cook ahead of him.

I remained seated, my back to the wall at the table near the main door, and continued to eat the undercooked potatoes and carrots and miser's meat scraps. I had a ripe tomato for dessert. The others, all twenty people in the main room, even the always-talking innkeeper John Hostel, stopped what they were doing.

Lydie, Hostel's plump and bosomy wife and partner who told the lewdest riddles ever heard, spotted McShane and his soldiers and dropped the pitchers she was carrying to the ferrymen's table. She hustled behind the bar to join her husband and the frightened cook. John Hostel wrapped his arm protectively around her. All stared stone silent at the soldiers.

Well, mostly, they watched McShane and the flanged mace dangling from a leather strap around his wrist. Two brothers who, moments before, had been cheerfully sloshed set their tankards on the bar and started for the door. McShane glanced at them. The now cold-sober brothers returned to their places at the bar.

McShane scanned the patrons, pausing for a brief moment on several faces. When he saw me, contempt plainly etched his features.

Our dislike of one another had not faded.

I saluted him with my fork. He ignored me and pointed his mace at the overnight rooms upstairs. The two dragoons behind him rushed up the stairs.

John Hostel cleared his throat then hesitated before speaking.

"You are always welcome in our inn, Mister McShane, but you have no authority here," he said, nearly stuttering. "You are a...re-respected member of the Zar army, but Zar's border don't extend to this side of the river. We are free frontier here, an' King Ulrich has always honored that."

"Tonight I have the authority, innkeeper," McShane replied. "Tonight I hunt assassins, and they hide among the people gathered here at your inn."



The mammoth Io River stretches over seven thousand kilometers from its northern continent headwaters in the Thurian-Rivenran Alps to the delta at Cape Horn in the southern continent where it empties into the sea. The ferry at La Traversée is the only river crossing, unless one has his own boat, for fifty leagues in either direction. To the east of La Traversée is the unmapped frontier and to the west is the Principality of Zar.

The township at La Traversée stands on the frontier side of the river. The ferry is well used by traders, trappers, adventurers, rogues, and brigands. There are no laws or taxes. Many businesses appear each spring then vanish by autumn.

Each year during summer solstice the notorious wife market is held.


Only four businesses are permanent—the ferry, the blacksmith and wheelwright, the general store, and the Three-Legged Crusader Inn and Tavern.

I have known the innkeepers since John Hostel won the place in a dice game with the previous owner four years ago. Then, it was called the Fiery Owl, but Lydie Hostel rechristened it with what she thought was a more amusing name. They collect news

and stories for me from the travelers passing through. So far, none has helped me in my quest.

More than a year had passed since I had last been to the Three-Legged Crusader. This time, Lydie told me she'd heard several stories, some from reliable God-fearing folk, about a caul-eyed warlock who practiced the black arts in Rivenran. That, I'd decided just before McShane's arrival, would be my next destination.

16

 *bearded traveler wearing a bearskin-collared greatcoat hurried* down the stairs. McShane pointed his mace at the table where the town blacksmith and a gypsy alchemist sat sharing a pint. The uneasy traveler, without question or protest, joined them.

“Listen up,” McShane said. “Place all your weapons on the table or bar top in front of you.”

I put my pistol in front of my plate but left the dagger sheathed inside my boot.

“McShane,” I said, “I have one of the rooms upstairs. Tell your men not to steal my extra shirt or razor.”

“When I wish to hear your voice, Novarro,” he replied, “you will know it.”

Before I could respond, a loud crash and louder yelps of pain sounded from the upstairs rooms. All faces turned toward the commotion.

A young woman appeared. She was beautiful—early twenties in age with long, dark-red hair that touched her lower back. Cinching a plain cloth robe around her shapely body, she strode barefoot with her head held high across the landing to the stairs. It was clear to all that she wore nothing under the robe.

The two dragoons stumbled out from her room, one clutching his crotch and weeping in agony. The other, blood shining under his nose, held his hand over one eye.

The woman stopped at the top step and scanned us until she found the master-at-arms.

"I was undressed when your soldiers stormed into my room," she said. "When I reached for my robe, they told me I wouldn't need it. I disagreed. As you can see, my opinion prevailed."

McShane glared at his two men then motioned for the woman to come down and join us. She remained where she stood.

"I cannot fight off all of you, but you have my solemn oath that the first men who come at me will see the grave before I do."

"Your safety is assured by me, woman," McShane said, pointing his mace at an empty spot at the table of ferrymen. "Now, come down and sit."

She accepted his guarantee. As she came down the stairs, however, she looked at the ferrymen then at the others. Without pause, she walked past all to my table.

"Good evening," I said, rising.

She smiled and settled on the bench beside me.

"I pray you are the gentleman I hope you to be, milord," she said as I sat back down. "My name is Rebecca Nines, and it appears that we will be companions for the moment."

"I'm Patrick Novarro."

"Quiet," McShane ordered.

Rebecca scooted closer to me and pressed her leg firmly against mine as she picked up my tankard and took a drink from it. Finishing, she looked at me, quite bewildered.

"Water?" she whispered.

"I like to keep a clear head and steady hand."

She chuckled.

McShane motioned to his dragoons, and they collected all weapons, placing them on the bar. John and Lydie Hostel moved away from the swords, knives, hatchets, and my lone pistol. The cook followed their lead.

Rebecca opened her robe below the table and examined the foot and shin of the leg not pressed against mine.

"I believe I may have injured myself when I kicked that chafing soldier. I know my knuckles will be bruised."

"Milady," I said softly into her ear, "you're exposing your virtue."

She smiled. "You looked?"

I focused my full attention back on McShane as the master-at-arms studied everyone in the room again, one at a time. Catching us all by surprise, one man leaped to his feet and rushed toward the unguarded front door.

"No!" Rebecca cried out.

I was astonished by the speed with which McShane responded. He flashed across the room and tripped the fleeing man. The man's momentum carried him forward like a thrown spear, slamming the top of his skull so hard into the door that it cracked wood and rattled the leaded-glass windows on both sides in their frames. He crumpled to the stone floor, and blood haloed his head.

Rebecca jumped up. Rising, I tried to stop her, but she slipped through my grasp. She rounded the table and knelt by the downed man's side. He did not move as she examined his body.

"He's dead," she said. "His skull is cracked wide, and brain is seeping out."

"Why did you shout 'no' when he attempted to flee?" demanded McShane.

"I thought your soldiers were going to shoot. The gentleman and I were in their line of fire."

McShane frowned. Then he said, "Innkeeper, do you know this man?"

"He's a stranger here," John Hostel answered. "Arrived alone in the late afternoon."

"Was he waiting for others to join him?"

"He may have been."

"The man asked about the coach from Capital Town," added Lydie.

McShane nodded.

"Soldier," Rebecca said.

McShane looked at her. She pointed at the man's cloak and shoes.

"These are what the fashionable bucks in Quantero currently favor. The tailoring isn't Noble Row quality but not poor Caneyville-shop, either. I'd say the man was a merchant, not rich but on fortune's rise."

“A merchant, you say. Can you deduce his political persuasion, too?”

Rebecca ignored him and patted the man’s cloak pockets. From one she withdrew a large pouch.

“Jewelry merchant, to be precise,” she said, opening the pouch and emptying its contents on the floor. Rings, necklaces, and bracelets spilled out.

“A true jeweler wouldn’t have his merchandise dumped in a pouch like that,” I added.

“Aye,” Rebecca agreed. “And these are good pieces. At least, they were until they got nicked and chipped all tumbled together. Not worth as much as they once were.”

She searched the man’s other pocket and withdrew a necklace. It had a gold medallion set with a circle of green emeralds hung on a chain. Even I could tell this one piece was worth more than all of us in this room possessed.

Rebecca studied the medallion.

“I’m not well-schooled in my letters, but the ones engraved on the back I believe are B...K...R.”

McShane held out his hand. She placed the medallion and chain in his palm.

“This belonged to the murder victim,” he announced. “It appears we have found the second assassin. That leaves the third and last one to be unmasked.”

Rebecca returned to our table. Her gait was unsteady.

“I’ve never seen a person killed right in front of me before,” she said.

Then she swooned. And fell against me.

As I held her in my arms, she pressed her hands and face to my chest. I felt her open the top of my shirt and slip what I knew to be a coin purse inside. Then she lightly kissed the notch of my collarbone.

I set her down firmly on the bench. She picked up my tankard and sipped some water. Over the rim of the mug, her back to all others, she looked up at me with laughing eyes.

“Sit down, Novarro,” McShane growled. “And stay put.”

I sat on the farthest end of the bench. Rebecca slid back beside me. Once more, she pressed her leg against mine.

McShane ordered his two injured dragoons to drag the dead man outside and for them to remain there. As they did, the master-at-arms studied Rebecca and me. I knew the thoughts going through his mind. First, this woman defeated two of his dragoons and challenged the entire room with fierce bravado. Now, she was suddenly a delicate maid who must be protected and coddled. Something was clearly amiss.

“Who was the assassins’ victim?” I asked.

McShane curled a tight fist around the medallion.

“A visiting dignitary from the Cimera Plains.”

“Lydie an’ I are from Cimera,” John Hostel said. “We’ve been gone for several years now, but perhaps we knew of this personage.”

“His name was Barnabas Kim-chi Roby.”

“Yes,” said John Hostel stiffly. “We know of him. He was a vile man who made his fortune in the slave trade.”

Lydie wiped tears from her eyes with the tail of her apron.

“I’ve heard that name in my travels,” I added. “I was told Roby publicly bragged that he kept his youthful appearance by washing in the blood of female virgins.”

“Perhaps this deplorable villain’s assassins should be honored and not hunted,” Rebecca offered.

“Murder may go unpunished elsewhere, but it will not in Zar,” McShane said, “and paid assassins like mercenaries are cowards with no honor. The last one is here and will not escape me.”

Whispers filled the room. They ceased instantly as McShane pointed his mace at John and Lydie Hostel.

“You’ll stay. I may need your knowledge of others lodging here,” he said.

John Hostel pulled Lydie tighter against him. McShane then gestured at the cook and the two brothers.

“You three may go,” he said.

The cook scampered over the bar and followed the brothers out the door.

“I’m confused, McShane,” I said. “You know the killers are paid assassins, and you say that one of us in this room is one, yet you don’t know who it is. How can that be?”

He swung toward me. Anger etched his features. McShane is many things, good and bad, but he is not a servant of Satan. He could do to me what Satan and his legion could not. Rebecca moved away from my side.

"Perhaps I can assist you in ferreting out this paid murderer," I said.

"I need no help from the likes of you."

"Then I may go?"

"No. You were in the capital two days ago."

"That is no secret."

"And I know your story. You are a killer. How many have you slain, Novarro?"

"I remember them all, but I've never tallied a count."

The master-at-arms, with much thought and deduction, winnowed down the number at the inn. He sent the ferrymen, blacksmith, alchemist, and a timid general store clerk on their way. John Hostel vouched for some others, including me. McShane released the rest but ignored the innkeeper's witness to my character.

During this time, Rebecca had eased back beside me on the bench. Beneath the table, unseen by others, an indecent assault and defense was being waged.

When the final suspect count reached seven men and myself, McShane stepped in front of Rebecca.

"What's your story, woman?" he asked. His eyes flicked to me then back to her. I wondered how much of Rebecca's devilishness he'd seen.

"I am a seamstress. That is how I know of Quantero fashions," she answered, folding her hands innocently on the tabletop. "That is where, of late, I plied my trade, but work there has become lacking. I'm going to Capital Town, not coming from as these other travelers are. My hope is that your ladies come to admire my needlework and I can make a profitable living. It's also my hope that I might find a kind and generous husband." She smiled. "If he is unmarried, so much the better."

McShane did not return her smile.

"Innkeeper."

John Hostel's response was prevented by Rebecca.

“They do not know me,” she said, her bare toes caressing the top of my boot under the table. “I arrived today at sunset.”

“Work is scarce in Quantero, yet you have enough to indulge in a room for the night.”

“I am a frugal person, and I saved a tidy sum before coming here. I could’ve slept outside on the ground, but I dislike sleeping outside on the ground.”

McShane studied her, deciding.

“You may go, woman.”

“I will stay, sire, if you allow it. The night air is chill, and I’m only wearing this thin garment. I know I have your assurance, but your two soldiers outside still cause me disquiet.”

“I fear more for their well-being than yours, and I need them on this night. You may remain.”

“I’m also intrigued to see you unmask the assassin.”

“You may stay only if you remain mute.”

Rebecca placed two fingers over her lips.

McShane turned away, Rebecca dismissed from his thoughts as he pondered more pressing and serious matters.

I surveyed the seven remaining men. All were strangers, unknown to John and Lydie Hostel. They were travelers who had arrived after dark. Six said they were coming from the capital. The seventh claimed he had come in from the frontier territories to get supplies at the La Traversée general store. I knew that none of the seven was the assassin McShane sought.

The bearded man who had been roused from his room, however, kept drawing my attention. McShane’s dragoons didn’t seem to notice that he repeatedly touched the left sleeve of his great-coat, as if reassuring himself that some object was still there. He also appeared to me to be more nervous than an innocent man should have been. Of course, innocent people are wrongly detained, but he didn’t seem to be a guiltless man trying to understand why life was so unfair and unjust. He was more like a guilty man plotting his escape.

Underneath the table, Rebecca slipped her hand into my lap and traced circles with her fingertips on my inner thigh. I slapped her knuckles. She gazed deep into my eyes then slowly turned her head in the direction she wanted me to look.

The bearded man was stroking his left sleeve again.

She had taken note of him, too. I wondered if the master-at-arms had.

McShane tapped the head of his mace against his open palm as he paced the room. He spoke aloud, but he was plainly talking to himself and not to the rest of us.

Barnabas Kim-chi Roby had traveled to Capital Town to seek permission to use Zar trade routes for his business. He had been in the city for four months. Upon arrival, he requested an audience with King Ulrich. The king refused to see him despite pleas from two prominent bankers. Zar had abolished slavery, and Ulrich didn't wish to even be peripherally involved with Roby.

Roby was staying at the chateau of one of the more prominent bankers. He had several meetings with other bankers who wished to invest with him and reap the substantial profits of his corrupt business. He was heard complaining that, since coming to Zar, he had been unable to get the precious virgin blood he needed for his bath—even the accommodating bankers had balked at that request. But it was whispered that Roby had two men in his employ who had no such qualms.

DeQuinn Mercy had told me the story about a vampire demon hunting young maidens in the city. The tales had begun shortly after Roby's arrival. I now had no doubt the real monster was human and not from Hell.

Two nights ago, after midnight, assassins crept into the chateau. They crossed the grounds to the household unseen by guards and hounds. They picked locks and advanced inside undetected by servants. The assassins located Roby and swiftly, without mercy, killed him and his two bodyguards. Then they left. Their departure was once again unobserved by either guards or servants. Outside the chateau grounds, they headed into the night in separate directions. Their murderous plan had been flawlessly executed.

They would've gotten away scot-free and Roby's murder might never have been solved except one assassin, Clegg Flint, decided the blood money he was being paid wasn't enough. He stole some of Roby's jewelry and coin when his companions weren't looking.

At this point, under the table, I angrily squeezed Rebecca's knee. She did not react or even look at me.

Clegg had gotten sloppy drunk at a Capital Town tavern and started showing off his plunder. The owner sent a lad for McShane. When McShane arrived with his dragoons, Clegg was still bragging about his newly acquired fortune. McShane took Clegg prisoner, but the assassin was severely wounded in the capture. He died an hour later.

Before Clegg died, however, McShane learned he was one of three who had been employed to assassinate Roby. The master-at-arms didn't uncover the names of the other two assassins or the person who hired them, but Clegg did tell him they were all to rendezvous at the Three-Legged Crusader in La Traversée tonight to receive their final payments.

McShane and his dragoons followed the lead Clegg had given them. And, the master-at-arms added, they had found the second assassin—the man with the stolen medallion—here at the inn.

"The third assassin is here, too," McShane said, finally speaking to us. "He is here to receive his blood money. I've had my suspicions right along, but at last, I know the assassin is—"

The bearded traveler leapt to his feet as he dumped the table onto its side. A short saber slid out of his coat sleeve into his fist, and he stabbed the closest dragoon to him through the heart.

Lydie cried out as John Hostel pulled her away from the fight. I moved swiftly in front of Rebecca to shield her. She peered around me to watch.

"Ya damn gits won't take me to gallows!" the bearded man shouted as he slashed his saber wildly.

The remaining two dragoons attempted to ready their rifles and shoot. The bearded man drove them back with his saber. The rear door and escape were only a few feet beyond the soldiers.

McShane bolted across the room. He jumped onto a bench then onto the edge of the overturned table. He sailed toward the bearded man, who looked over his shoulder and saw McShane. His eyes widened in terror as he spun about and raised his saber as McShane hammered the mace deep into his forehead. Blood cascaded down the man's face. The man's entire body spasmed; then, he collapsed dead to the floor.

“Oh, my,” Lydie whispered. She gripped John’s arm to stay on her feet.

Rebecca rested her left hand on my backside.

“Does he ever capture anyone alive?”

I glanced at her. In her right hand, she held the dagger from my boot.

McShane searched the body. He held up an executioner’s mask, showing it to me; then he tossed it aside.

He ordered the two dragoons who were outside to come back in. The four remaining soldiers carried their fallen comrade and the dead bearded man out of the tavern. McShane then told us remaining suspects we were free to leave. The six other men didn’t linger in their exit.

The quiet in the inn was thick and heavy. McShane cleaned the blood and brain from his mace with a bar rag.

“There’s still the matter of the person who hired the assassins,” he said.

None of us responded.

“I didn’t see any person this evening who had enough money to hire three assassins.” He tossed the rag down onto the bar top. “It appears that part of the assassination shall remain a mystery.”

Lydie began weeping again, and John comforted his wife.

McShane studied the innkeepers.

“When do you expect your next shipment of Tasmanian rum to arrive?”

“Harvest time,” John Hostel told him.

“I’ll return then with coin to spend.”

McShane walked to the front door. He stopped in front of Rebecca and me, but he didn’t look at us.

“Woman, you won’t find admirers of your needlework in Capital Town,” he said. “You won’t find them in any city or township in Zar. I suggest you ply your trade in Blackharbor, Camd’n Rin, or Shoi-ming.”

“I shall heed your suggestion, soldier,” Rebecca answered.

McShane inhaled deeply, holding the breath long in his lungs. Then, he finally exhaled.

“The king admires you, Paladin. I suspect we may meet again in the years to come.”

"I'll try to keep the occasions brief," I said.

"So will I."

Without further word, McShane left the inn.



Rebecca returned the dagger to my boot sheath. John Hostel locked all the doors and extinguished most of the lanterns then returned to his wife's side.

Rebecca and I joined them at the bar.

"Justice, long denied, has touched Barnabas Kim-chi Roby," Lydie said, her eyes moist yet again. "May he burn in Hell for eternity."

"His death," added John, "will not bring our daughter back to life, but it will have to do."

Lydie stepped close to Rebecca.

"Bless you, Mistress Nines."

"Blessings are undeserved," Rebecca responded uncomfortably. "But you may bless the nameless wretches who panicked and McShane killed. I wonder what crimes they were actually guilty of?"

"There's been a long-sought highwayman who wore an executioner's mask to hide his face," I said.

"Then the jewelry merchant met him here and bought his booty to resell in Quantero where it wouldn't be recognized."

"It appears so."

"Flint is dead," John commented.

"I warned you Clegg Flint was a damn fool."

"You did." John Hostel pulled two coin sacks out from under the bar and placed them in front of Rebecca. "I believe you should have Flint's share as well as your own."

She smiled. "I shan't debate you, innkeeper."

"You are an honorable man, Master Novarro," Lydie told me. "You understand why we were forced to do what we did. We had no other choice left to us to see justice done. John and I bless your journey, and we'll pray that your quest ends favorably and soon for you and for the Lady Lenore."

I nodded, accepting their blessings and prayers.

"We'll continue to collect news from travelers that might benefit you," Lydie added.

“As always, I thank you both.”

“Are you riding out for Balmoral in Rivenran on the morrow?”

“I leave at first light.”

John Hostel sighed with regret.

“My wife an’ I beg your forgiveness,” he said. “We’re exhausted an’ going to retire for the evening. Prayers must be said. It’d be my honor to serve you a drink before we depart.”

I shook my head, declining.

“A drink? Yes,” Rebecca said, “I believe I’ll have...” She looked at me. “...water. I like to keep a clear head and steady hand.”

I started to comment but thought better of it.

Lydie placed a tankard of water on the bar. Then the innkeepers, holding each other, both weeping now, headed into the kitchen and to their room in the rear.

Rebecca pulled herself up onto the bar. She swung her legs as a playful child might. I shook my head at her. This woman was indecent scandal personified.

Smiling, she looked at the tomato from my supper she now held in her hand. She took a deep bite, and juice splashed down her chin. Then she held it out to me.

I shook my head again. Indecent scandal and brazen shamelessness.

“McShane knew, didn’t he?” she asked me.

I closed the wide gap in the top of her robe.

“Yes. That is why he showed us the dead man’s mask. But, for his own reasons, he decided to do as he did.”

“Without being immodest, I say I’m the best pick-lock and pick-pocket there is. I opened the locked and bolted doors of that chateau as if I had unearthly powers. Can I have the purse I lifted?”

I tossed the coin sack onto the bar beside her.

“Why did you steal the medallion from Roby? It proved your part in the assassination.”

“I shouldn’t have. I knew better. I give oath the medallion was the only piece I took. It was fortunate I did, however.” Her eyes narrowed as she gazed at me. “You saw me slip it into the merchant’s pocket. Why didn’t you expose me to McShane? He doesn’t like you, but he would’ve believed everything and anything you

said—you are the Paladin. He would not have believed a word I said in denial.”

“He said he didn’t need my help.”

“No other reason?”

I carefully measured my answer.

“I’m going to retire to my room. First light will be here much too soon.” I paused, studying her. “I think I’ll barricade my door so I can rest undisturbed.”

“Patrick,” Rebecca said, tracing her fingertips down my arm, “it just so happens that I, too, am leaving at first light and heading to Rivenran. We could ride together. You could lecture me on the benefits of doing righteous and good deeds, and I will give my solemn oath to hang on every word you speak.”

“I am married, Rebecca.”

“Till death do you part, the vows say. You are husband no longer,” she said. “I could be the here-and-now. I pledge that you won’t regret the decision for a twinkling.”

Conflicting thoughts dueled and swirled in my mind. I’d never considered once in near five years what I was considering now.

“Have we met before?” I asked. “I have felt as if we have.”

“No. I would’ve remembered you if we had.”

Rebecca slid down to the floor in front of me. Using my shirt, she wiped the juice from her chin and forced the remaining tomato into my hand. Then she stood on her tiptoes and kissed me on the corner of my mouth.

“Goodnight, Patrick. My door will be unlocked.”

“Farewell, Rebecca. I wish you good health and fortune.”

“I’d prefer to hear ‘see you soon.’”

She ascended the stairs. At midpoint, she smiled at me, and the robe fell from her body. She didn’t retrieve it.

I turned away as she continued, head held high, to her room. I placed the tomato on the bar.

And left within the hour.

I’d decided I would sleep down the road. I rode Leopard in the opposite direction of Rivenran. Tomorrow, or the next day, I would swing a wide loop back then seek out the warlock I’d been told about.

I am Patrick Novarro.

Some call me the Paladin.
One woman knows me as the third assassin.

INTERLUDE

T*he twelve archdemons gathered around the throne, waiting* for their master. Lenore knew something had happened. The twelve were angrier and more violent than usual, shouting and cursing in their original tongue that she had only learned a few words of thus far. Only Mammon, who revealed no emotion in victory or defeat, appeared calm. Croell, by contrast, wailed and clawed deep at her breasts, and Sulhoth flagellated himself with a cat o' nine tails.

Yes, she was certain an event had occurred that had caused all twelve to abandon their earthly missions and assemble here. They needed their overlord's guidance on how to proceed.

Lenore gave thanks to the Holy Trinity. A nearby dragon-pup growled at her.

The room was barren save for the blood-gold throne. The glacial walls were in continuous movement, changing from square to oval to maze. Satan's favorite mortal trophies hung below the high ceiling's blasphemous and always changing mural—bodies crushed and entombed in hoarfrost spikes. She only knew a few. Her beloved would have known most.

There were Iscariot, and Pilate, and the pharaoh who ordered the murder of all Hebrew male babies to stop the coming of Moses. There was Thuria's mad King Redmore III, and the pagan war-

lord Attila, whom she only knew from the curse “may Attila sup on your liver.” Tortured mortal faces, other persons of some significance also, she assumed, were pressed against the underside of the black ice coating the floor.

Once, Satan had escorted her to a dark, misty part of the room.

“Your husband has performed deeds that scar his soul,” he said. “His killing of his companion at the Abyss still weighs heavy on him. Doubts, more and more, plague him. I may not have to destroy the Paladin. He may damn himself.”

“Patrick will not fall,” Lenore replied, steadfast. “He will remain a good man.”

Satan pointed at the floor.

“This is where I will lay you and him. You will be facing one another with only a sliver of ice-wall separating your souls. You will spend eternity looking into one another’s eyes but never speaking with or touching the other. When I have done that, I will think upon you no more.”

“Why are those who join you punished?”

“It is what all Mankind deserves,” Satan had replied.

Now, Lenore struggled to move closer to the archdemons, but it was no use. The chain that impaled her through the waist usually allowed her to move about the entire room, only stopping her a height’s length from the entryway. Since the arrival of the twelve, the chain had retreated into its the ice-pillar, and she couldn’t rise from her knees.

Now, Lenore heard two words in guttural demon-tongue she knew. The first, said several times, was *death*, but it meant more than that. It referred to the feared demise that ended in the Abyss. The other was the obscene term the demons used for the warrior angel Elias.

She tugged on the chain. The dragon-pup snarled. Ignoring it, Lenore closed her eyes and concentrated on the voices. She heard several Thurian names—the Io River, Zar, Rivenran, Tynan, Valkyries Gate and...

Without conscious thought, her hands went to her breast, pressed together in prayer. The dragon-pup whined as if it had been struck. Yes, she told herself, she had not misheard. Croell was cursing Patrick. Her beloved had done something to cause this upheaval.

Satan arrived. All fell prostrate as he walked to his throne. The underworld lord looked at her. His features revealed nothing of his mood.

As Satan sat down, the goat-headed archdemon Baphomet bel-lowed and shook his fist toward Heaven. Satan looked at him. Baphomet flew across the room, crashing into Ki, the three-headed archdemon, then slammed into an icy wall. He crawled on his belly back to the throne.

The other eleven remained silent.

Finally, Satan turned to Mammon; Mammon spoke.

Lenore labored to understand their words. Patrick had done... no, had *not* done yet whatever had them so aroused. Her beloved was riding from Zar toward Rivenran. In that province was... what? She was overwhelmed with frustration, did not understand.

Croell was allowed to speak. The archdemon spoke of Tynan. Lenore recognized the name. He was a grand master warlock, Croell's and Sulhoth's protégé and a most-devoted disciple. Tynan was one of the few living mortals Lenore had seen inside the flaming palace walls. He'd been granted for his lifetime a passage-way that led from the world to Hell. It stood at Valkyries' Gate.

Patrick had learned of the warlock and was seeking him.

Croell finished, and several archdemons spoke at once, each drowning the other out. Satan raised his hand. All fell silent again.

One name had stood out from the din.

Elias.



The story of Elias was well known to Lenore. The warrior angel loved mankind and inhabited his winged mortal body with honor. It was unknown how many demons had fallen to his flaming sword.

Croell and Sulhoth set an ambush for Elias. He escaped but received a fatal wound to his side in the battle. A good mortal family found the warrior angel and tended him until the Archangel Magdalene and others arrived. Elias requested that when he passed he be allowed to retain his warrior angel body and be laid to rest on earth. Perhaps he could inspire yet-to-be mortals to tread the righteous path.

His request was granted. The archangels and the good family placed the body of Elias in a simple, unadorned tomb. Then, the

tomb and the ground surrounding it were blessed so that no demon or mortal damned could disturb it. Then, all the archangels and warrior angels swore an oath that the location of the tomb would never be revealed to any mortal or immortal soul.

Most believed the tomb of Elias was somewhere in the Sacred Lands, but centuries of searching, by armies and individuals, had not found it. A few said it lay within the ruins of one of the lost civilizations—the island of Amazonhenge that was consumed by the ocean, the devastated Five Cities of the Jordan Plain, the Great Desert’s metropolis Scimitar that vanished in a hundred-year sandstorm, the empty temples of Grenburke. Perhaps, said others, it was on the other side of the Wall of Fog.



Elias, Croell repeated.

Lenore tugged again on the chain. It remained as it was.

Satan pointed at Sulhoth. Croell’s twin spoke, but his words made no sense to Lenore. Ten, a hundred, a thousand? Seers, oracles, soothsayers? A vision—the same vision, Sulhoth said—at the same moment had occurred. This, and the possible discovery of the passageway at Valkyries Gate, is what so terrified the legions of Hell.

Lenore, despite retaining her mortal aspect, no longer breathed, nor did blood flow in her body. Yet she would have sworn her heart was racing in triumph.

A thousand seers had beheld the same vision at the same moment. They saw Patrick wielding a flaming sword over the ashes of a slain demon army.

Satan commanded all save Croell to return to their earthly missions. The overlord and his devoted servant talked. Lenore could not hear them. It was as if she had been struck deaf.

Croell left. The chain lengthened from the ice pillar, and Lenore stood. Satan waved for her to approach.

“Novarro is more resourceful than I imagined him to be,” he said. “But he will not prevail.”

“Then why does my beloved so frighten your legion?” she challenged him. “Because he will triumph?”

Satan smiled. “Novarro may stand before the eleventh doorway at Valkyries Gate, but he will not use it to come here after you,

and he will never hold the sword and shield of Elias. Events that might be can be foretold, but not what *will* be. The future for no man or woman is written in stone. I have sent Croell to stop him. If Croell fails, I will send another. And another, if need be. No-varro and the ones who ride with him will be defeated.”

“Others?”

“Trusted companions travel with him, but it is not enough, for they are sinners and all have tasted of my gifts. One will be enticed to be Novarro’s Judas. In the end, they will all perish. And, also in the end, he will betray his vows to you.”

Lenore staggered back as if struck by a fist.

“The season has come to put finish to your mortal’s quest and an end to him.”

“A covenant cannot be broken except by agreement of both parties,” she reminded him, trembling and suddenly unsure. “I do not agree to unseal ours. Patrick shall not be harmed by you or any of your legion.”

Satan rose, towering over her.

“I am destroyer of worlds. I am annihilation of mankind’s hopes and dreams. I have never broken a covenant nor will I. But every covenant has a loophole that I may use, if I so desire. Know this day, mortal...”

Lenore fell to her knees in prayer.

“...that I do so desire.”

Part Two

TO THE RUINS AT VALKYRIES GATE



17

T*he villagers of Pencross, who had survived merciless Sevian* raiders and two black plagues, decided to abandon their town until we left.

The sun had reached its zenith in the cloudless spring sky as I stood alone in the village square near its moss-rimmed fountain. A small locked box containing one thousand in gold and silver coin was at my feet. I had traveled to the Rivenran provinces with one purpose—to find the caul-faced warlock—but found myself waylaid from my intent.

During our second day in Balmoral, the sprawling Rivenran capital, I was sought out by the merchant-lord Konstantine Theron. His twenty-year-old son Grigori had been kidnapped by brigands and was being held for ransom. His lordship begged me to save him. I was, he said, sobbing, the one man he could trust to deliver the ransom and not abscond with it; the one man who could rescue his child.

I knew of his lordship's honest reputation and was about to agree when he added that, as a reward, he would give me a map showing an ancient, long-forgotten route through the Rivenran Mountains that led to Valkyries Gate.

He should not have said that.

Polished deceivers and frauds know when to stop talking; they let the mark finish the tale and its outcome for themselves. If the

merchant-lord hadn't added the map, hadn't dangled the passage I was seeking as a prize, I would not have grown suspicious. I would have ridden to Pencross unaware.

My purpose in Rivenran was not common knowledge. That was their first error. I had only discovered the warlock's name was Tynan Greydraca the day before. As to the whereabouts of his passageway, I had no hint, until the merchant-lord made his offer.

So, someone wanted me to come to Pencross. Ill intent was clearly their purpose.

I wanted to know who that someone was.



The brigands' lookout, dressed in wolfskin and armed with a long-bow, rose from his position on the tavern's rooftop. I'd known where he was within the first minutes I had arrived this morning. He waved his bow over his head, signaling to the others that I was here and alone, as I was supposed to be.

Only I wasn't alone. Two whom I trusted without reservation had followed me unseen into the village.

I removed my tattered greatcoat and dropped it, folded, onto the ground near me. Then, I tossed my wide-brimmed hat atop the coat.

Four villains rode into view at the far end of the square and reined their mounts to a halt.

I tugged the gloves from my hands.

Two of the riders were cloaked in bear and wild boar skins respectively. Their hair and beards were long and matted, and they appeared more beast than man. Most curious were their weapons—one had a gladiator's retiarius net, the second twirled a bolo.

The third horseman was dressed in dirty tailored broadcloth. Grigori Theron should have been bound and gagged, perhaps even battered from his abduction. He was not. He was one of them. A rapier was in the scabbard on his hip, and coiled in his hand was a long whip.

The fourth rider I recognized but had never met. She sent blades of fear and dread through me.

I have seen Omusa's unfinished painting of the Nine Rings of Hell. It is a soul-chilling work, and I can understand why the

artist killed himself before completing it. The visions he saw while painting must have been terrifying and overwhelming. The likeness of the fourth rider, presented in the painting down to the maggots writhing in her serpent-like hair, was very accurate.

She was called Croell, and was one of Satan's twelve archdemons. Like most of her kind, she usually moved about this world by body-snatching mortals, but not this day. Today, she wore her true appearance. She had become vulnerable and risked the Abyss to face me.

Why? I wondered. The elder demon knew well I was protected by her master's oath. She could not harm me. So, why was she here?

I smashed the box at my feet with my boot heel then squatted to examine the spilled contents. There was no coin. The chest was filled with iron bolts and shavings to give it weight.

The plot *had* all along been to entice me here.

Croell's plan was now clear. She couldn't kill or maim me, but she could capture me. That was why the others had the weapons they did. I was to be seized and imprisoned. Then, I would spend the remainder of my years trapped in a dungeon cell, where I would have no hope of rescuing Lenore and where I could no longer threaten Hell's legion.

It was a good plan but for one flaw.

My plan.

The four riders spread out across the street. Grigori and the other two advanced. Croell understood one thing the others did not seem to. She remained back, out of range of my pistol.

I saw Rebecca pull herself up onto the tavern roof. The lookout, his bow drawn, was intent on me and the events unfolding in the square. Holding her short sword with both hands, she crept toward him.

Croell spurred her destrier forward but not too close. Grigori and the other two moved farther apart. Why were they delaying their attack?

As soon as I thought the question, it answered itself. Yes, it was definitely a good plan.

I smiled at the elder demon. She stroked the albino titan boa constrictor that suckled her breast.

“You have caused much grief to the Master, Novarro,” she announced. “Today you are done.”

“Make it so,” I replied.

Croell spat. The snake hissed at me as it uncurled from the archdemon and dropped to the ground. Four powerful legs extended from its body, and its white eyes darkened.

Grigori was in the center of the advancing trio. He uncoiled his whip. The horseman to my left swung the bolo over his head, the stones at the ends of the leather rope whining. The rider to my right, near the tavern, stretched his net out along the side of his horse. The snake-turned-lizard, hunched down on its legs, scuttled closer forward.

From an alley behind me, a fierce battle cry echoed, followed by a shriek of anguish. Then came the clash of steel against steel. Those Croell had sent to assail me from the rear had run into Vas.

Croell’s stallion reared as she, realizing her surprise assault had come to naught, hauled hard on the reins. The others misunderstood what had happened. At the sound of Vas’s cry, the three horsemen and the lizard-snake rushed me.

An arrow from the lookout cut air near my head. Ignoring him, I drew my pistol in one smooth motion, and fired. The round punched the horseman swinging the bolo from his charging mount. I crouched, turning toward the rider on my right. He let his net sail, spinning at me.

On the rooftop, Rebecca swung her sword at the archer. She missed him, but he jumped backward to get away from her and fell off the edge of the roof. He landed hard, his spine shattering against the rim of the fountain in the square’s center, and moved no more.

I rolled across the ground as the net sailed to the spot where I’d been a moment before. I leapt back to my feet, firing. Bloody mist exploded from the rider’s throat, and he tumbled from his horse.

Grigori’s whip curled around my leg, and he yanked me off my feet. As I slammed to the ground, he cracked the whip across my body.

The snake was nearly upon me.

I grabbed a handful of iron from the shattered box and threw it in the snake's eyes as I fired at Grigori. The round pierced the young noble's chest. He swayed, dropping the whip, but remained in the saddle.

The snake reared up to attack, its maw wide and black venom dripping from its fangs. I shoved my pistol into its open mouth. Its fangs tore the flesh on my hand as I fired, and the snake's head exploded in blood and bone. It flopped to the ground, its huge body twitching.

Once more on my feet, I aimed, the last rounds in the chambers, at Croell. Perhaps she was in range.

It was worth the risk.

The elder demon reined her stallion about then lashed the animal to a gallop. I fired and missed. As Croell thundered away, I saw Rebecca running across rooftops after her.

"No!" I shouted.

They reached the end of the street at the same moment.

Grigori blocked me with his horse, his rapier gripped in his fist. Blood stained the tunic over his breast; his face was pale and slack. He raised the blade and spurred his horse at me.

I shot him through the cheek.

The horse hit me, sending me sprawling ass-over-crown; I crashed facedown into the ground, the wind knocked from my body. I struggled up onto my hands and knees. Vas gripped my arm and pulled me to my feet.

"I count four here," he said. "My tally is five. 'Twould have been six, but the last coward ran away fouling hisself." He gazed around the square. "Where is milady?"

I looked toward the end of the street. Neither Rebecca nor Croell were in sight. The archdemon's stallion, riderless, charged back around the last shop. Dread filled me.

Then Rebecca rounded the corner, sheathing her short sword.

"Are you harmed?" I called out.

"I'm whole," she replied. "Can't say the same for the git bitch." She held up Croell's severed head just before it burst into flame and crumbled to ash.

18

T*ynan Greydraca forced my participation in this foul deed,”* Lord Konstantine Theron said, slumped in a chair behind the desk in his study. He twisted a scarf in white-knuckled hands.

The merchant-lord had aged and withered greatly since our meeting the previous day. He made no attempt to protect himself from me.

“I beg your forgiveness, Paladin. The warlock said he would have my entire family and household murdered if I did not aid him.”

The anger within me began to fade.

“Grigori was with them willingly,” I said, rubbing again the wound where Croell’s serpent had ripped the back of my hand.

“I lost my son to the warlock last autumn. Many families in Rivenran have lost loved ones to the coven. Until the night Grigori brought Tynan to this house, I had not seen him in weeks. The son I knew and loved no longer existed. The one who came that night was a cruel stranger. Even his favorite dog would not approach him. I swear this on what little honor I still possess.”

It was the truth—that I knew. My anger at the merchant-lord was gone.

“Tell me what you know about the warlock,” I said.

Konstantine leaned toward me, releasing the mangled scarf onto the tabletop.

“Tynan knows you have come here for him,” he said. “He rarely leaves the keep near Twobridges Pass except to perform his rituals at Valkyries Gate. This is known. He was infuriated that he had to come here because of you. But he was absolute that his plan would succeed.”

“It wasn’t his plan. It was the plot of one whose command he dare not refuse.”

“I must atone for what I have done.” Konstantine rose to his feet and stiffened his shoulders. “My life is yours to end for my deceit, and all that I possess, Paladin, is available to you.”

“I don’t want your life and merely by being here I put your family at further risk. We’ll ride on.”

“We were marked the minute Grigori joined the warlock’s coven. Perhaps your presence, and that of your companions, will allow us a few more days before we go to the grave.”

“Tynan has no cause now to fulfill his threat.”

“All the more reason he will. ‘Tis his nature. Stay. I will tell you all I know about Tynan, and I will find others who can tell you what I do not know.”

“Is there a map to this Gate?”

“None that I possess.”

I sighed, thinking, debating.



I found Rebecca and Vas in the household kitchen. Rebecca sat at the table, the plate the cook had prepared untouched in front of her. She gestured for me to sit on the bench beside her.

Vas devoured his drink and bowl of haggis as if he had never drunk and eaten before, and never would again.

My companions, my friends.

Rebecca took my hand into hers and spread lemon-grass ointment on my wound. Then, she blew gently across the torn flesh.

I meant to take my hand away.

I did not.

Rebecca wore a boy’s jerkin, open to navel, that barely restrained her full bosom; skin-tight breeches; moccasins rising up

to her thighs and a horseman's duster. She expertly wielded her *miséricorde* stiletto with blade trimmed in silver, but she was only a fair hand with a short sword. I was amazed that, with the sword, she had bested the archdemon and sent her into the Abyss. Divine assistance must have guided her blade.

After our adventure in Zar, she wished to continue our association. I'd had a partner once before; the alliance had cost Tom Kree his life and nearly his soul. I did not desire another. Twice I'd ridden on, leaving Rebecca behind. Both times she caught up with me. The third time I abandoned her, I found myself suddenly worrying about her welfare, and I turned back to the township where I'd left her.

We have been riding together ever since.

Upon hearing stories about a caul-veiled warlock who had a passageway to the underworld, Vas from Lyoness had tracked me down. When he found that I already knew about Tynan and was going to Rivenran to search for him, he said his village could never repay me for the service I had done, but he could give small token by joining Rebecca and I.

Then he cursed me. He added that the rat-catcher whose station I had raised had become a respected civilized voice within the village. All listened to her and heeded her advice. She openly disdained the manly pursuits of fighting, drinking, wenching and playing games of chance. Lyoness had grown dull.

"I *fart* civilized," he said.

Vas had taken to wearing a spiked iron cap over the stub of his missing left arm. He favored a double-bladed battle axe that he wielded with deadly precision and strength. Vas was a bold and honorable man. He had become a good friend.

I wanted no partners, yet now I had two. And I had sent message for a third to join us.

I feared for them every day they rode with me.

Once, my father told me that a single stick could be broken easily, but several together was much more difficult. I knew I couldn't capture the warlock on my own. It spoke volumes about my unworthiness that I was allowing them to risk their lives, and possibly their souls, to rescue Lenore.

Vas, his mouth overflowing with sheep's pluck, motioned to Cook to refill his bowl.

"Where do we travel next, Patrick?"

"We're staying," I replied. "For one night. Tomorrow, we'll go into town to meet DeQuinn. Listen to me. We've been offered all this household provides during our stay. Do not take advantage."

Vas pointed at his now full-again bowl.

"I am content."

Then he winked at Cook. The large woman giggled, clearly pleased by the attention.

"Would a hot bath and new clothing be too much to request?" Rebecca asked, tugging at her shirt. "The stench of that demon skank rubbed off on me, and it's all I smell. How could anything be this chafing foul? Flies come within one meter of me and drop dead in mid-flight."

Cook nodded in full agreement.

"I smell nothing," Vas said, shoveling another heaping spoonful into his mouth.

"That's because you have never bathed a-purpose."

"Bathing strips a man of his natural bodily defenses."

"How many wives do you have?"

"Three. All are built for comfort and warmth, not for speed and adventure like you."

"Any children?"

Vas counted on his fingers.

"Eight. Igraine is the youngest. Only two seasons old."

"I'm surprised there's one."

Vas frowned, broth dripping from his mustache and beard, her meaning eluding him.

I traced my fingers down my cheek to my chin.

"A bath and a shave would be good."

"I give a most excellent shave," Rebecca purred.

"No," I replied sternly.

If I hadn't known embarrassment was an emotion Rebecca was incapable of, I would have sworn she was blushing. I feared a different emotion was bringing the color to her cheeks and a smile to her lips.

Cook placed a plate of food for me on the table. The expression on her worldly face was as disconcerting as Rebecca's.

19

B*athed and with the beard razored from my face, I pulled on* breeches that had once belonged to the merchant-lord's son and tied them at the waist. It had been a long while since I'd worn any clothing that was not mended or threadbare.

I eased under clean linen sheets on a feather mattress. I was exhausted and should have fallen asleep immediately. Instead, I stared at the shapes the fire in the hearth painted across the ceiling. I saw ocean waves, soaring birds, tall mountains, winged fairies.

The ceiling itself seemed unnatural. Most often, our "ceiling" was sky and stars. I couldn't recall when I had last slept on a feather mattress. I did know the last time I had slept in a bed in night-clothes and without weapons within easy reach. That was when I lived in Valon, with Lenore, more than five years ago. There were times—too many of late—when that life seemed like a desired dream, a fanciful fable that had never truly been except in my mind.

I was and am a sinful man. This, I freely admit. With Lenore's guidance and example, I became a better man. I do not know if I will be received in Heaven when my days are done. I do know, without misgiving or uncertainty, that Lenore should be among the angels and not trapped in Hell.

I will not do anything in deed or action that might jeopardize her further.

I will not.

I heard the door unlatch, and Rebecca slipped into the room. She locked the door then looked at her hands.

"I am the best."

I stared at her, not speaking, for words failed me. My lack of voice wasn't because she had come uninvited to where I was sleeping. That she had done before, although she knew the outcome beforehand.

This occasion was different.

She'd had a bath also and was dressed in a modest high-collared gown clearly not of her choosing. It covered her completely from chin to toe, her fingers peeking out of too-long sleeves. As she padded barefoot to the bed, I was reminded for a moment of another.

But she is not the other, I repeated to myself.

"I'm in no mood for this battle again," I said at last.

Rebecca shook her head.

"I didn't come tonight to tempt your resolve."

"Then why?"

She hesitated then said, "I'm frightened, Patrick."

These words I did not believe.

"After what we survived today, *now* you're frightened?"

Sinking to her knees, she placed her elbows on the mattress then her chin in her cupped hands. She gazed at me across the bed.

"Each time I close my eyes, I see visions of the Damned in Hell," she said. "I see me among them. I am an abomination."

A great sorrow swept over me.

"Croell was not soldier or disciple," she continued. "She was one of the Twelve. *He* will want revenge."

"I am higher on his list than you will ever be."

This was the truth, but she was right. Croell's destruction would not be ignored or dismissed. Satan, and most certainly the archdemon's brother Sulhoth, would want blood retribution.

"I don't remember battling her. I jumped off the roof just as she rode past. I had my sword at the ready, and I recall the bitch was looking up at me, caught by surprise, as I came at her. The next thing I know, I'm walking toward you and Vas with her burn-

ing head in my hand.” A tear trickled down her cheek. “I may never sleep again.”

I had never seen Rebecca weep. I had never heard her voice fear of man, beast or demon. Our meeting, our partnership, was the worst thing that had ever befallen her. I wished I could undo the event.

“Please, allow me to lie beside you—only that. Perhaps then I might be able to sleep.”

Her eyes filled with more tears, and I relented. I turned back the sheets. She smiled as she stood, and the gown fell and puddled at her feet. Firelight danced over her naked flesh.

She took my hand, kissing my wound, and finished the doctoring by pressing the injury to her bosom. Then she slid under the sheets, sealing her body against my side. Only her head, placed on my shoulder and chest, was visible.

She’d deceived me. Again.

And I was allowing it.

“I should have known better,” I said. “Go.”

“You already said yes. Why are you wearing breeches to bed?”

“You lied to me.”

“Lying is but one of my tongue’s talents. Do you want me to show you some others?”

“Get out, or I’ll put you out.”

“You can. You’re much stronger than I.” She shifted her position against me slightly and wrapped one leg around mine. “I am comfortable now. Goodnight.”

“Move your hand.”

She raised her hand above the sheets and wiggled her fingers at me.

“The other hand.”

“Your mouth says one thing, but your body says quite another. Oh, damn! Patrick, you’re—”

I grabbed her roughly, pulling her across my body and dumping her on the floor. She stood, rubbing her backside with both hands, not attempting in the least to shield her nakedness from me.

“I know for certain now that I don’t repulse you,” she said. “And I am more envious of Lenore than I have ever been before.

Blaze, you stir my soul as no man ever has. I don't chafing like it."

I did not respond.

She walked around the bed and dressed in the gown, but instead of leaving, she lay down, knees drawn to chest, on the very edge of the bed with her back to me.

"Goodnight, Patrick," she whispered. "Safe sleep. Don't scratch at the wound as it heals."

I remained silent. Part of me wanted to finish throwing her out of the room, another part said for me to leave.

I did neither.

I cursed myself for a coward.

I lay there, once again looking at the fire shadows traversing the ceiling—dark tombs, a screaming direbeast, fiery rivers, clawed demons. I picked up the cameo on the bed table beside my revolver. I traced my thumb over Lenore's carved name. Over the years, I had nearly worn the engraving away rubbing it.

Rebecca whimpered in her sleep. As I put the cameo back on the table, I felt her body shiver. She was still on her side with her back to me.

Why had I not sent her away immediately?

Rebecca gasped and kicked in her sleep. Was this act another deceit? Or had she been true about the nightmares?

I put my hand to her shoulder, and her shuddering seemed to lessen as I touched her. I removed my hand, and her body quivered harshly again.

She hadn't lied about the nightmares.

Easing closer, curling my body along hers, I slid my arm around her. Rebecca clutched my arm then sighed contentedly. She pressed her lips against my hand.

Soon, she was still and peaceful.



When I woke at first light, Rebecca lay atop me, her head on my chest and her legs stretched between mine. She was naked again.

I was relieved as I quickly determined I was wore my breeches. I was ashamed, however, that my manhood was fully aroused and pressing against those breeches and her softest flesh.

I studied her face for a long moment then brushed the hair away from her eyes. A small smile touched her lips.

This was not the first time Rebecca had been naked around me, but I had never allowed my gaze to linger on her body. She liked to keep her legs and underarms shaved. I do not know if other women partake of this grooming ritual, but I was dismayed that I knew this particular vanity of hers.

Not once had I seen Lenore naked.

During our courtship, we stayed firmly on the path of proper etiquette. Her chaperoning mother and aunt instructed us on the ways of the God-fearing and decent. We believed. As wife and husband, we only made love in our marriage bed, at night, under the covers and wearing nightclothes. Holding one another afterwards, praying that our union would produce child, had been the best of times.

From my readings at the university and from indecent talk with schoolmates when I was younger, I was fully aware of earthly temptations and deeds. I must admit that, upon occasion, I was weak, and evil thoughts crept into my mind's eye; but I would have never attempted to make those sinful visions real. To have done so would have horrified Lenore and scarred her heart and soul. Even our glorious and brief reunion, after the events at Ananyas, had remained within pious boundaries.

Lenore would have never even thought of the acts Rebecca delighted in describing for us to do. My loving bride deserved much better than me.

I gazed at Rebecca's exposed back. Her spine had a slight S-curve to it. Was that why, when she was exhausted, she limped when she walked?

Slowly, ever so slowly, I studied her spine from neck to buttocks. I paused. There was a small birthmark at the crest of her buttocks. It looked strangely like the ancient Thurian symbol for a falling star.

I traced my fingers over the mark. The flesh felt hot. Rebecca, waking, kissed my breast and said words that I would never have expected to hear from her.

"Sweet morn, my love."

INTERLUDE

R*is Mal was at first mystified by the selfless and loving acts of* some mortals, then became more and more curious. Curiosity soon turned to admiration, and that to wishing to be human, even when it meant forsaking the Master and immortality.

So, when the opportunity arose, Ris Mal had eagerly taken it. The demon slipped inside a young woman's body at the very moment her soul departed it and, using its waning demonic powers, repaired the broken vessel and became mortal. It was no longer Ris Mal, low demon; she was now DeQuinn Mercy of Gaul in the Principality of Zar.

Not once since the possession had she grieved over the decision. Every day was a wonder of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches that she treasured. She constantly marveled at the sensual delights of inhabiting her human body. She also had found friendship among mortals, which was more foreign than all else. She had learned much from them.

Even with the loss of most of her powers, the trade was more than acceptable.

No regrets.

Until this day.

One Christian mortal knew of her past, and he had kept her secret. She had given her solemn vow to accompany him when

he found a passageway into Hell. She considered participating in the quest to free his lady a privilege.

DeQuinn headed out for Rivenran the same day she received word from the Paladin asking her to join him and the others in Balmoral.

She had heard the story of the warlock he was seeking. He was called Tynan Greydraca. His mother had been a Fenrir witch, and King Ulrich's grandfather, King Leopold, had beheaded the pregnant woman then had her body burned. A sudden downpour saved her from becoming mere ash. After her scorched, headless corpse was retrieved from the pyre, a live son was ripped from her womb.

Although mortal, he learned incantations and conjuring from the elder demons Sulhoth and Croell. He journeyed often between this world and Hell's palace beside the River Styx to present offerings of gold, precious stones and the blood of the innocent to his mentors. 'Twas said he was a skeletal man with a webbed, membranous caul that veiled his face from hairline to cleft chin, and that blasphemous tattoos covered his entire body from crown to the soles of his feet. He was the unchallenged leader of his coven, his followers fervent and obedient to him.

Novarro had found the warlock in Rivenran.

DeQuinn gave herself one task before joining the Paladin. To complete it, she wished she had retained all of her otherworldly powers.

She could still walk among crowds and be unnoticed and unremembered unless she deemed it so. It had been so for the entire time she had been here. She entered the keep past two sentries at the main gate without challenge.

All members of the coven—all two hundred men and women—appeared to be present at the midnight convening, even the guards. 'Twas the perfect opportunity to finish scouting the fortifications. She had already mapped most of the castle grounds in her memory and had found three breaches in the walls. After exploring the rear ramparts, she would head out to rendezvous with Novarro.

Nearly all of the coven were filthy and wore hides as clothing. Some had swords; others had spears or clubs. Still others had bows. None spoke to her, no one even brushed against her as she moved within the throng.

She paused at midpoint among them. Ahead of her was a tall platform that all could view from anywhere in the courtyard. A naked man was tied spread-eagle on his back on an altar. Two more were bound and on their knees near him. Four men wearing beast skulls for masks and holding battle axes guarded the three. Behind them, a decaying body hung crucified upside-down facing a large inverted cross.

Everyone stopped where they were and raised their faces toward the tower. Tynan Greydraca descended the stone steps in a purple velvet robe. Even from this distance, DeQuinn could see that the thick caul cloaking his face looked like a spider's web.

The flesh on her arms and legs twitched in warning. This was one of the most reprehensible humans she had ever encountered.

Tynan crossed the platform to the center. He brushed his long white hair back then raised his arms. The coveners lowered their heads toward the underworld as one.

"To our Lord and Master Satan, and to all the demons in Hell, we pledge our lives and souls," Tynan intoned. "We will slaughter all who oppose our Lord without qualm or pity. We will wash in their blood and celebrate their misery as we await the day the entire world will be the Master's kingdom."

"Hail, Lord Satan!" the coveners chanted. "Hail, Lord Satan! Hail, Lord Satan!"

"Proceed," Tynan commanded.

Two of the skull-masked guardsmen, a bull-shouldered man and a giant, moved one to each side of the altar.

"This miserable creature," Tynan continued, "was chosen to battle one of our Master's greatest mortal enemies. The task was an honored one. Faced with the enemy, he ran away. He betrayed himself and our congregation. He will never run away again."

The guardsmen swung their axes, severing the man's legs at the knees, and he screamed in agony. The scream did not last long as the blood streamed from his body.

Tynan moved to the kneeling men.

"These two were given the sacred duty of protecting us," he said. "They allowed a spy to enter our house."

DeQuinn recognized the gate sentries and knew she had been discovered.

The warlock pointed at the crowd. His coveners stepped aside until, in only a moment, no one stood between DeQuinn and the warlock.

She faced him defiantly.

“The Master awaits your return, Ris Mal,” he called. “You achieved your desire to forsake his Kingdom and become mortal, but there is a cost. A winged dragon-hound stands at the ready, and when your mortal body dies, it will snatch your soul in its jaws and drag you back to where you were first shat to life. You will be punished for ten thousand years before your soul is sent into the Abyss.”

DeQuinn glanced at the followers to her left, then on her right. She knew several would come at her at once, but one would still have to be the first to reach her. One was all she needed.

“You will not aid Novarro,” Tynan said. He slapped his hands together. “Kill her!”

They came in a frenzied rush, shrieking, from all sides. A flat-nosed man with a braided beard and a raised Cimera dagger reached DeQuinn first. She blocked the descending blade with her left and grabbed him around the throat with her right. Their eyes locked for an instant, for a mere moment. She saw his pupils shrink to pin-points.

Then she felt the first sword cut into her body. Then another and another. DeQuinn folded to the ground as blades stabbed her again and again.

A name echoed above the searing pain—*Risa Malluca*.



The man vomited, dark bile gushing from his mouth and down his braided beard. He collapsed onto his hands and knees. His eyes burned fiercely in his head, and his skull pounded as if it were going to split wide open.

Behind him, the mob was slashing the body on the ground. One could no longer tell whether the person was man or woman, young or old. Blood pooled on the courtyard stones and hung like a mist in the air. A severed arm twitched near the body's eviscerated guts.

Tynan clapped his hands. The attack ceased immediately. His followers moved closer to the platform.

The man closed his eyes. He wanted to vomit again, only there was nothing left inside to expel. He heard a voice and recognized that it belonged to Tynan; but the warlock sounded like he was standing far, far away, and the words were in a language the man no longer understood.

Slowly, he sat upright. He could not stand yet—there was no strength in his legs.

What's my name? the man wondered. *I have a name. And where am I?*

He was at the keep in the pass—that, he remembered. But he did not know how long he had been here, or why he had come here in the first place.

What's my name? he repeated.

Then he remembered he was here because Tynan had promised to lead them to fulfillment in this life and to greater reward in the afterlife. He did not particularly like the black ale that was served with every meal—'twas thick and smooth but left a bitter, lingering taste in the mouth. He did like that the women, one and all, would bend over for any man who wanted to use them. When he'd first arrived, he had sated himself several times a day and never with the same woman twice.

He could not remember when he had last taken advantage of that. It seemed to be a long time back. Snow had been high on the ground.

But it did not really matter. The urge never came anymore.

He finally stood, but his legs trembled as if he were a newborn colt.

What's my name?

Tynan climbed the stone steps to his tower sanctuary. The others left the courtyard, headed to their pallets or to their assigned tasks. The few remaining loaded the three bodies from the platform into a cart before collecting the one in the middle of the courtyard.

The burning and pounding in the man's head faded. He started toward the main gate then stopped. There was a narrow breach in the east wall he could use, and no one would see him going. 'Twas best if no one saw him leave.

He frowned. He knew, without doubt, that he had to go, and he had to go now. What he did not know was *where* he had to go, or why?

What's my name?

Where am I going?

He moved toward the east wall, the strength in his legs returning and his strides quickening with each step.

His name was Haysson. He was from Saxony Liege. He was going to Balmoral to find Patrick Novarro.

He had a message to deliver to the Paladin.

20

I scanned the faces of the people in the mobbed, noisy tavern. DeQuinn was not here. I hadn't expected her to be.

I didn't see Rebecca, but I knew she was somewhere among this crowd. I was content to have some time away from her. All day, she had smiled at me and repeatedly told me how well she'd slept last night. This was trouble.

Vas, sitting next to me at our table, winced and furrowed his brow as he put hand to temple.

"Are you ill?" I asked

"Did you hear that?" he replied, looking behind him.

"I can barely hear *you*, and you're beside me."

He frowned.

"There it is again."

"There what is again?"

"You didn't hear that? 'Twas like several loud voices talking at the same time."

I pushed his tankard of ale out of reach.

"What are they saying?"

He looked around a second time.

"All said the same. 'Archangel Magdalene is faster than any winged dragon-hound that ever was.' Then they said 'No regrets.'"

I shook my head. We needed supper. Perhaps food would clear Vas's addled head.

I counted the few coins we had, lying on the table. We could only afford three bowls of rice or oats. It wasn't much, but we had gotten by on less before.

Vas saw me counting the copper coins.

"Perhaps we could return to his lordship's for one more night?"

"We need to see the friar, and he resides in the opposite direction of his lordship. We'll leave as soon as Rebecca returns."

"Very well." Vas pulled the tankard closer to him. "You should have accepted the purse his lordship offered. I know my wanting a meal every third or fourth day is selfish, but I've always been that way."

I let the remark pass. In hindsight, I *should* have taken the money Konstantine Theron had offered. More important ideals and principles of my youth had been shunted aside in my quest. Why not that one?

We'd gone to the open market at mid-morn. It was the time and place we were to meet up with DeQuinn. By late afternoon, when she hadn't shown, I knew it was not to be. Perhaps she hadn't received my message. Perhaps her duties in Gaul had kept her from joining us. Perhaps, perhaps. The perhaps game could be played forever and did no good. She was not here, and that was the end of it.

The merchant-lord had given us the names of two men who could tell us more about the warlock and his coven. We finished the daylight hours searching the first man out. He turned mortified when we introduced ourselves and voiced our request of him. He wailed that his lordship had condemned him to death by merely speaking his name to us. We departed without causing him any more anguish.

The other man was Friar Sebastian. He lived at the abbey a half-league south of the capital. Tomorrow we would visit him.

Rebecca appeared out of the crowd and bounded to us. She smiled at me again.

"I slept so well last night."

Troubling, she was.

She had returned to her preferred attire for our journey to town. The neckline of her bodice was cut so low an indecent amount of cleavage was revealed, and it appeared her bosom might escape

its meager confinement at any moment. Slits at the sides of her skirt exposed her legs from foot to waist, and she wore no undergarments.

"You need to put on your breeches," I said, standing. "We're leaving. We'll make camp on the road to the abbey and seek out the friar in the morn."

"Perhaps DeQuinn Mercy has only been delayed by slow mount or bad weather and might arrive on the morrow," she replied. "I suggest we stay in town for one more night."

I gestured at the coins.

"We cannot afford stable for our horses, let alone rooms for ourselves."

Rebecca nodded. Then she slipped her hand under her skirt. Unease settled within me.

"I am the best." She plucked out a heavy pouch and dropped it atop the coins on the table. "The horses will enjoy a night in a warm stable and a full belly of hay and grain. Perhaps a carrot or apple for dessert."

Vas leaned back on his stool and studied the bulging pouch. He was impressed.

I shook my head, disappointed.

"Who did you steal this from?"

"I could tell by his demeanor he was a bad man deserving of punishment large and small."

"Who, Rebecca?"

"When we camp on the road, I'll put my pallet next to yours. If I can feel your body beside me and tuck my hand behind your belt, I will feel safe, and it'll keep the nightmares away."

"We're not bartering on this."

She grinned. "Yes, my sweet, we are."

Vas watched us, amused.

I picked up the pouch.

"I thought we had come to an understanding about this inclination of yours."

"I recall you lectured me on the benefits of doing righteous and good deeds, and I, as I gave oath I would, hung on every word you spoke. The sound of your voice is better than rare elder-gods wine."

Vas snorted loudly and slapped his hand on the tabletop. I glared at him for encouraging her, which she surely did not need. Then I looked sternly down at her. I was about to command she show me the man whose purse it was when I heard a commotion behind me.

Vas rose to his feet. The voices in the tavern ceased. I turned around.

Three men, large and brutal, stood a short distance behind us. The people between scrambled to get out of the way. The biggest one wore blue-glass spectacles. The middle one moved to the side, facing Vas. He had a cocked flintlock pistol in each hand. The smallest of the men, pain etching his face as he held his crotch with one hand, pointed at Rebecca with the rondel dagger he had in the other.

I pulled my coat back to reveal the revolver in my belt as Vas put hand to his knife's hilt. Rebecca stepped beside me but left enough room to not block my right arm. She had her stiletto in her fist.

The big one removed his spectacles, wrapped them in his handkerchief, and slipped them inside his coat pocket. Then he drew a double-barreled flintlock pistol with one hand and a Daarmoor hawk knife with the other.

"The harlot picked me brother Micah's pocket," he said.

"It's not his," Rebecca responded.

"I say 'tis."

"I recall your brother. When I passed him at the bar, he grabbed my ass uninvited. So, I put fist to nubbin sack, and he unhanded me."

"You're a lyin' whore," barked Micah.

"There are several well-to-dos here tonight," she answered. "If I were to whore, why would I pick a miserable, filthy git like you?"

Laughter rolled across the room. Micah glared at her.

I addressed the biggest one.

"The coin isn't yours. Walk away, and your slurs will be dismissed as ale speech."

"We're walkin' away, an' we're takin' coin an' harlot with us," he said. "You an' the one-armed chafer will stand aside."

"We will not."

“Then you will bleed.”

I sighed. My first shot would slay the biggest brother, my second would take down the smaller. I would pay no heed to the middle one. Vas would see to him.

“May I know your names before we slay you?” I asked.

The biggest one frowned.

“Chantry, Herdrich Chantry,” he replied. “Me brothers Pittell and Micah. We have no desire for your chafin’ names.”

A slender young man eased from the crowd. He was clearly from the Eastern Sun kingdoms and his dress—dark jacket tucked into breeches double-tied at the ankle, knee, and waist, and split-toed boots—suggested he had once been an Ushidō soldier. He walked, unarmed, I noted, between the brothers and us to the table.

“*He’s* the one who dropped the coin purse I was attempting to return,” Rebecca said innocently.

The slender man picked up the pouch then moved to the bar. While he never looked directly at any of us, I knew he was noting all around him.

I continued to watch the brothers. Whether because of pride or simple stupidity, they were not standing down. They wanted this fight.

The slender man stepped back toward us.

“Pardon my intrusion,” he said to me. “I have seen few pistols like the one in your belt. I have heard stories about such a weapon the one called the Paladin carries. When you are done here, my san, it would be an honor if you and your companions dined with me this eve. I would pay.”

The brothers glanced at one another.

“Vas eats a lot,” Rebecca said to the slender man. “You’ll save quite a bit of coin if they kill him.”

“That’s mean,” Vas protested.

“Really? Didn’t intend for it to sound that way.”

“Apology accepted, milady.”

“I wasn’t apologizing.”

The slender man moved nearer.

“My apologies for intruding once more,” he said, then turned to address two other men in the crowd. “You are comrades of these

brothers. I saw you together earlier. If you decide to come to their aid I will kill you where you stand.”

“There’s another on the stairs,” I said. “But either Vas or I will administer to him.”

The slender man bowed.

Micah, the one who had laid hands on Rebecca, looked as if he was about to bolt. Herdrich studied me.

“There is no Paladin. Never was. He only lives in minstrel tale an’ song.”

“I know several who wish that were so,” said Vas.

“Anyone could claim to be the Paladin,” the middle brother, Pitdell, added. “He’s not known around here.”

“That is true,” I answered. “Still, walk away.”

“It’s too late for them to go unhumbled,” Rebecca responded.

“It isn’t,” I told her. Now *she* was the one who would not stand down. “The choice is theirs.”

The middle brother moved first. He pointed his pistols at the ceiling and uncocked the hammers.

“Mayhaps the thief jus’ looked like this har—uh, woman,” stammered Micah, stepping back.

“No woman in here looks like me,” Rebecca snarled. She slid her stiletto into its sheath and raised her empty hands toward the smallest brother. “I swoon with desire at the mere thought of your diseased, tiny manroot.”

Micah bristled, no longer back-treading. Herdrich Chantry and I stared at each other for a long moment; then, finally, he slid his pistol into his belt.

This was done, or so I thought.

As I foolishly turned away, from the corner of my eye, I saw Herdrich hurl his hawk knife at me. I could not avoid or block it—I wasn’t quick enough to do that. My mind yelled that I was protected by Satan’s oath; my body prepared for pain.

The slender man caught the knife by its hilt a bare inch from my chest. Rebecca held out her hand, and he placed it in her palm. With one smooth continuous motion, she sailed the hawk knife back at Herdrich, pegging the blade through the man’s booted foot and staking him to the floor. She scooped up Vas’s tankard from

the table and threw it at Micah. It nailed him square in the ear; he yelped as blood blossomed on the side of his head.

Herdrich grabbed his pistol, but I had already had mine drawn and aimed at him. He changed his mind and showed me his hands.

“Don’t brace us again,” I said.

He nodded, gritting his teeth in pain as Pittell pulled the knife from foot and floor. The brothers retreated into the crowd. Four others joined them. I muttered a short curse. I’d missed one.

For a long moment, there was stunned silence in the tavern; then laughter and jeers followed the brothers and their comrades as they headed out the door into the night.

Rebecca had amazed, surprised, and shocked me in deed and word since our first meeting. The last two days, however, had been more bewildering and troubling with each event. I didn’t know what to say to her.

Vas did.

“That tankard still had ale in it. *My ale.*”

“I’ll buy you another.”

“Never waste ale, woman. ’Tis a sin.”

The slender man bowed.

“I am Jeb Li Shashu—in Thurian, Jeb Li the Archer,” he said. “May I know your companions’ names?”

“Rebecca Nines,” I answered. “And Vas.”

Vas rubbed the stub of his arm above the iron-spiked cap. He appeared ashamed. I wondered why.

“Vas Lyoness,” Rebecca added. “Of the township of Lyoness. I’m sure you’ve heard of him.”

Jeb Li put fist to chest and bowed again, first to Rebecca then to Vas.

“I am honored,” he said. “I have never met one who had a town named after him. You must be a great warrior.”

Rebecca nodded. “He is. And soon he will tell you more than you ever wanted to know about his great deeds.”

Vas beamed from ear to ear. I swear he was about to hug Rebecca despite knowing the gesture would end with bruises on his person.

“Shall we find a quiet room for us to dine?” Jeb Li continued. He spotted the tavern keeper behind the bar, and we followed him in that direction.

Vas stepped up beside him

“You said you’d kill those two if they jumped in,” he said. “I believe you would’ve, but you’re unarmed.”

“I am never unarmed.”

Vas frowned, not understanding.

“Perhaps, after we sup, you and I could raise cup and hunt willing wenches.”

“I do not favor the female.”

Vas shrugged, not dissuaded .

“Then I’ll hunt willing wenches, and you can hunt willing muses.”

Jeb Li smiled and tapped fist to Vas’s shoulder.

“I need a moment,” Rebecca said to me after a few steps. She slipped her hand under her skirt again.

Unease settled over me again. She withdrew two more coin purses. I frowned.

She grinned.

“We can continue on now. Something in one of these was stabbing my...woman-ness,” She looked at the smallest purse. “This one’s filthy. I have to wash myself. I think it belonged to that ugly little git.”

This was too much. I was tired of her continuously testing my resolve. Perhaps, despite the danger she was in, it was time to part company.

My thoughts must have been plain on my face, for her grin faded.

“We can donate it all to Friar Sebastian’s abbey,” she said. “I’ll never again...”

She was still talking, but I was no longer listening. A flat-nosed man wearing animal skins, his beard in braids, had just entered the tavern. He spotted us and with swift strides approached. Shoving Rebecca behind me, I put hand to pistol.

“Patrick Novarro,” the flat-nosed man said, “I bring you a message from DeQuinn Mercy.”

21

What did DeQuinn say to tell me?" I asked, leading Haysson into a side room.

Rebecca had gone to tell Vas and Jeb Li that a messenger had come for me. The look on her face warned them she expected, as I did, bad news. Vas dropped into a chair at the room's round table and drank from his new tankard. Jeb Li hesitated in the open doorway. I gestured for him to stay.

I sat Haysson down at the table. His eyes were fogged, his jaw slack. As he leaned toward me, the filthy nails of one hand scratched at chigger blisters on his neck while the other moved over the tabletop as if he had pen and was drawing. He seemed unaware of what either hand was doing.

"Last winter, I was Haysson from Saxony Liege," he droned, as if he had been repeating the words over and over so he would not forget them. "Now, I am again Haysson from Saxony Liege. From then to now I no longer had a name. I was coven. There is Master, and there is coven. Master rules coven. Coven serves Master."

His hand continued to draw on the tabletop.

"Where's DeQuinn?" I demanded.

"She is dead," Vas said. He raised his tankard toward the ceiling then drank. I knew he spoke true.

Sadness seeped through me. Another had died because of my quest. I would seek out a chapel before leaving the capital. On bent knee, I would pray and offer my meager tithe for the soul of De-Quinn Mercy, once known as the demon Ris Mal. Perhaps one voice on her behalf would benefit her. I hoped it would be so.

Haysson bolted upright, straight and rigid, and his eyes rolled upward. Only white was visible.

"I will speak these words to Patrick Novarro," he intoned.

"I am Patrick Novarro."

"Once spoken, the message will be gone."

"I understand."

"Tynan Greydraca is a powerful warlock taught by those who have been in the underworld since conception. There are eleven passageways scattered across the earth that lead from this world to the underworld. Two are given to dark-honored mortals to use until their end days, or until a more honored arises. Tynan has one. He moves from this world to Hell and back in the passageway he opens at Valkyries Gate. He sees much but not all. He is not infallible.

"The coven he leads is two hundred strong. All follow him without question. All will slay and die for him. The four who wear the beast-skull masks are his fiercest acolytes."

Jeb Li had disappeared and now reentered the room. He placed paper and inkpot in front of Haysson and handed him a quill. Haysson, without looking, his hand moving without his direction, drew on the paper. I realized he was sketching a map.

"The keep is in ill-repair," he continued. "There are breaches one can use to enter unseen past the guards. There is one tower in the keep, at the northwest wall. The room at the top of the tower is Tynan's sanctuary."

The sketch he drew of the keep was more detailed and precise than many royal maps I had seen.

"The man who brings this message was once coven. The bond Tynan had over him is broken. He is coven no more. He will not recall delivering the message nor its words. He is weak-minded and of low character, easily lead by persons of strong will. Depend naught on this man."

He finished the map and pushed it toward me. All the oil-lamp flames in the room dimmed at the same moment, as if about to go out, then flared back anew.

Haysson's eyes returned to normal, and his rigid body went limp. He stared at the quill in his trembling hand and at the paper on the tabletop. He pitched the quill away as if it scalded him.

Then he looked at me.

"Are you Patrick Novarro? I bring a message for you."

"You delivered the message. You are free to go."

He didn't move.

"Where do I go? Tell me what I should do."

Rebecca moved around the table, shoved the filthy stolen pouch into his hands, and led him to the door.

"Go feed yourself. Get sloshed. Shit down your leg. Don't care which." She pushed him out of the room. "But go. We don't need anyone with us dumber than Vas."

Before Haysson could utter a word, she closed the door. Vas frowned.

I studied the map, and wondered if the message was truly from DeQuinn or if this was a deception. If true, how best to capture the warlock and spirit him away from the keep? And what would be the cost in the doing?

The silence in the room was suddenly broken. Vas's stomach growled loud enough for all to hear. Jeb Li tugged a cord on the wall near the door it.

"Our meal will be served shortly."

"Thank you, sire," I replied.

"Do you intend to brace this warlock inside his fortress?"

"We will have to," said Vas. "I have misgiving he'll come with us if we merely ask."

"He has two hundred surrounding him."

"A babe from my village would not be daunted by that puny number."

Jeb Li nodded, weighing Vas's words.

"I humbly offer the service of my bow to you, my san," he told me. "Perhaps, if I aid in the rescue of a virtuous woman trapped in Hell, a good mark might be noted in my life book. Good marks have been rare of late."

“Life book?” Vas sounded confused. “How does one get a life book?”

I felt the weight of heavy stones on my shoulders. Did I want another partner with one already in the grave ahead of us?

“I stole a book once from this rich noble,” Rebecca said. “It was an illustrated volume of the Kama Songs. I kept it for a while before I sold it. It’s the only book I ever finished reading, and I read it twice.”

“Did it have drawings in it?” Vas asked. “I like books with drawings.”

“Most excellent drawings. That’s why I read it twice.”

I looked at Jeb Li.

“I know a little about the Sun Kingdom religions,” I said. “You don’t believe in Heaven and Hell as we do. Why do you offer to ride with us?”

“It’s not important that I believe,” he answered. “Only that you do.”

Rebecca looked at the map in my hands.

“What’s our plan, Patrick?”

“Capturing Tynan and getting him out of the keep is only the first part. We must then take him through the mountains to Valkyries Gate.”

I sighed. Another part of me had perished along with De-Quinn. I could no longer fool myself. Clearly I was not the man I had been in Valon. The high ideals and firm values of my youth had, one by one, withered away. Now I did what I must to fulfill my vow.

“We need to stable the horses and get rooms for the night. We have to make plans, and it’ll be too late to leave for the friar’s abbey when we’re done. But we must leave at first light.”

“Yes, m’lord,” Rebecca responded. “I’ll arrange for both.”

I waited for her to add an inappropriate comment or wave stolen purses at me. She did neither. She only smiled, pleased.

Vas and Jeb Li began discussing battle weapons.

A quick knock at the door, and four serving women entered with food and plates. Vas smiled at the plumpest of the four. She blushed but did not retreat.

Rebecca drew her stiletto as she stepped toward the door.

“I’ll draw blood if you don’t depart from here.”

Outside, sitting on the floor, Haysson offered the filthy purse she had given him back to her.

“Where do I go?”

INTERLUDE

T*he tall friar smelled the smoke on the morning breeze before* he saw it. He knew immediately it was not smoke from a cook fire or the talon pots. At the edge of the open field, when he saw the two thick gray-black columns rising from behind the knoll, he recited a swift prayer to Heaven and kneed the old chestnut mare to a gallop. The horse raced with all the speed it could muster on its aging legs across the field toward the knoll and the abbey beyond.

Sebastian had ridden out well before the dawn, before any of his brothers had stirred for first prayers, with his three flintlock rifles, powder and shot. He intended to be at the southeast woods of the valley by daybreak. That area was the best for hunting pheasant and goose. Both would be supper if his aim was true. Perhaps he might even find some ripe strawberries to pick and share.

This eve would be the last night they would all be together till next year. That was the reason for his hunt. Starting tomorrow, the friars would depart on their individual paths through the provinces and the frontier. A few had horses donated by the devoted. Most would walk. They would leave with only the clothes on their backs and the shoes on their feet. The friars had all taken vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; none owned property. They believed that by leading this pure way of life they could more effec-

tively preach the Gospels and counsel the faithful and repentant sinners.

Sebastian's evangelical route was through the Rivenran Mountains. Until eight years ago, not a single friar had braved the mountains twice. Two had perished—one in a blizzard, one murdered; the others had become so discouraged by the distrustful, and often warring, clans they had left the order. It had been believed Sebastian would perish also, that the pale-skinned and fair-haired mountain clans would take one look at his black Mukilteo face and determine he was Hellspawn. They would kill him then celebrate the deed.

But the tall friar had earned the people's respect and trust. He had accomplished this in part because he admired them. Their lives in the mountains were not easy; they were relentlessly tested every day and had survived for generations just as his people had in the Mukilteo jungles. He also had a skilled hand with carpentry and a keen eye with a hunter's rifle. Lastly, he had attained earned their respect by out-drinking the clan chieftains, which he did not share with his brothers in the order.

From the low hills in the northwest to the cloud-draped crags in the east, Sebastian's ministry was the same for each village and hamlet. On the first full day there, he held services for all who had departed this mortal world since his last visit. The second day, he married those who had joined together as husband and wife during the year. The third day, he baptized the newborns of those he had married the day before and all others. In the following days, he visited the widows and elderly. He did shelter repairs and hunted to add meat to their stores. On the last day, he held mass for all.

The people always listened politely to his sermon, but most were waiting for him to say "Through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, world without end. Amen." For when he spoke those words, the village festival would begin. He was never quite sure whether the celebration was in honor of his return or his departure.

Sebastian had returned to the abbey from this year's mission with a second horse, a third rifle, a hatchet, two cooking pots, four blankets and a winter coat. His brother in Christ William had reminded him he had taken a vow of poverty and could not keep

what had been given to him. He had responded that he had to keep it all.

The boy was shocked until Sebastian explained that if he returned to a village without the gift they'd given him, the people would be shamed thinking their offering had not been worthy of keeping. What's more, if he held on to one gift and not to another, and the clans were warring, it would be considered a great insult and a sign that God was siding with the clan whose gift he had retained. This could lead to the clan turning away from the Gospel and to his own earthly demise.

William reflected on his answer then asked him to repeat it to Friar Antonio, who had convinced William to relinquish all the donations and gifts his flock had given him this past year. Sebastian had laughed. He wondered if Antonio was more concerned whether William was betraying his vows by coveting worldly possessions or envious because Antonio's flock rarely donated to him or to the brotherhood.



The old chestnut raced across the field, wheezing for breath. Sebastian white-knuckled the reins in one hand and a rifle in the other. He could barely breathe, fear clutching his chest.

Near the knoll, embers and ash filled the air. They reached the crest, and the mare collapsed to her knees. Sebastian, still in the saddle, choked back a cry.

The abbey was engulfed in flames. Two friars lay sprawled in the courtyard; one had several arrows piercing his body. Four men wearing animal skins, one with a beast's skull masking his face, stood near the front gate.

One of the brothers—Sebastian could not tell who it was—ran into the yard, his robe ablaze. A barbarian triggered his crossbow and knocked the friar back into the burning structure.

Near the stable, he saw William crawling away from the fire; a fifth barbarian approached him with raised spear. Sebastian brought his rifle to his shoulder, aimed and fired. The barbarian spun, blood spewing into the air as he collapsed to the ground.

The other four twisted toward the knoll. The skull-masked barbarian pointed at Sebastian, barked a command, and the other three charged.

Sebastian stepped off the mare and swiftly reloaded. The shrieking, frenzied barbarians were halfway to the knoll when the one with the crossbow stopped and aimed it at the tall friar.

Sebastian fired first.

The crossbowman toppled backward, bolt still in the channel. Sebastian tossed the rifle aside and grabbed the other two from their scabbards on the mare. He stood beside the horse and cocked the hammers with his thumbs.

His fear was gone. Now, icy anger gripped his soul. He waited for the attackers to start up the knoll then waited more. When he could see the color of their eyes, he fired both rifles from the hip.

The two barbarians were knocked flat. One writhed in agony for a few moments, the other rolled dead to the base of the hill. Sebastian dropped one rifle and reloaded the other as he marched toward the skull-masked leader.

The man in the skull-mask stood his ground, swinging the broadsword he held two-handed from side to side. As the tall friar passed the crossbowman, the wounded barbarian rose to his feet, aiming his weapon. Sebastian fired point-blank into his chest.

The skull-masked barbarian charged, screaming a battle cry. Sebastian stopped, reloaded. He was fast and well-practiced, but it was not enough. The skull-masked enemy was nearly on him, and he fired with the wooden ramrod still in the barrel. It pierced the barbarian's throat.

He fell to his knees, dropping sword and clutching at the ramrod. Slowly, he pulled the wooden rod from his gullet. Sebastian shouted in anguish and, clutching the rifle as if it were a club, shattered the butt against the barbarian's temple.

The man collapsed, dead.

Sebastian ran to William, dropping beside him and pulling the boy into his arms. William stared up at him, confused, in pain.

"Why?" he whispered. Then he grabbed Sebastian's robe. "Did I bring this...by c-coveting...?"

"You did not cause this, William. The Savior knows you have a pure heart."

Sebastian lowered the body to the ground. He prayed the boy had heard his last words before passing.

He moved to the bodies in the center of the yard. One was Antonio; the other was the elderly Matthias. Then he went as close

as he dared to the burning abbey. He saw no movement within. Turning, he scanned the yard for any sign of life. He called name after name after name. No one answered.

Sebastian dropped to his knees, closed his eyes and prayed. He opened them when he heard horses fast approaching. Four riders galloped up the road from Balmoral.

22

We arrived at the abbey to find all but one massacred.

I had brought Hell's wrath down upon these peaceful friars—that was clear when we saw the bodies of the marauders. They were coven. The weight of my quest was growing heavier on my soul each day.

I did not know what to make of the fact that the lone survivor was the man we were seeking. Had the angels protected him? Or was it mere happenstance that he was away when the attack came and had survived his battle with them?

We assisted Sebastian with the burials. Even with the coveners, as he insisted. At midday, when the last prayer for the dead was done, we sat around a small campfire to eat the pheasant and boiled potatoes Jeb Li had prepared.

I told Sebastian why we had come.

"Will you guide us to the ruins at Valkyries Gate?"

"You are on a noble mission," he replied, "but it is a warrior's quest. I must decline. I am not a warrior. I am but a humble messenger for Our Lord."

"Five corpses say different," remarked Rebecca.

Sebastian nodded wearily but wasn't swayed.

"I must go first to the archdiocese to tell what has happened here. Then I will do penance for the lives I have taken."

“They needed killing,” said Vas, plucking a pheasant bone from his mouth. “I do not understand you Christians and your one God and your thousand ways *not* to get into Paradise.”

Rebecca chuckled. “Christians don’t understand you, either, Vas.”

“Paladin,” Sebastian said, “I have traveled all the roads and trails of the mountains, yet I have never gone to Valkyries Gate. I had no reason to. I can tell you where it is supposed to be and which trails to take, but understand this—it is a cursed and unholy place. Even the fiercest mountain clans do not venture there. I only met one man who was said to have gone there. He was raving mad, and his people kept him caged so he could not harm others.”

“I must find it.”

Rebecca glanced at me sharply. She’d heard me say “I” and not “we.” If Vas or Jeb Li noted it, they gave no indication.

“All the tribes and clans have tales about the ruins,” Sebastian continued. “They say that it was once a special place. The most repeated legend says the Valkyries rested and groomed their winged horses there.

“Then Odin became enamored with one Valkyrie maiden, and terrified, she fled there to hide from him. The god followed and destroyed the temple searching for her. During his hunt, he accidentally killed the maiden’s horse. The Valkyrie, overcome with grief, wept, and her tears tainted the land. So the legends say. Now, only those who are soulless and beyond redemption walk its ruins.”

“Soulless. That would be Tynan,” said Rebecca, still scowling at me.

Sebastian frowned. “You do not believe these murderers were bandits. You think they were from the warlock’s coven and were sent here after me.”

“Yes,” I told him. “Somehow, he found out Lord Konstantine had given us your name and that you could lead us to the ruins. He sent his servants to prevent that.”

Sebastian spoke slowly, plainly, telling us the route to use to reach the Gate. I listened; Rebecca did not. She cleaned the dirt from under her fingernails with the tip of her dagger. Jeb Li appeared to be dozing, but I knew he was memorizing each word. Vas struggled to follow along.

Finished, Sebastian rose to his feet.

"Now I will go and pray for my brothers."

"We must return to Balmoral. May we do anything for you before we depart?"

"No. I thank you for your kindnesses this day, and I will pray for your success in rescuing the Lady Lenore."



On the ride back, we discovered Haysson trudging along the road.

As we neared, he called out, "Patrick Novarro! I have a message for you from DeQuinn Mercy!"

"You have fulfilled your task," I told him again. "You are free to go."

"Where do I go? Tell me what I should do."

Rebecca leaned in her saddle toward him.

"Stay on this road and walk until you fall off the edge of the world."

"Rebecca!" I snapped.

"I have no sympathy for idiots. The world is better off without them."

Haysson pleaded with me.

"Tell me, Paladin, what I should do?"

Rebecca touched heel to her sturdy little paint mare and rode ahead. Vas and Jeb Li followed.

I knew I needed to aid this man. He had lost all that was important to him by bringing me DeQuinn's message. It was my obligation to give him a new path. Lenore would be ashamed if I did not.

"This I command you," I said, finally. "Follow this road until you reach the abbey. There, you will find Friar Sebastian. Aid him in all ways you can. He is a good man."

Immediately, Haysson obeyed. I spurred Leopard and joined the others.

23

All was in turmoil at the capitol. Shops were closing early, and citizens hurried home. The city's soldiers marched in clusters down the streets. Magistrates questioned residents and especially strangers. Some were taken to the jail for further questioning. We were stopped thrice.

The few people we encountered were unusually close-mouthed, as if speaking to us would bring attention to themselves. We did learn there had been a murder, but whose death would cause this level of reaction we did not know.

We separated to gather supplies; I remained mute as Rebecca gave stolen coin to Vas and Jeb Li to purchase what we would need. We agreed to meet at the tavern where we had previously stayed at sunset. Rebecca refused to leave my side. She said she was afraid to be alone, but I knew she feared I would ride off without them.

I might have. I had considered it more than once today.

At darkfall, Rebecca and I stabled the horses and walked down the empty street toward the tavern.

"Rebecca, when we met Jeb Li, you gave Vas a proud last name. It would've never crossed my mind to do so. The gesture pleased Vas greatly. That was the act of a friend."

"You're wrong," she replied. "He is stupid and foul-smelling and has an irritating manner. Ah, blaze, he has thick hair growing

on his knuckles and his back. Disgusting. He's your friend, not mine, and my words were intended as insult."

"Very well, milady," I said, disbelieving her. "Tell me why you threatened DeQuinn Mercy's messenger? I've never seen any person anger you so thoroughly before."

"I'll need rest for the hard days ahead," she said, ignoring the question. "I will sleep beside you tonight. You'll indulge me, or neither of us will sleep well this eve."

"You didn't answer my question."

She curled her hands into tight fists.

"What lie would satisfy you?"

"Only the truth."

She stopped walking, turned away from me and looked up at the swirl of stars spread across the night sky.

"Bram," she whispered.

"Who is Bram?"

Rebecca didn't answer. I took her by the shoulders and turned her to face me. I gazed into her hard-set eyes.

"Who is he?"

"He *was* my brother. Same mother, but not father. Dead now."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? You did nothing to Bram." She pressed her hands against my chest. Her voice softened. "You would have liked him, Patrick. He was sweet and kind-hearted. But even more simple-minded than our mother was." Her voice hardened again. "The world is too damn cruel and unfair for some. It is best when they are no longer in it."

I folded her into my arms against me. She kissed the notch of my collarbone then stepped away from me. She headed toward the tavern door.

"I am the best. With picking locks and pockets. And with lies."

I shook my head. Had she told the truth or lied or mixed the two. I could not tell.

She looked over her shoulder at me before going inside.

"I am not her, Patrick. I cannot be her. I can only be me."

This I knew without the telling.

I followed her inside.

The tavern was deserted except for Vas and Jeb Li. Rebecca sat down at the table between them, and stared at Jeb Li. He was filling a metal ball with nails and black powder. Two more balls lay already on the table, short candle wicks protruded from their sealed openings.

I studied Vas. Something was clearly amiss.

“What’s wrong?”

“You didn’t hear the news?”

“No.”

“His lordship, his family and his servants were all found slaughtered in their beds,” he answered. “It happened last night. No survivors, no witnesses. Their killers are mystery.” He paused. “Cook was a warm, generous woman.”

His words burned into my soul.

“Another man, across town, was also butchered last night,” Vas continued. “The townsman his lordship sent us to see. The rumors are the murderers were brigands from the frontier, demons, blood monsters, even Satan himself. The most curious thing is that not a single rumor suggested Tynan was behind the slayings.”

I heard the door latch lift. The tavern door opened, and Friar Sebastian stepped inside with Haysson following.

“I changed my mind,” Sebastian said, his voice as stony as the expression on his face.

24

We rode toward the coven's keep. A quarter-league farther, Sebastian told us, would be a crossing. The northern leg was the only road through the pass, over the bridges that went to the keep. The other fork wound into the mountains to the west. Once we had captured Tynan, that trail that would take us to Valkyries Gate.

Vas and Jeb Li had taken the point. They were on watch for any lookouts the coven might have placed along the road. Thus far, there had been none.

In the middle were Sebastian and Haysson. Except when giving directions to the keep, the tall friar was in continuous prayer. Haysson led a horse for Tynan to ride. I did not understand this man. He was terrified to his core to be traveling with us to the keep, yet he stayed, and on the rare occasion that he spoke it was always to ask the same question: "Where do I go?"

Rebecca said we needed to get rid of him, and that, since he kept following, we needed to put blade to throat. She announced she would do it. Part of me agreed with her, and that troubled me.

Rebecca and I brought up the rear of our band.

Rebecca Nines and I would have never crossed paths in my old life, and, if we did, I would have walked away. I do not, for a moment, negate my own sins and transgressions. I have strayed far

from the righteous path and pray that one day I will return to it. Rebecca, on the contrary, was a thief and assassin, and she enjoyed it. Lies were second nature to her, as was a quick and, at times, unfounded temper.

In the scriptures, it says women should adorn their bodies in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire; and that a woman shall not wear a man's garments. Lenore had always adhered to these teachings. Rebecca never did. Was it only my base lust that wanted her near me?

I believed there was more than that, but was I lying to myself to justify our remaining together? Later today, it might not matter anymore. Later today, I would either be closer than ever to fulfilling my vow or, despite Satan's oath of protection, would have reached my end in this life.

Rebecca tapped my hand.

"Do you believe in the reading of palms?" she asked.

"No."

"All fortune-telling is git. I know some of the tricks, though. Give me your hand, and I'll read the lines on your palm."

"Why?"

"For amusement."

I should have known better. I held my hand out to her. She slipped hers under it and drew it closer to her eyes as though to see it better. Then, she pressed it against her breast.

I yanked away.

She grinned at me.

"You need to leave it there longer for a good reading. Works even better if there is no garment between my tit and your hand. The best is to use your lips. At that moment, I give oath I will know your immediate future."

I shook my head. How could I consider there might be more between this fire-haired temptress and me?

Up ahead, Vas and Jeb Li had reined to a halt. Vas raised his ax, and Jeb Li placed two arrows in his bow. I spurred past Sebastian and Haysson. Rebecca followed.

Six men occupied the crossing. Three were the Chantry brothers; the others were coven. Five were removing goods from an ox-

cart and pack mules and placing them in a wagon. Herdrich Chantry stopped counting the coins in a purse and dropped the pouch on the ground. He limped from the ox-cart to where he stood facing me, about ten steps between us.

"This here don't concern ya," he said, thumbing back the hammers of his double-barreled pistol. "Ride on."

Rebecca leaned until her head was behind my back.

"If only one reaches the keep, we are done for," she whispered. "We have to kill them all."

I glanced from the ox-cart to the wagon. On the far side of the wagon were a battered, half-dressed woman and three naked children. All four were in leg chains.

Herdrich and the others could not harm me. This I knew. I dismounted and moved away from Leopard.

Herdrich removed his blue-glass spectacles and slipped them into his coat pocket. Then he smiled.

"In one minute, Paladin, you'll be eatin' dirt."

All was done in less than a minute. Herdrich Chantry lay dead on the ground with two rounds through his breast. Micah Chantry had half his skull blown away when I spun to the left and shot him through the ear. One covener had two arrows and one round in the chest as Jeb Li had done for the other two. By the ox-cart, Pitdell Chantry lay with Vas's ax buried in his chest from chin to sternum.

Sebastian rushed to the woman and children to shield them with his own body. Rebecca jumped down from her pony.

"When you're ready to start, Patrick," she said, "just give the signal."

"Signal."

She chuckled.

Jeb Li stepped to the coveners and retrieved his arrows. I called to him, "Check the road ahead for sentries that might've heard this."

He nodded and hurried down the road.

I reloaded my pistol and placed the empty shells into my pocket. Vas marched toward the corpse of Pitdell Chantry.

"What the blazes were you thinking, you dumb git?" Rebecca asked him. "What if there had been others? You threw your ax and killed that chafer but then you were unarmed."

Vas puffed out his chest.

"I am never unarmed."

"You're not? I know your farts are deadly, but I didn't realize they were now a weapon."

Sebastian had finished removing the chains from the woman and children. As I joined them, the woman raised her clasped hands to me.

"They sold us to the coven," she said, trembling. Eyes welled with tears. "They used me..."

"They won't again," I assured her. "They are in Hell where they belong."

"We'll send you in the wagon back to Balmoral," Sebastian said. "You can go to Saint Magdalene's. The mother superior there is a kind and generous person. Tell her I sent you. Do you know where the church is?"

"Aye."

"Haysson!" I called.

The man ran to me. Sebastian and I assisted the woman and children into the wagon. The tall friar said a prayer.

I shoved Haysson onto the wagon seat and handed him the reins.

"Take them to Balmoral," I ordered. "The woman knows where to go. Understand?"

"Where do *I* go?" he asked.

"Balmoral."

I slapped the lead horse on the rump, and they moved back down the road.

Vas stomped over to Herdrich Chantry. Squatting, he picked up the spectacles that had fallen from the brigand's pocket. He examined the blue glass and started to put them on his face.

"I wouldn't do that," Rebecca warned.

He looked at her.

"Why? Are they too fancy for one like me but good for one like you?"

"Gits who wear those have the pox. The blue glass is supposed to slow the blindness coming or some such. Not sure if the blindness comes before or after your manroot rots off."

"Pox?" His eyes widened. "Are ye speakin' about Cupid's disease? The Southern Curse?"

“The Southern people call it the Northern Curse, but aye.”

Vas pitched the spectacles far away and rubbed his hand vigorously in the dirt. Then he scrubbed his face with more earth.

I explored the area of the crossing until I found a ravine with deep grass and thick bush.

“We’ll dump the bodies over here.”

“When they don’t return, the coven’ll know something happened,” Rebecca pointed out.

“But they won’t know what, and that should be enough time for us to raid the keep.”

Without further comment, she marched to Micah Chantry and dragged his body toward the ravine.

Jeb Li returned at a jog.

“Any sentries?”

He shook his head.

No lookouts. Did Tynan think he was untouchable? He would soon learn the error of that belief.

“Patrick,” Vas called, pointing behind me. Haysson stood beside the horse he’d been riding.

“Woman and male bairn kept asking me questions...so many questions. They know way.”

We put the bodies and the cart into the ravine. The oxen and mules were set free to graze. I studied the northern trail that led across the bridges to the keep. Rebecca joined me, then the others. Sebastian prayed for guidance. When he finished, I turned to my companions.

“The warlock awaits,” I said. “Let’s go introduce ourselves. It’s the courteous thing to do, and we should always be polite.”

25

R*ebecca grew angrier with each passing minute.*
As she stood in the wooded glen, the tower of the warlock's

keep within sight over the treetops, she glanced at the mute Haysson where he brushed one of the restless tethered horses and considered booting him in the crotch to relieve her rage.

Dammit all.

She should be at Patrick's side. She should be watching his back and helping seize the miserable git warlock.

Should be.

She had been cursing Patrick, mostly aloud to his face, since he'd first revealed his plan. This night would be moonless, he'd said. They would go at high midnight and find the breach in the east wall shown on DeQuinn's map. Sebastian would guard the breach and insure it remained passable. He, Vas and Jeb Li would enter the grounds. Vas and Jeb Li would find positions to cover him until he returned with the captured warlock.

Rebecca's task was to guard the horses.

To guard the chafin' horses!

Her immediate response caused the friar to recite a prayer and Haysson to retreat behind Jeb-Li.

"Somebody has to stay with the horses," Vas had pointed out. "Who does milady think we should we leave? Haysson?"

Rebecca had turned on him, and Vas raised his arm and stub to defend against body blows.

Then the strangest thing happened; she still could not believe it. Patrick said one word.

Please.

And she heard herself say that she would. How could she have done that?

Wait here. Stay back. Hide. If she never again heard those words from Patrick, it would still be too often. She needed no man, not even him, to protect her. She could defend herself. She'd taken out the archdemon, hadn't she?

She had sworn oath, after Bram's death, that there would never again be a person in her life she could not leave without thought. No friends or partners. No lover. She'd kept that oath and was content with her life.

Then she'd met Patrick Novarro, and he gave her thoughts that were foreign and disquieting.

And now she found herself *praying* for him.

She kicked a stone into the bushes. There was no law that said she must stay with Patrick; there was no scripture text that forbade her from riding on. Patrick would not fault her or think badly of her if she did. He'd told her that.

What did it matter if he *did* think badly of her?

It didn't.

Damn him.

She'd presented her body to men in the past. She thoroughly enjoyed giving and receiving the fleshly pleasures Levi Bergg had shown her. But she had also offered to Patrick what she had never offered to anyone before—her heart. He had not refused, but he had not accepted, neither her body nor her heart.

Piss on him.

She had said that. Then, blaze, the other night the mere thought he might actually send her away had shaken her to the quick. She had sworn to stop lifting purses. He knew she was lying. The trouble was, *she* wasn't certain she was.

Vas had once asked, "Is the Paladin nought but a challenge to you? If he took you like you want him to, would you see him like you see all t'other men?"

Rebecca had ignored him. His question, however, continued to plague her. Usually, it came to her at night when she was attempting to fall asleep, but sometimes it came in midday. She still had no answer. She knew that one day he would return to his Lenore. She could never have what Lenore and he had...

She wiped the tears from her eyes.

Blaze him. And me. Blaze the whole chafing world.

A knifing pain flared deep within her chest. Behind her, the horses screamed. She pressed a hand to her throat. She couldn't breathe.

What was happening?

INTERLUDE

The *Archangel Magdalene wept.*

She had been called by a strong heartfelt prayer to this place of lost souls; the sadness that cloaked these humans was overwhelming. Most were already damned, having willingly given their allegiance to the fallen angel and his emissary Tynan Greydraca. The children, perhaps a few others, might be saved, but no more. It was heartbreaking.

The prayer had been for Heaven to protect Patrick Novarro as he walked among these damned. The man and his quest were well known. Magdalene and the other archangels had bartered countless times for Lenore's release from the covenant. On each occasion, Lucifer had replied that Patrick Novarro might find a way to take Lenore from him, but he would free a thousand other mortal souls before he released hers. The woman would not be allowed to say she had bested him.

Now, he said, her rejoicing was heard throughout his kingdom each time Novarro defeated one of Hell's soldiers; but one day, her grief and despair would resound in Hell and in Heaven when Novarro was destroyed.

Magdalene watched Patrick Novarro approach the tower. The half-score of coveners in the courtyard could not see her. Novarro could have, had he been looking in her direction.

You are protected by Lucifer's oath from physical harm, she thought, but there are too many. They can capture you and give you in chains to Lucifer.

A sentry started toward Novarro as he reached the tower steps. The archangel waved a wing and the sentry turned back the way he'd come.

Magdalene surveyed the courtyard. *In our Lord's House are many mansions*, she recited. The prayer that had beckoned to her had not come from Patrick Novarro. She located each of his companions. The pagan and the soldier had not sent the prayer; they were focused single-mindedly on their immediate tasks. The Christian friar was praying, but his prayers were for his fallen brothers and for guidance. Nor had the prayer come from Lenore; she was praying for her beloved as she always did, but this voice was not hers.

This plea was deep, sincere and came from one who had not prayed for many mortal years. Even then, she had only prayed for her brother, and not once since his passing. The prayer came from one who had been damned when she began growing in her mother's womb. It was a miracle.

The Archangel Magdalene watched Patrick Novarro mount the tower steps.

Yes, Rebecca Nines, I will protect him as best I can while he is here. But even I cannot guarantee his surviving this path of his quest.

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Haysson scurried away from the rearing, terrified horses. Across the glen, Rebecca stood stone-rigid, her arms straight out from her shoulders. She rose into the air, her feet no longer touching earth. Maggots dribbled from her mouth and nose. Her eyes turned all white then reptilian and finally back to normal. Her face twisted into a demon's features for a brief moment before returning to Rebecca's, but Haysson saw.

He wanted to run away, more than anything he had ever wanted in his life he wanted to flee, but he was rooted where he hid.

Rebecca lowered to the ground, and a shadow stepped out of her body as she collapsed.

The shade grew and turned solid.

The demon swayed and dropped to the ground. After a moment, she stood and motioned him to her. He could not resist, although he tried. In his struggle, he bit his lower lip, and blood trickled down his bearded chin.

When at last he stood before her, the demon tore the wound wider with a claw and sucked, gripping him by the hair. He sobbed and trembled.

She allowed him to fall to his knees as she licked her lips. She stroked his head.

"Stay. I may want more from you."



From the dark of the forest, Sulhoth strolled into the glen, followed by his three black winged wolves. He frowned as he approached his twin sister. He had never seen her as battered and ghostly as she was now.

Croell smiled weakly. The pain within her slowly ebbed.

— *Finally, you have arrived to share in the glory of this night.*

— *You should have waited for me. Magdalene collected Ris Mal's soul before the dragon did. She took her to Heaven. The palace is in uproar. Master pitched the dragon and its mate into the Abyss. Now Magdalene is at keep with Novarro.*

— *Does not matter, Croell snapped. The keep is not holy ground.*

— *'Tis not ours, either. Magdalene could defeat you.*

Croell unsheathed her claws.

— *Sister, no! Sulhoth commanded, anticipating what she planned to do as she twisted toward Rebecca. Do not maim or ruin the woman. We may need her. Novarro cares for her. That gives us an advantage.*

— *I want this creature dead, brother, Croell snarled.*

— *We may need her, he insisted.*

— *You do not understand. This mortal is like none I have ever encountered. I did not see or hear it before it attacked me at the village, and I only just barely managed to go inside it. It nearly bested me.*

Sulhoth pointed at Haysson.

— *Let that one suffer instead, he suggested.*

Croell stepped in front of the trembling man. He was sobbing uncontrollably. She cupped his face between her hands.

Haysson looked up at her.

“Where do I go? Tell me...what I should do?”

Croell plunged her claws deep into his eye sockets, and he shrieked in agony as she cracked open his skull from crown to chin as if it were a ripe melon. She released the carcass and licked the blood and eye from her hands. The three wolves pounced on the remains, feasting hungrily.

Sulhoth frowned.

Tomorrow's outcome is not in stone, sister, but this we do know—Novarro will capture Tynan.

Croell glared at him with frustration. Slaying the mortal had not soothed any of her rage.

— *But we have not lost*, Sulhoth continued. *Novarro has not escaped us. Together, we have never seen defeat. We are the only ones in the Master's kingdom to have slain a warrior angel. He looked at the tower beyond the treetops. For now conceal yourself inside the woman again. Do nothing to raise Novarro's suspicions. Rein your urges. You must insure Novarro takes Tynan to Valkyries Gate.*

— *You are not hearing me. This woman will not do as I command!*

— *She is mortal. You have possessed her. You are in charge of all she does.*

— *But I tell you I am not!*

Sulhoth shook his head.

— *What you say cannot be.*

— *Yet it is. Now do you see why I want to rip her apart?*

— *Soon. And you can do it in front of Novarro. That I promise. I will wait for you at Valkyries Gate.*

Rebecca groaned and attempted to rise. She failed and sank back into oblivion. Croell stared at her. She had lost count of the mortals she'd possessed and controlled over the ages, yet this one would not obey. Before it died screaming and begging, she would share her secret.

I drew the dagger from my boot and eased open the door to the tower room. I had decided I would only use the revolver as a last resort, as it would awake the coven.

The windows were sealed; no light of moon or sun could seep inside. and it was lit by several clay lamps, and the air was heavy with the stench of brimstone and oleander. The Ananyas symbol was etched over and over on the walls, beseeching Satan for merciless strength. On a perch beside the door, a two-headed owl shredded the carcass of a rat.

On the floor in the center of the room, an elaborate pentagram was surrounded by a circle of dwarf jackal skulls. Tynan sat cross-legged inside it. The webbed caul cloaked his face from hair-line to chin, from cheek to cheek. I could not be certain, but it appeared he had no eyelids, nose or face beneath the caul. On his neck above the collar of his robe and down his forearms and hands were blasphemous tattoos and markings.

“You will do as I say,” I ordered.

The warlock shook his head, his faith in his supremacy absolute .

“The hour was not known, but it was foretold that Novarro would come before me.” He waved his arms to indicate the pentagram then he pointed at me with the hex sign. “I am shielded

within this circle and beyond your grasp. You may be armed, Paladin, but *you* are *my* captive. Your reign of terror ends this night.”

“Get up.”

“The Lady Lenore will spend eternity in Hell, and she will know always that you failed her. Just as you did Lord Theron and his family.”

I moved swiftly into the pentagram, kicking the skulls aside. Tynan’s eyes widened in disbelief behind his caul as I yanked him to his feet and threw him crashing into a cabinet of potions and elixirs. The owls screeched as it fled to an overhead beam.

Tynan twisted toward me, shards of pottery and bits of herbs staining his robe, clearly shaken that the circle had not protected him. He slid his hand into a pocket.

“You betrayed Lenore!” he cried. “You betrayed her with the thief!”

Anger flooded me as I leapt for him, and he hurled dark-blue powder into my face. It did nothing to me. I slugged him in the jaw with the hilt of my dagger then punched him in the gut. I smashed his mouth again, shattering teeth. Then I pitched him headlong across the room into a small table. It shattered under his weight, and he fell hard to the floor.

I moved toward him.

I will not kill him, I repeated to myself. *I will not.*

The warlock whimpered as I approached.

“Get up,” I said.

The door burst open, and a skull-masked sentry rushed inside.

“Kill him!” Tynan shrieked.

The guardsman charged, berserk with fury, raising his axe. I ducked under his swing and plunged my blade deep into his neck under the ear. Warm blood gushed across my fist. The axe thudded to the floor, and I ripped the blade across his throat to the other ear. He clutched his gushing wound with both hands.

I didn’t watch him fall.

I pivoted back to Tynan and snatched a leather tie from my belt. I looped one end around his neck and the other around my wrist and forearm; then, I jerked him upright. He clawed at the leather as I dragged him to the door and peered down at the courtyard. The tower steps were passable, as was the path I’d taken from the east wall.

I pressed the tip of my dagger into his right side. Tynan gasped.
“When I say walk, you walk,” I told him. “When I say stop, you stop. When I say run, you run. Understand?”

He clutched at the shallow wound.

I stabbed him again.

“*Understand?*”

“Yes!”

I scanned the dark courtyard again. Several coveners moved about. They seemed to be about their own business. The sentries I could see were looking outward, not inside. I didn’t know where Vas and Jeb Li had taken position, but it was clear our presence had not yet been discovered.

Then I saw her.

The Archangel Magdalene stood halfway between the tower and the east wall. Her advice, warnings, suggestions, and questions filled my mind as if we were having a days-long conversation. Finally, she waved for me to come down.

“Walk,” I ordered Tynan.

We headed down the steps. A woman in the courtyard pointed up at us. Then two men spotted us. They started forward.

The archangel waved a wing, and all three turned away.

We reached the bottom of the steps and started across the courtyard. I noted that Tynan was quivering, and that, with each step, the trembling increased. Violently. It appeared the warlock was about to collapse, and I gripped the leather around his neck to keep him upright.

More coveners saw us, but the Archangel Magdalene swept her wings and they returned to their tasks. Still, I knew her protection would only last while I was inside the keep. She could not maintain it indefinitely.

We passed near her, and I nodded a grateful thanks.

I shall see you again soon, I knew.

The archangel waved the sign of the cross. Tynan screamed as if he’d been stabbed by a thousand knives. The cry echoed across the keep.

Sentries spun about on the catwalks. The coveners in the courtyard twisted toward us. The archangel rose and spread her wings wide.

I shoved Tynan forward. He was shuddering and weeping in fear. His followers poured into the courtyard.

“Run,” I barked.

He crumpled to the ground, his entire body quaking, then he moaned and passed out.

Vas dashed from the shadows.

“Why aren’t they attacking?”

“They will,” I assured him.

He grabbed the limp warlock and swung him over his left shoulder.

“We go?” he asked.

“We go.”

He headed toward the breach in the east wall. Jeb Li appeared and strode beside him. I looked once more to where the Archangel Magdalene held the coveners back. Then I joined my companions

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As *I crawled from the breach in the keep wall, two hundred* voices howled in rage. Magdalene could no longer hold them back—angels cannot harm any mortal or restrain them for long periods. I thanked her for the time she'd been able to give us.

“To the horses,” I ordered.

Jeb Li lobbed a flaming ball through the opening. It exploded, and the passage collapsed in stone and dust. Vas, with Tynan over his shoulder, headed across the high weeds toward the trees. Friar Sebastian and Jeb Li followed. I was right behind them.

An arrow cut my sleeve as bolts and spears spiked the ground. I spun around, aiming my pistol upward. Sentries had gathered atop the wall. I fired, and an archer crumpled; two others, shot chest center with Jeb Li's arrows, also fell. Sebastian dropped to one knee and aimed his rifle, but he didn't pull the trigger. The weapon shook in his hands. He closed his eyes and lowered his head.

I pulled the friar to his feet, urging him to the woods. He jogged toward the treeline.

Jeb Li fired, and a fourth sentry dropped. Another archer tumbled forward off the wall with one of my rounds in him.

Sebastian cried out as an arrow pierced his side, but he kept running, tugging the shaft from his body.

Ten coveners, shrieking, wielding axes and spears, rounded the southeast corner of the keep and rushed toward us. Jeb Li and I ran. Up ahead, Vas was almost to the treeline, and he stopped.

“Keep going,” I yelled.

He dumped Tynan on the ground. Cracking his neck, he anchored his stance.

“I am Vas Lyoness! ‘Tis a good day for you to die!”

Four coveners raced out of the forest. Still running, I shot one as Jeb Li put a shaft deep under the jaw of another, and Vas braced the last two. He blocked a spear thrust then crushed the carrier’s face with his arm spike. Without pause, he pivoted and split wide the other’s chest. He twisted toward us, blood splattered across his face and body, and roared a triumphant battle cry.

I spun back toward the charging ten. Sebastian had his rifle aimed at them, but again, he couldn’t shoot.

“Friar!” I yelled. “Get the warlock!” Then I fired. As my round hammered him in the chest, the swiftest covener, wearing a skull mask, slammed to the ground.

Sebastian dashed to Vas and Tynan. Jeb Li pitched a ball into the attackers; it exploded in flame and thick smoke. A covener staggered out of the gray-black cloud missing one arm, his face shredded, but he kept coming. I shot him.

As the smoke lifted, I saw the rest were no longer a problem. Most were already dead, their bodies pierced with nails. A few still writhed. One attempted to crawl to us.

“Ye gods!” called Vas. “You could’ve left me some!”

Jeb Li reloaded his bow.

“Thought you needed a rest.”

“I’ll outlast you!”

Sebastian set his rifle down then knelt beside the unmoving warlock.

“Vas! Friar!” I shouted. “Go—”

Before I could finish, two more coveners thundered out of the trees. Vas pivoted around, gutting the first then cleaving the other from crown to chin. He shook his head and spat.

“You gits aren’t worth counting.”

“Get to the horses!” I commanded.

Sebastian rose with Tynan slung over his shoulders.

I reloaded as another score of coveners, all spread out, charged around the southeast corner. More stormed from the northeast as replacement archers joined the ones on the wall. I downed two of the nearest then picked up Sebastian's rifle and shot one on the wall. Jeb Li hurled another ball. It exploded and took down several, but the rest continued charging us. He threw another.

The coveners did not slow, and it did not matter how many we downed. If they'd been soldiers, we would've all been dead by now. But there was no one directing them, no order to their attack. Each had one goal—to rescue Tynan. They appeared to be in an uncontrolled, trance-like frenzy. I'd heard of Memphi warriors who became such, but I had never seen it until now. Berserker, they were called. It was madness.

Yet they would soon overwhelm us by their sheer number. Our only hope was to lose them in the forest.

Three more coveners bolted from the trees. Vas decapitated one then, with an underhand sweep, buried his blade deep in the crotch of the second. He screamed at the third, and the man fled back the way he had come.

I fired again, and again, then reloaded. Jeb Li sent arrow after arrow, each hitting its target. The swiftest coveners would reach our position within a minute. From the southeast, two score more emerged. We were done. There were too many.

Then, above the din of coven battle cries, I heard a banshee-warrior yell. Rebecca spurred her mare out of the woods and along the treeline. She rode low in the saddle, her head and upper body pressed to the mare's neck. Clutched tight in her fist were the reins of the other horses.

"Ride, milady!" Vas shouted.

The mount farthest back crashed to the ground with arrows piercing its body and legs. Another pulled free and raced in blind panic across the field. An arrow skimmed Leopard's flank.

Jeb Li and I kept firing.

Rebecca yanked her mare to a halt beside us. Sebastian pitched the unconscious Tynan across his mount then swung into the saddle. Jeb Li mounted his horse. As I leapt onto Leopard, a spear cut through his mane, and I shot the man who had cast it.

The warlock raised his head, groggy. Sebastian slugged him brutally on the jaw. Jeb Li skewered two coveners then grabbed the reins of the friar's horse, and they headed into the forest. Vas struggled to mount his terrified horse as the animal fought to get away. I continued firing at the approaching coveners, making each round count as arrows and spears pierced the air near us.

A spearman aimed at Vas's back. Rebecca spurred her pony and plunged her short sword into the man's chest.

"Mount up, you dumb git," she yelled.

"I'm trying," he barked.

"Just chafin' do it!"

Finally, after an eternity, Vas swung into the saddle. He spurred his horse after Jeb-Li and Sebastian. I slapped Rebecca's mare on the rump, and we followed. Four coveners appeared from the bushes ahead of us. One dropped his weapon and fled. I fired my last round, and the other spun to the ground. A third, shrieking, charged at me with a hatchet. I rode over him, his frenzied cry ending under Leopard's hooves.

The fourth covener jumped up and latched his arms around Rebecca's waist. She began to slide from her saddle. Her attacker pulled harder, and she plunged her short sword straight into his mouth and out the back of his head.



The others were waiting for Rebecca and me at the second bridge of the pass road. Jeb Li had dismounted and stood alongside the friar and our captive.

I turned to Rebecca. She smiled.

"You asked me to stay with the horses," she said. "I stayed with the horses."

I examined the flank wound on Leopard. The arrow had cut flesh but not muscle.

"You're welcome, sire," Rebecca bristled.

Turning to her, I traced my thumb across a bruise on her cheek.

"Where's Haysson?"

"I don't know. He left, and I didn't bother to search for him."

I sighed. She glared at me.

"I didn't do anything to him, Patrick. Oath. He wandered off of his own accord."

I didn't debate her.

As we neared the others, I saw that Vas and Jeb Li were staring, bewildered, at the tall friar. Sebastian sat upright on his mount holding the warlock down securely. His skittish horse shifted sideways.

"Damn," whispered Rebecca.

Three arrows had pierced the friar's back. From its position and the bright blood staining his robe, I knew one had penetrated his heart.

"He never cried out," Jeb Li said. "He must have been dead before we rode into the trees."

Vas dismounted, but his eyes never left Sebastian.

"He was dead, yet he held on to the warlock. How can that be?"

I had no answer.

I never would.

INTERLUDE

Rolling her pallet beside Patrick's, Rebecca studied the forest mountains that surrounded them. Dense fog was lowering on the narrow valley where they'd set up night camp; already the stars were blocked from sight. Trees and boulders cloaked by the chilled shroud took on the shadowy, twisted appearance of serpentine scorpion and horned kraken. Soon they wouldn't be able to see beyond arm's length.

Vas and Jeb Li were patrolling the perimeter of the camp. Vas was certain that, after two days hard riding and several quick skirmishes, they had finally eluded the coveners who pursued them. Patrick and Jeb Li were not convinced.

Tynan Greydraca sat on his knees, bound hand and foot, several rods from her.

Rebecca's gaze lingered on Patrick as he changed the bandage on Leopard; she was amazed that the fierce animal stood perfectly still while he did the doctoring. Also, she enjoyed watching Patrick from behind—the curl of his long, dark hair, the width of his broad shoulders, and the lean vee where his buttocks and legs joined.

Croell despised all this. She wanted to emerge *now*. The emotions that filled this woman when she thought about Novarro were vile and repulsive. But the archdemon endured the misery. She accepted the pain. The reward was worth it.

Nines continued as riddle as well as torture. Her fear of retaliation by the Master and Sulhoth for Croell's death were very real but receded when she lay beside Novarro. That was disturbing enough. Still, the grand mystery remained: Why would the woman not obey?

She was rebuffed by Nines on every command, and that was not supposed to be possible. She had possessed thousands of mortals over the ages without hindrance of any kind, so how could this thief defy her? The woman was mortal. She did not possess an otherworldly shield, as Novarro did. She carried no Heaven's talisman. No warlock or witch, even the great le Faye, could cast a protection spell of this strength.

There were no traces of a previous possession by demon or angel—that she would have recognized. Were her powers fading?

The thought sent a shudder through her. The sooner they reached Valkyries Gate and she could kill the bitch the better. That vision sustained her.

"Crusader," the warlock called. "Release me, and I will give you crown and army to serve you."

"Quiet," Novarro replied.

"I can turn stone into gold. I can make you wealthy beyond equal."

Novarro ignored him.

"I can give you any desire."

Stop groveling, Croell wanted to shout. *You cannot give him his desire.*

Tynan would die soon, too. Magdalene had touched the warlock and terrified him to the core. All that her brother and she had given him over his lifetime was being destroyed. Few could withstand the overwhelming influence of an archangel, and Tynan was clearly not one of those. His usefulness was nearly done.

"If I am slain," the warlock continued, "my passageway to the underworld will close immediately and forever. Your quest will fail before it has begun."

Rebecca hurled a stone at him, nailing him square in the chest.

"Shut up!" she snapped. "You damned son of a corpse!"

Rage etched the warlock's features behind his caul. Croell wondered if he would at last fight back. Perhaps Magdalene had not withered his courage completely.

As Novarro checked Tynan's bonds, the warlock chanted words from the first language. He pleaded for the Master to save him.

"Are your mumblings supposed to frighten us?" Novarro asked.

It should, Croell wanted to say. That was the language the Master spoke when addressing the Twelve, when he seduced Iscariot, Cain, and Redmore III.

"Your companions will die cursing your name," Tynan wheedled. "Release me, and I will grant them safe exodus out of the mountains."

Novarro frowned, and Croell made note. The Paladin had a clear vulnerability—he feared for his companions.

"You're a liar," Novarro said.

Sweat pooled at Tynan's temples and trickled down his caul.

"I will not open my passageway to the underworld for you."

Novarro patted the dagger sheathed in his boot.

"You will."

Croell rejoiced. All mortals, under the right circumstances, were capable of cruelty. Even the Paladin.

"Even so, you cannot use it," Tynan gloated. "No mortal can but me."

"If I can't use it, then there's no point in keeping you alive, is there?"

"Please, have mercy! Perhaps you can also use it."

"I thought I might." Novarro started to turn away but stopped. "You'll remain silent while we rest. I won't restrain milady as I did last night, and if she comes over here, you'll truly know regret."

Tynan bowed his head toward the underworld.

Damn, Croell cursed. She admired Novarro more as an enemy than she did Tynan as an ally.

Novarro joined Rebecca as she finished arranging her blankets beside his.

"It's cold, and we're sleeping on the ground again," she said before he could comment. "I don't like being cold *or* sleeping on the ground."

"I know that well."

She frowned. "The nightmares are worse," she said. "Now, besides seeing the Damned being tortured, I see you covered in blood, dying."

"I'm fine, Rebecca."

"Last night, when I closed my eyes, I concentrated on a favorite memory, and as soon as it was bright in my mind, Skinface started his chants again, and it slipped away."

"He's done for this night. He understands that."

"It was a very good memory," she continued. "Remember the day we rested the horses at the beach along the coast of Cordoba?"

Novarro sighed.

Ah, Croell noted. Another vulnerability.

"In this country, I can't layer enough clothes on to be warm," Rebecca said. "There, in the magnificent sunlight, I spent the entire day wearing only my anklet, and it was wonderful. You even smiled—twice—that day. You nearly laughed once, too, and tried to hide it behind your fist. I like reliving that day, and Skinface kept interrupting it."

"Tomorrow, no matter how it turns, the warlock will bother you no more."

Rebecca smoothed Novarro's blankets with her hands.

"Tomorrow we reach the ruins."

"Yes."

Rebecca no longer looked at him.

"Let me say this without interruption. I won't use the right words but allow me to try."

Novarro remained quiet. She inhaled deeply then began.

"I have always understood that you must rescue the lady Lenore. It is a good and right quest. If you turned from your vow, you would no longer be you, and that cannot be. I wouldn't pray for it to be different.

"Tomorrow, you will enter Hell and I know you will find her. I know you will save her. I want it to be so. After tomorrow, you and I will never see one another again.

"But even if I had known on our first meeting that this was how it would end, I still would've ridden beside you. I don't regret our journey together. Not for a moment."

Novarro frowned.

"Why will we never see each other again?"

Rebecca wiped her eyes with her fingers.

"The lady Lenore and you will be reunited among the angels. I've broken too many of Heaven's laws. I am also unrepentant, be-

cause I have enjoyed most of what I've done. When I see two sins, I do not abstain—I run toward the one I have never tried before. Souls like mine don't walk among the angels."

"You're wrong."

"I had my paradise in the days we rode together."

Novarro gazed at her, but he did not speak.

The stallion raised its head with its ears perked and alert. Footfalls approached the camp. Vas and Jeb Li appeared emerged from the fog.

"If Sebastian hadn't taken Tynan from me so I could fight, I would've been doomed," Vas was saying. "I live today because of him."

"How do you measure a man who completes his task after dying?" wondered the archer.

"It was a good place where we rested his body."

"Yes. The coven will never find him there. They will not desecrate his remains."

They stopped near Rebecca and Novarro.

"They're not following," Vas reported. "We lost 'em in that maze of canyons, like I said."

"It appears so," agreed Jeb Li. "But a guard would still be prudent for the night, and we should keep a cold camp."

Rebecca sighed and lay back on her pallet. Novarro looked at Tynan. Tendrils of fog snaked around the warlock as he continued his now-silent incantations.

Croell watched Novarro. She did not know what he was thinking, but it did not matter. Tomorrow, his quest would end. He would know his failure. All his companions, especially Nines, would die. Lenore would learn she was spending eternity in Hell.

Tomorrow would be a blood day. She thirsted for it, and she would have her fill.

29

As dawn's light burned through the fog, I secured my saddle and lashed my gear down. The plan was clear in my mind. I knew what had to be done, and what I needed to anticipate.

Rebecca sat on her pallet lacing her moccasins. Near her was a pile of small rocks, and every time the warlock spoke, she hurled one at him. She never missed. Vas tied a waterbag to his saddled mount. Jeb Li, his horse and Tynan's saddled and ready, turned to the big man.

"Do you believe in reward or punishment after this life?" he asked.

Vas, his bag secure, tugged at his beard, thinking.

"I believe the same as my father did. You're born, you die, and you hope the gods, who are fickle and spiteful, put the two far apart."

"What is Paradise for you?"

Vas grinned. "A good death," he said, "fighting with axe in hand then going straight into the Hall of Warriors to collect my arm that went there ahead of me."

Rebecca chuckled. A scowl crossed Vas's features.

"You laughing at me?"

"You know I am."

Vas started to reply then thought better of it.

“Do you believe in an afterlife?” he asked Jeb Li instead.

“If I have fulfilled my penance in this world, I will be reborn in a blessed realm. If I have not tipped my life book with *metta*, I will be reborn in punishment as ghost or Damned in Hell.”

“What’s penance?”

“I must complete enough good and kind deeds to make up for the evil I have done.”

“Was your intent when doing those deeds evil?”

“My intentions were pure, but that does not excuse the deed.”

“Now you sound like Patrick’s Christian book. Come to the Hall of Warriors. I’ll vouch for you. We’ll discuss our battles between drinking endless pints of aged ale and seducing willing, lustful wenches and muses.”

Jeb Li smiled.

“Thank you for your tribute, my friend.”

He went to Tynan, unbound the warlock’s legs and guided him to his horse. Vas combed his beard with his fingers, thinking again.

“Aye, a good last fight. That’s what I want.”

I studied my companions, one and all. I couldn’t have better friends. I wished them all well in this life and the next. I stroked Leopard’s neck then went to join Rebecca. Jeb Li and Vas tied Tynan to his saddle. The warlock pulled against the restraints as Jeb Li climbed onto his horse. Vas scanned the camp for anything we had forgotten.

“Rebecca and I are staying behind,” I announced. “We’ll catch up later.”

She looked at me, puzzled then concerned.

“We’re staying? Why?”

I held out my hand. She slid hers into mine, and I pulled her to her feet. Curious, but wary, she gazed into my eyes.

We waited. Vas and Jeb Li, with Tynan behind them, rode from camp. When they were gone, I slipped my arms around her, held her against me. She smiled, pleased.

“Yes,” she whispered.

I brushed my lips across hers, and she rose up on her toes, grabbing my hair in her fists. My tongue traced her upper lip then slipped inside her mouth. She stroked her tongue over mine. I

could feel her heat through my clothing, and my body responded to it.

As we kissed, I sank down onto the pallet. She released my hair and skimmed her nails down my back. I laid her beneath me as her tongue probed deeper and deeper, as if she were attempting to merge our bodies. When I lifted my mouth from hers, she moaned pleurably, and her eyes were bright and shining.

“Rebecca,” I murmured.

I reached behind me and caught her hands. I eased them to her sides. She closed her eyes and raised her mouth, hungrily, toward mine.

“Forgive me.”

I flipped her over, pinning her to the ground. Swiftly, I lashed her wrists together with leather ties then knotted more around her ankles. I stood.

Rebecca rolled onto her back, looking up at me. I expected venomous curses, but she remained silent. A look of hurt, of betrayal, was etched plainly across her features.

I called loudly to Vas and Jeb Li.

“I’m going to the ruins with Tynan alone,” I told them when they returned. “I want you to return to Balmoral.”

Vas studied Rebecca for a long moment then shook his head.

“Lady Lenore ain’t rescued. I ride with you till you reach the ruins unharmed just like I gave oath I would.”

“Your friendship honors me.”

Then I turned toward Jeb Li, anticipating a like response from him.

“As does yours. I shall never forget.” I addressed them both. “But you cannot go where I am going. I must travel unseen past demons and the Damned. I may have to challenge Satan himself.

“And the underworld is a vast wasteland. It could take me a day to find Lenore. It could take my lifetime. I may not be able to use Tynan’s passageway to escape and will have to find another. I beg you to grant me this request.”

Both remained silent. Then, at last, Jeb Li said, “I will do as you request, my san.”

“Nay,” insisted Vas, his face stubborn.

I stepped to him.

"I have one last quest for you," I said. "We have become brothers, and there is no other I trust more than you to accomplish this great favor."

He looked for a moment as though he might yet refuse then nodded.

"Tell me the task, and I will see it done, Patrick."

"Take Rebecca safely to Balmoral. Do not let her follow me."

"I fear no man," Vas admitted. "But she makes my cock sack sweat and not in a good way." He looked at her. "I'll see her safely to Balmoral, even if it costs my life—and it very well might. You have my solemn oath."

I tapped my fist to his chest. Then, squatting, I gazed into Rebecca's wounded eyes.

"If I had asked, you would have either outright refused, or lied then followed. You cannot go with me this time."

She remained silent, her jaw tight and clenched. I had not known beforehand the words I was about to say, but as soon as I did, I knew them to be true.

"It may not seem so to others, but I've had a blessed life," I said. "Most do not find love once. I have found it twice. God-speed, milady."

Rebecca flinched as if I'd slapped her.

"No!" she cried. She fought violently against the ties. "You can't tell me you love me! Not now!"

Rising, I walked to the horses. I mounted then grabbed the lead rope of Tynan's horse.

I looked back one last time as we rode into the morning fog. Vas lifted his battle-axe high in salute, and Jeb Li put fist to chest in farewell. I could not see Rebecca; the uneven ground blocked my view. But I heard one word echoing again and again, beseeching me, stabbing me, as I headed across the valley.

"Patrick!"

30

T*ynan began his incantations the moment we lost sight of* camp. I ignored him as we cut trail through the forest. The warlock repeated his chants but offered no more threats or barter. That was good. With the wrong choice of words, I would have trimmed tattoos from his body. He seemed to understand this without me putting voice to it.

I attempted to keep my thoughts on the task ahead. It was difficult. First, I forced Rebecca from my mind, then the sacrifices of Tom Kree, Friar Sebastian, and the demon Ris Mal. When I finally did, the doubts I could accomplish the plan came.

We passed an apple tree. I plucked two from it. The warlock paused his chant and stared longingly at the ripe fruit. One I gave to Leopard and the other to Tynan's mount.

Lenore deserved better than me. This I knew. I recalled her, radiant in her white dress and flowered brow wreath, holding my hand as we stood in the village church and said our vows to one another.

"To have and to hold, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, to love and cherish; from this day forward until the end of our days."

Other images flashed across my mind, too—Lenore sitting in her rocking chair brushing her hair, the crinkles around her eyes

when she laughed, and the pride on her face when she wrote her name without my assistance for the first time.

Once she had been ill and unable to leave our bed. I went to the open market in hopes of finding foods she might be able to eat and keep down. When the other women discovered she was ill and I was her husband—I had no name, I was only “Lenore’s husband”—they loaded a basket with vegetables, fruits and herbs they guaranteed would heal her. Upon returning to our home, I found a half-dozen women surrounding her sickbed tending her.

Please, I prayed, give me the strength to rescue her. I will not ask for more. To this I give my oath.

By late morning, the fog had burned away, and the landscape was not what I’d expected. I’d seen cursed lands before. All, like the unnamed valley where I’d first encountered Satan and the demon sanctuary at Ananyas, had been bleak and ravaged with almost no life within their borders except for snakes, scorpions and the like.

But today, I rode across countryside of rich vegetation and towering trees, of crystal streams and lush meadows with an incredible variety of animals and birds. I was reminded once again that evil is not always ugly and forbidding; sometimes, it is beautiful and enticing.

I kept watch for the warlock’s followers. Found none. Perhaps we *had* lost them in the canyons, as Vas had said. Then, I wondered if the coveners were smart enough to ride ahead and be waiting at the Gate.

No, they weren’t.

At midday, as we approached a grassy, flat-topped hill in the midst of a wide clearing, I realized Tynan had stopped his incantations.

A white owl circled in the sky above the hill. Leopard’s ears perked. I didn’t hear what he heard, but his pace quickened.

We were there. That I knew.

At the base of the hill, I slashed Tynan’s bonds and pulled him to the ground. Then I unsaddled the horses and set them free to graze. The warlock’s mount raced back toward the trees; Leopard headed swiftly up the rise and over the crest.

I drew my pistol and shoved Tynan.

“Let’s go.”

He did, trembling but mute.

We quickly reached the summit, and below us was Valkyries Gate. It looked as if a giant’s bowl had been carved in the green ground. The crater was perfectly round with emerald-green clover covering its sides and base. At the bottom of the bowl, in the center, were the ivy-cloaked temple ruins; three columns and one stone-block arch were all that remained. The other arch, and what appeared to have once been stalls, had collapsed into heaps. Despite the beauty, a sadness shrouded the ruins that I could feel in my bones. I wanted to call out, to yell to Lenore. I wanted her to know I was coming.

Leopard stood near a limping paint mare—*Rebecca’s* mare. Tynan’s caul-face had turned paler, nearly bloodless. I dragged him into the bowl. Halfway down, I saw her. Rebecca lay sprawled, struggling to rise, across a large stone table in the center of the ruins. In the plan, I hadn’t foreseen her being a prisoner, although I had anticipated this could be a trap.

Croell stepped out from behind a column. I holstered the useless pistol in my belt. I’d expected one or more of the Twelve to be here, more than likely Sulhoth.

But not Croell. I had believed the archdemon slain.

I muttered a curse. Rebecca’s nightmares, visions of abominations and the tortured Damned. I should have known. Should have. Croell had been within her since the fight at Pencross. What else had I missed?

It did not matter.

Only my challenge did.

31

As we reached the base of the bowl, my focus solely on Rebecca and the archdemon, my grip on Tynan's arm had become so tight he whimpered for mercy. Blood rose on his sleeve beneath my grasp, and I realized his flesh was splitting and his bones cracking. I eased my hold. I still needed him.

"The woman is unmolested," Croell called, brushing her claws through Rebecca's hair. "Thus far."

The warlock and I approached the ruins.

"Here I cannot be defeated," she continued. "For you, this is the grave. Alive and unharmed you will remain, but it will be your tomb."

Rebecca stirred, waking, and swung her legs over the edge of the stone table. Struggling, almost failing, she sat upright then lowered her head weakly between her knees.

Croell stretched a hand toward me. In her palm, what seemed to be her head appeared. It burst into flame then crumbled to ash. She held her other hand out, and the same occurred. It had been an illusion at Pencross village.

She smiled.

"Mortals are so easily deceived."

So are arrogant demons, I wanted to tell her.

"Do as I say if you desire her to live."

Tynan started to speak, some courage returning. I backhanded him. He fell mute immediately and, despite the presence of his patroness, was quaking again.

Croell placed her claws atop Rebecca's head.

"Surrender to me."

The warlock and I stepped up onto the stone floor of the ruins. I could now see maggots writhing in the archdemon's hair and yellow specks in her dark eyes.

"Abandon hope, Paladin. You are done. Oh, yes—your other companions are dead."

I yanked Tynan to a halt.

"A league from your night camp," she continued, "ten of the coven ambushed them. The one-armed pagan released the woman from her bonds so she could fight. I came out of her body at that moment, took her and horse, and rode to arrive here before you. I did not bother to watch your companions die screaming."

Drawing my pistol, I forced Tynan to his knees then pressed the barrel to his temple.

"His passageway will cease to be if he is slain," Croell said with a smirk.

"I found this one," I answered. "I can find another."

The warlock sobbed.

Croell shook her head.

"You believe we have a stand-off, you with your prisoner, I with mine. We do not. If you wish to kill Tynan then do so. His life no longer matters. If you wish for the woman to live, you must surrender to me. Do it before you anger me further."

I stared at her for a long moment.

"As soon as Rebecca is safe."

"No. She will remain within my reach."

I did not respond.

Croell raised her hand high, and her eyes flashed yellow and crimson. Behind me, the mare screamed in agony; I twisted and saw the painted horse fall. Leopard reared, and he snapped with bared teeth as his forehooves slashed the air as if in battle. Then, he collapsed with one hoof still fighting the unseen foe. In his last moment, he looked at me then lay still. Smoke curled from his body.

I swung back around. Croell clutched Rebecca by the hair.
“I will kill her.”

It took all of my restraint not to fire every round into the arch-demon.

“Do it!” she urged. “You want to!”

I lowered the pistol.

Croell frowned, disappointed.

“Tynan,” she called. “My brother is near. Open your passageway so he may join us.”

The warlock looked up at me.

“You heard her.”

He quickly recited an incantation. The air inside the arch roiled like black ocean waves coming into shore. They came faster and faster as the darkness twisted into a vicious whirlpool. Lightning cracked within, thunder rumbled. The passage opened; a hot brimstone wind flared, and the tortured wailing of the Damned echoed.

Sulhoth marched from the passageway. Two ghouls followed with spears, then three more leading the winged wolves on leashes.

All the underworld demons, except the most important one, were now here.

“I almost forgot,” I said, “I didn’t come alone, either.”

Above the stone arch, a radiant light flashed, and the Archangel Magdalene appeared. Along the rim of the crater at the north, south, east and west points, four warrior angels stood in brightly shining armor and holding flaming swords. The wolves snarled.

Sulhoth thrust his fist at Magdalene.

“This ground belongs to the Master! You cannot tread here!”

“This is true, demon,” she answered. “We cannot and will not step on the soil of this cursed sanctuary, and we cannot harm those who stand upon it.”

I was not bound by those restrictions. The plan had been clear in my mind’s eye when I shared it with the archangel at the keep.

I shot Tynan between the eyes.

The ghouls rushed toward the closing passageway. One leapt through as it shut. A severed leg lay on the stone floor. The others spread out across the ruins, unsure, waiting for command. The wolves fought against their leashes, wanting to be freed.

“Stand down, Paladin!” ordered Croell.

I shoved the pistol in my belt.

“You can no longer leave,” I said. “There was only one passage-way here, and it’s gone; so you must use another. And if you take a single step from these grounds, the angels will destroy you.”

“Nay, we’ll slay *them*,” Croell snapped.

“Then do it, demon,” I said. “Or give me Rebecca alive and whole.”

The only sound was wind.

“Give her to me,” I repeated.

Croell shook her head.

“What will we gain if we do?” asked Sulthoth.

“If you *don’t*, eternity trapped here.”

He moved beside his sister.

“You offer no enticement to comply, Novarro.”

“Once Rebecca is safe, all will be clear.”

The archdemons studied the warrior angels then Magdalene. Sulthoth whispered to his sister. The bloodlust within Croell was high; I knew she wanted to kill Rebecca, and she wanted me to see it done.

Finally, she gave in and released Rebecca. The ghouls with the wolves moved behind the twin archdemons.

One wolf broke free from its leash. It raced across the bowl, snarling and growling, then rose on its wings up the crater wall toward the western angel. The angel did not move. The winged wolf reached the crater rim, the sanctuary’s border, its maw wide, and dived at its prey. The angel swung her fiery sword and, in one fierce sweep, decapitated the creature. The wolf’s body burst into flame and vanished.

Rebecca looked at me. The archdemons and their soldier ghouls, watching the warrior angel and the wolf, did not see. She was red-eyed but recovering swiftly. I shook my head, pleading for her to come to me as she eased her stiletto from its sheath.

“Patrick Novarro,” Magdalene announced. “They are here.”

Vas and Jeb Li crested the crater rim. They were battered and bandaged but stood ready for battle.

“Stay where you are,” I called to them. “There are demons here.”

“We will,” Jeb Li said. “Until you say different.”

“Tell the Hellspawn we’re ready for them,” yelled Vas.

“Stay on the rim,” I repeated then looked at Magdalene. “Are they possessed?”

“They are not. I do not understand why I could not tell Rebecca Nines was.”

I nodded and turned back to the archdemons. Croell glared at me.

“As long as the woman is within the sanctuary, I can kill her at any moment I desire, and you will be unable to stop me.”

“As soon as Rebecca is safe, we’ll finish this.”

“She stays,” Croell insisted.

Sulhoth put a hand on his sister’s shoulder to calm her. He, I believed, grasped what was coming next.

“How much does your master value your service?” I asked.

Croell stepped back as if she’d received a body blow. Now she understood, too.

“Summon Satan to join us.”

“The Master will not be *summoned*,” Sulhoth said. “He will come only if pleases him to do so.”

“Let’s see if it pleases him.”

Rebecca rose to her feet facing Croell.

“He’ll come if you’re dying,” she said.

“Rebecca!” I shouted. I moved toward her, but the wolves blocked my path.

“No mortal or angel can harm me here, bitch,” Croell said, opening her arms wide and extending her claws to full length. “But try. After you do, I will rip the flesh from your face.”

Rebecca clutched the stiletto in her fist, edging closer to the archdemon.

“You were inside me but not in command.”

Croell stared, disbelieving, at Rebecca.

“None have ever remembered that.”

“What I thought were nightmares were your memories left behind.”

Croell shook her head, mystified.

“No mortal can read my—”

Rebecca pivoted and drove her *miséricorde* silver-edged blade to the hilt under Sulhoth’s sternum. The archdemon moaned as pain flooded through him. She pulled the knife free.

“I am the best.”

Sulhoth reeled into his sister, black blood pumping from his chest and his dark eyes turning yellow-white. Croell caught him in her arms and lowered him to the ground.

Rebecca glared down at him.

“Same spot you stabbed Patrick. Only deeper.”

32

Satan arrived as Sulhoth turned to ash and dust.
It must have pleased him to be here, I thought.

Even with warrior angels surrounding me, and the Archangel Magdalene above me, I felt my mind and spirit would break in his fearsome presence, but I did not retreat. I moved beside Rebecca and curled my arms around her. Striding across the ruins, Satan leveled his gaze on us. The ghouls and wolves that a moment before had been attacking us, fled from his path.

My heart, as it had on our first meeting in that unholy valley, felt like it was being crushed inside my chest. My skull pounded and throbbed. Rebecca clutched my shirt and struggled to keep standing. *He cannot harm us*, I repeated over and over.

But now I doubted.

The Archangel Magdalene moved closer to us, and the pain vanished as if it had never been.

“Lucifer,” she said, spreading her wings wide, “does the last battle commence this day?”

A shadow fell across the sun. The warrior angels raised their swords. More celestials joined them on the crater rim. All held flaming blade, lance or bow.

“No!” I shouted. “This was my doing!”

He ignored me.

"If this were the day, Magdalene, we would already be in battle, but that hour does draw nearer."

The shadow faded from the sun, but a veiled, dark sky remained. Croell stared, horrified, at the ashes that cloaked her arms and torso.

"Master," she cried. "How could she slay Brother? This is sanctuary."

"I can slay here, so can she. She is my blood."

Silence settled over the ruins. No one spoke—not demon, angel or mortal. I looked at Rebecca. She did not meet my gaze. There had never been a hint of this. Why had the Archangel Magdalene not told me? Or was it a mystery to her as it had been to the archdemon?

Satan smiled at Magdalene as the archangel eased to within a breath's distance above us.

"I mask my parentage at conception, don't I?"

Magdalene nodded, her expression one of dawning understanding.

"And to protect them from us, you must also keep them secret from your own. For if just one of your Twelve knows, then an archangel can discern it."

"Unfortunately."

"Still, we have found many of them and stopped them from doing more harm than they already had—Nephi, Gankona and Bathory."

"True, but those three were diversions so my children Iscariot, Attila and Sung could achieve their great glories." Satan pointed at Rebecca. "So tell me, good sister, now that you have discerned Rivkah's heritage, will you put an end to her?"

"I will!" Croell bolted forward, growling deep and fierce and flashing her claws. Satan glanced at her, and the archdemon slammed into the floor, shattering flagstones.

He spoke harshly to her in their language. She nodded, stiff and rigid, that she understood. Then she slashed her own breasts, wailed, and crawled away. The ghouls and wolves followed her to the edge of the ruins.

Rebecca touched my cheek lightly with her fingertips. Then she turned toward the fallen angel. I tightened my embrace.

“Father,” she said, her body trembling, “I thought you’d forgotten me.”

“I remember all sixty-six and six hundred with my blood in their veins for as long as they live,” he replied. “You are the first to betray me, Rivkah.”

“Release Lady Lenore and take me in her stead.”

Before I could speak, before I could protest, Satan raised his hand.

“Your offer will not be considered,” he said. “I can take you any time I desire. I believe I’ll wait until you are happy and content and have almost forgotten about me. Unless, of course, a soldier of Heaven has already put an end to you.”

She understood, and her knees folded. I eased her to the ground. She wrapped her arms around my leg and pressed her face to my thigh.

Now, Satan directed his gaze on me.

“You have caused much damage to my kingdom this day, Novarro. One prized captain lost and another imprisoned here for eternity. A daughter turned traitor. I need to increase your bounty.”

I prayed that I would remain resolute and strong.

“Let’s finish it,” I said.

“We cannot.”

“We can do it here and now.” I felt Rebecca quivering against me.

“I know you wish it to be so, but the covenant is not yours or mine to annul. The covenant is between Lenore and I.”

I knew this. I always had.

“I can convince her. But would you agree if I did?”

Satan looked at Croell.

“One lost, but one rescued and my shield removed from you. I would agree.”

“Give oath, Lucifer,” Magdalene said, “that you and your legion will not seek revenge against Patrick Novarro after the covenant is dissolved.”

“I give oath that I and my legion will not seek Novarro *and* Rivkah if they do not seek us. However, what most mortals do to one another during their miserable existence is merely life.”

“There is more good in mankind than evil.”

“So you keep saying. I do not find that true.”

I studied the demon overlord. There was more he was leaving unsaid. More that was beyond my ability to determine.

Satan returned to me.

“Lenore would stay in my kingdom for eternity to keep my shield over you. Do you truly believe you can convince her to annul it?”

“Yes. Tell me where to find another doorway, and I’ll go there without haste.”

He shook his head, amused. He was Satan, once the Archangel Lucifer, and he needed no passageway from this world to Hell.

“Take my hand, Novarro.”

Rebecca gripped my leg tighter.

“We shall go speak to Lenore.”

33

I watched the Boatman guide his teeming ferry along the River Styx to Hell's shore and raised my trembling hand in acknowledgment to him. He nodded. Then I looked across the waters at Heaven. *Give me the strength to be the man I wish to be*, I prayed.

Still, the fear knotted in the pit of my belly grew. Turning, I marched across the bridge toward the flaming palace. Lava flowed within the moat surrounding it. The skyline in the distance was a labyrinth of black and red, and the stench of brimstone and sulfur hung thick in the air. The tortured wailing of the Damned was deafening. One agonized scream rose above the din. It belonged to Tynan Greydraca. This I knew.

At the gates, the dragon-hounds and lesser demons retreated. Mammon appeared in the gateway. He'd been the first angel to join Satan in abandoning Heaven. The archdemon had taken the male human form. His unclothed body, nine feet in height, was covered in oozing black-blood cankers and lesions. His eyes were empty sockets. The flesh on his left side had rotted away, exposing skull, jaw and ribs. He favored a giant black-bladed scythe as his weapon.

Without a word, he waved me inside.

I hesitated, inhaling deeply. From its burrow, the Direbeast rose and bellowed. When allowed loose, the beast was the largest crea-

ture to walk the earth. Its head was wide at the rear but tapered to a narrow snout with four eyes that allowed it to see in all directions at once; and its U-shaped jaw contained massive razor-sharp teeth that could rip an elephant in half with one bite. The creature's forelegs had mammoth killing claws and the rear had cloven hooves for speed. It did not know fear or defeat.

I entered the palace.

The path I was to take was clear. The stone floor, except for a slim ribbon, was a sea of shifting snakes. From holes in the walls, rats emerged and dropped onto the serpents, and the creatures devoured one another. Overhead, above the massive spiders and their webs, owls and vultures lined the crossbeams.

Without further pause, I walked into the arctic throne room. I gripped the pistol in my belt despite knowing it was useless here. My boots echoed with each step. The hall was nearly empty.

Satan sat upon his blood-and-gold throne. He stabbed a claw at the floor directly in front of him. I advanced, but he was not commanding me.

Lenore stepped from behind the throne. Breath raced from my chest. I loved this woman. I would surrender my own life without regret to save her from this eternity. She dragged her chains to the place Satan had pointed and faced him.

She didn't know I was there.

Satan prolonged the time, savoring my anguish because he could. Then, at last, he motioned for Lenore to look behind her. She turned, saw me. Her eyes widening, she started to run to me but did not. Terror gripped her, and her hands clutched her breast.

Tears filled my eyes.

"I am safe," I said, "but my time here is brief. I have come to take you home, my beloved, to take you to Heaven."

We went to each other then, held one another.

"Please," I pleaded. "Agree to this. He is willing to break the covenant, but you must also agree."

I implored her to do this—for her, for me, for us. The moment had come to cease what was. I would cherish our days together for all time. I'd endeavor during the remainder of my life to earn Heaven's reward and join her there when my end came.

"Please, my beloved," I said. "Consent. I need to live the rest of my life as all mortals did with no otherworldly shields."

Time stopped as I waited for her reply. All that we had been, all that we had become, all that we might have been, folded into one moment.

34

Lenore prodded me again, and I dismissed it as I had before.
All was finally right in my world, and I guessed my disquiet was from being always aware of my surroundings for the last five years, for to be unaware, even for a moment, could have lead to my death and failure.

As sunlight spread across the white sands of the Cordoba beach, I walked from our shelter on the secluded bay and into the warmth. I watched the waves roll into shore. Dolphins jumped from the water. The joy of observing nature's wonder eased a smile onto my lips.

The covenant was annulled. Lenore was finally in Heaven, as she deserved to be. The Archangel Magdalene had escorted her to Paradise with a bodyguard of warrior angels. Satan collected Croell and the others; she went in chains for allowing herself to be trapped at the sanctuary and for not protecting her brother. I didn't fear the archdemon coming for revenge. I believed my life would be long over before Satan's punishment ended for her.

Back in Balmoral, in the first hour there, Rebecca left us. She did not look back once as she walked away from me. I went to the chapel where I'd prayed for DeQuinn Mercy's soul and said another for the tall friar.

Vas, Jeb Li and I shared a final midday meal at the tavern. Vas Lyoness, as he now called himself, moaned after several ales that

he didn't relish going back home to his wives. He could endure their venom for his being gone so long, but how could he bear merely being a fisherman or tradesman and no longer a warrior. He would become a pitiable old man who retold tales of adventures no one wished to hear any longer.

Jeb Li said he'd heard about a farming township in northern Thuria that was plagued by bandits. Their sheriff had been killed, and they had sent word to King Harold that a new magistrate was needed to protect them. The following day, they rode south together.

As for me, I wouldn't return to Valon. It had long been my desire, but I wouldn't. Too many memories and ghosts. I was no longer the same person who had grown to manhood there, and I could never be again. My life in Valon would remain a treasured, beloved memory. Now I had to decide where to go and what to do.

Still, I gave thanks that all was at last in its proper station. There is more good in the world than bad—this I believe and have seen. Just as I know Satan hasn't forgotten us. Someday, he or one from his kingdom would seek us out.

His final words to me at Valkyries Gate thundered in my mind.

Always remember this, Novarro—the Lord God forgives your trespasses. I don't.

I looked up at owls, a score it seemed, flying west toward the frontier. I'd never seen owls flying in flock before.

Returning to the shelter, I decided to prepare the morning meal. Then perhaps I would work the horses. The new animals were becoming lazy and fat from our rest here.

I gathered the cooking pots. As I did, I saw a satchel I didn't recognize. I opened it. Inside were bulging coin pouches, loose pieces of silver and two jeweled necklaces.

I turned. Despite being asleep, a smile etched Rebecca's lips. She wore only a gold band on her right hand, her only attire since we had arrived here.

During our farewell, Lenore had said that Rebecca was not the woman she would have chosen for me, but Rebecca's love was fierce and absolute. All could see that. She wished us well.

In Balmoral, Rebecca had returned after several hours. With her were a Christian priest and a Hebrew rabbi. It was unclear whether the clergy had come willingly or at stiletto's urging.

"I couldn't find any Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim holy folk," she announced. "We can do their vows when we come upon them."

"I don't recall asking for your hand," I said.

Jeb-Li shook his head at me. Vas laughed.

"Patrick, y're not dodging this. Accept it. You've won milady's heart. 'Twould be safer to battle Hell's spawn than to spurn her."

Rebecca didn't challenge our friend's assessment.

"Not until we come to an agreement," I told her. "Certain skills will no longer be practiced. That I shan't negotiate."

"I give my solemn oath," she said, "to cling to every word you speak. But know this, my love. I will walk beside you and you alongside me. Eve was created from Adam's rib, not his tailbone. I won't follow you like a meek fool—you already know this well. When you request, I am butter in your hands, but when you command...you can kiss my freckled butt."

Vas laughed louder. The clergymen looked appalled.


Thirty days had passed since we'd left Balmoral, thirty glorious whirlwind days.



As I held the stolen coin and jewels, I frowned, irritated despite knowing I accepted my sleeping bride for who she was, as she accepted me. Whatever road we took together would be adventurous. And that would be fine.

Unease jabbed me again. I knew, somehow, my disquiet wasn't caused by Rebecca. It came from a different direction. But from where?

INTERLUDE

 *atan was pleased.*

Except for the death of Sulhoth, which had not been foreseen, all else had concluded as planned. It was believed, in both Heaven and his own kingdom, that he had suffered a terrible defeat, that two mortals had bested him. He would allow that illusion to flourish for now.

More than five years before, at his command, with his sister watching from the dark woods, the loyal Sulhoth had possessed a lowly thief and fatally wounded an insignificant scholar. Satan had allowed a devout woman to “trick” him into saving her dying husband and place his shield of protection over him. Sulhoth had then gone to Patrick Novarro again, in the guise of a warrior angel, to spur him on his quest.

Then Satan had sacrificed several of his legion to prove the man’s steadfast devotion to his lady and to Heaven. He’d arranged for Novarro to rescue Cain and Tanith. He had planned for a demon soldier to forsake Hell and pledge her allegiance to the Paladin. It had taken time and precision, but the plan had succeeded in every aspect despite that nothing involving mankind was ever guaranteed or could be foretold.

That had been proven by the failure of the first two he had set on this same path long ago. One had been slain by the people he

vowed to protect; the other had gone, alone and banished, into the vast barren Great Desert.

But now the pawns, including one of his own whose betrayal still mystified him, were in sacrificial position, guided there with divine assistance.

He called for Croell. She'd complete the task Sulhoth had begun. In one year more, all would be revealed.

The end of days for mankind would soon commence. The hour approached.

And it would happen because of the love two mortals had for one another.

Satan was *very* pleased.

Part Three

DEMONSTORM RISING



35

For the second time that day, I approached the university headmaster's office. As I crossed campus, with students calling to me, "Good day, Master Novarro. Salutations to Lady Novarro," I looked to the east. So far there was no sign of the massive storm rolling toward Thuria, and behind the tempest, a merciless invader army.

They'd been laying siege to every township and village in their path. They were a plague that took no prisoners, not man, woman, or child. The cities of Chgyou-Te, Jahara, and Daarmoor were said to be rubble and ash; their armies crushed and annihilated.

The university attempted to keep all worldly affairs outside their gates. This time, however, the world had come roaring through the campus like a wild beast.

Prince Aaron, heir apparent to His Majesty King Harold, was commander of the Thurian army, and he intended to stop the invaders. Troops from all nearby kingdoms and provinces had come join him. Even the merchant state of Zar had sent the few professional soldiers they had to join the prince. Two score of the senior class had already left to join local militias. Now, third-year students were departing. I had no doubts that soon first and second-years would be leaving.

Despite all, the faculty and trustees maintained their customary regimen. They said if they altered the university way of life the enemy had won another victory.

They were right.

But they were also wrong.

For the most part, I enjoyed being a teacher again. Long ago, if I had been told that I would be living in the historic capital city of Blackharbor and instructing the young men attending Blackharbor University, the most prestigious and oldest college in the western world, I would not have believed it possible. My first year on the faculty would be concluding soon, and my return in the fall was the subject of my morning meeting with the headmaster. I'd heard that some faculty and alumni disliked me. The reasons were always vague. Their main objection to my continuing presence was never said to my face.

But I knew.

The university was a male world. Only three women lived on campus. None were instructors, students or serving staff. All three were wives of faculty. Two were hardly seen—they stayed in their husbands' shadows as was deemed their proper place and station. They were never topics of conversation.

The third was.



I was ushered into July Roosen's office at the agreed-upon hour. I liked the elderly headmaster. He welcomed me and offered a chair. He sat beside me instead of returning to his desk as was his custom, but he kept turning away, not looking directly at me.

"In two weeks time, Master Novarro," he said in a deep voice that sounded strange hailing from his frail, infirm body, "the trustees and senior faculty will meet to review the first-year instructors."

"I'm aware, sir."

"You have impressed me. I cannot recall a time when students actively sought inclusion in the ancient Thurian history classes. In the past, they were very creative in coming up with the reasons they should be allowed exclusion. You have taken stale chronicles and made them alive and relevant."

"Thank you."

"And your rapport with the students has made a few on the faculty jealous."

I thanked him again.

The headmaster studied his gnarled hands. Finally, he looked at me.

"I abhor gossip and innuendo. However, my duties as headmaster sometimes compel me to tread into those disagreeable waters. I ask your permission to speak frankly with you."

"Of course, sir." Then I added, "Your meeting with the marquis is common knowledge."

Roosen nodded.

"Yes. There are gossiping tongues, high and low, eager to share, in every corner of our campus."

It was well known that the marquis had met with the headmaster yesterday evening. The meeting had been loud and vigorous. Now I knew the topic of their discussion.

Marquis Geoffrey Drake, King Harold's nephew, was a prominent university benefactor and held the position of high counsel on the board of trustees. Many followed his direction. He lived by a rigid moral code, but while he gave the appearance of a dull, unimaginative man, he was not spineless. His deadly precision with a pistol was well known and had been proven several times on dueling grounds. I didn't know him socially, but I knew he wanted me terminated from my position.

"The marquis came to me as a father, not as high counsel," Roosen said. "He was upset and made demands that I must consider. That does not mean I will acquiesce to him, but I must take his opinions into account."

I nodded. I wondered if I'd soon be facing the marquis with pistol in hand.

The headmaster continued.

"We have never had any person like Lady Novarro inside these halls before. She is always in high spirits and speaks openly to all regardless of their station. Agreeable and admirable traits, I say. She has many fine qualities. It is also very apparent to all except to some dimwitted fools that she is devoted to one man—her husband."

I waited for the "but."

"However, some of her behavior has been a distraction to our main purpose here at the university. Our young men have enough difficulty, at times, focusing on their studies and following the proper

gentleman's code. If Lady Novarro is in the vicinity then that focus becomes even more difficult.

"At our forthcoming council meeting, we will be adopting for the first time ever a dress code for women. That is because of Lady Novarro. I have been told that a petition for warm weather has become a repeated prayer at morning chapel services because on those days, Lady Novarro walks the campus in brightly-colored attire without encumbrance of shoes and stockings."

Now I was angry. If Rebecca's choice of color for her dresses and her naked feet offended some, the hell with them. I could have my resignation written within the hour.

The headmaster did not deserve my harsh words. I didn't put voice to them. But Roosen read my reaction on my face.

"Know this, Master Novarro. If I dismiss you, it will be because of *your* actions not milady's. However...*however* is a word I find I am saying quite often in our discussion this morn. *However*, Lady Novarro's latest deed has put me in a most precarious position."

"What has Rebecca done that has so enraged the marquis?"

"The marquis states there is an improper relationship between his son and Lady Novarro."

"Pardon me?"

This could not be. I trusted Rebecca—end of discussion. Any "relationship" between her and the marquis's son was either being misinterpreted or a damned lie.

James Drake was in two of my classes. A senior, he was the very opposite of his father. He was a pleasant young man who struggled to achieve average grades. He possessed none of his father's leadership or physical abilities.

Or, I'd wondered more than once, was he hiding his talents and skills?

I had posted the quatrain from the Grenburke chronicle I was trying again to translate. One day, James said he had the translation to the first line. He was right. He had accomplished what I and many other hieroglyph scholars had been unable to.

Was he also a secret university Lothario? Perhaps that was so, but not with Rebecca. I shook my head. Gossip was stabbing me with jealous thoughts of shy James Drake.

“Three weeks ago,” Roosen went on, “Squire Drake announced that he had joined the army and was to report in one month’s time. He said it was his duty and honor to serve king and country in this desperate period. All, including his father, were caught by surprise by the decision.

“The marquis attempted to get his son’s enlistment deferred but has so far failed. Squire Drake told his companions that he was to be a captain in the battalion that fed the worms and kept the grave-diggers from being idle. It is brave and sad at the same time.”

“How does this involve Rebecca?”

“Since Squire Drake’s revelation, Lady Novarro and the squire have been meeting after last class at the oak grove on south campus. She has been seen by many, including faculty, going to and coming from the rendezvous in a man’s tunic and breeches and wearing what I believe are called moccasins.”

“I’m unaware of these meetings. What is supposedly occurring at them?”

“Lady Novarro has been instructing Squire Drake on how to wield a dagger and utilize his body in close combat using very explicit and blunt terms. She has been touching his person and having him touch her person to insure that he understands her instructions.

“Supposedly, fifteen of our young men are now attending her class. She told her pupils she did not want any of them to earn the glory of dying for king and country; she expected them to give the enemy soldiers the glory of dying for theirs. I understand that war calls for different thinking, but this, despite the intent, is sheer indecency and undermines all that we hope to instill in the young men attending our university.”



I went searching for Rebecca as soon as I left the headmaster but didn’t find her. She wasn’t at any of the usual locales she frequented, but I was told she’d been there earlier. Two hours later, with still no success in my hunt, the headmaster’s man found me. I was to return to his office forthwith. The messenger was near bursting but said he could not tell me more.

As I marched up the pathway, I spotted several men—alumni nobles and faculty members—standing near two dirt-and-sweat-

coated horses. The mounts had clearly been ridden hard and over a fair distance. The marquis, solemn and resolute, stood among the gathering. One of the men spoke to him, and he turned. He was now looking—glaring, actually—at me. I half-expected him to send his man with a duel challenge.

I smiled. He must've thought I was laughing at him—his features turned grimmer. I wasn't laughing at him. I was amused with myself. When he'd eyed me, my right hand without conscious decision, had moved to my belt.

But there was no pistol in my belt, as there was no longer a blade sheathed in my boot. A year ago, the weapons were always on my person. On the eve of my first day teaching at the university, I stored them in a trunk and hadn't taken them out since.

As I breasted the gathering, I noted the caparisons draping the horses were embroidered with King Harold's royal eagle. Then I saw that the headmaster was sitting in a chair on the outer circle of the men. Roosen raised his hand in acknowledgment then pointed for me to go directly to his office.

I was puzzled and curious. And soon was more so.

As I entered the outer chamber, I heard two voices talking and laughing, coming from inside the headmaster's office. One I recognized immediately.

Rebecca.

At the moment, however, I was intent on the road-grizzled soldier, dust marking his shaved head and thick mustache, approaching me. The Zar master-at-arms still carried the flanged mace with a leather strap around his wrist.

"McShane," I said.

"Novarro. Been waiting on you."

It was clear immediately that time had changed nothing between us. Our dislike of one another was thick in the air.

"If I'd known you had sent for me, I wouldn't have come."

"Wasn't me that sent for you, that's for chafing sure." He jabbed his mace toward the headmaster's office.

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I could only see Rebecca through the open doorway and not the person she was talking to. I could tell by the angle of her head he was a big man.

She saw me and beamed. She was wearing the kind of high-necked, long-sleeved dress that had become her custom since we'd arrived at the university. This dress, one I had not seen before, was bright green, not the black, gray, or brown the other two faculty wives adhered to.

And, of course, she was without shoes and stockings; her dirty bare feet peeked out from under the hem of her dress. Her lips were painted red, and the nails of her fingers and toes were lacquered the same shade.

I entered the office and stopped, surprised. Rebecca's companion was Prince Aaron. She placed her slender hands over the prince's large ones then bowed and stepped back. She paused, smiled again, and opened her hand to him. In her palm was his gold signet ring. The prince checked his now-unadorned right hand and laughed as he put the ring back on his finger.

"I thank you, milady, for charming me into forgetting my great burden for a few minutes."

"I am your devoted servant, Your Highness."

"When you come to Citadelcourt, Lady Novarro, I will have a platoon of castle guards watching your every move to protect us from your depredations."

“But, sire, who will protect the guards?”

The prince laughed again.

Rebecca moved to my side and slipped her arm through mine before she squeezed my forearm. I had never seen her starry-eyed before. This I’d tease her about when we were alone.

I bowed.

“Your Highness.”

“I have ridden far to speak to two men this day,” he said, slapping dirt from his tunic. “When that is done, I must return post-haste to army headquarters.” He twisted toward the doorway. “I want lager, McShane, but cool water would be best to cut the dirt in my throat.”

“Water keeps a head clear and a hand steady,” Rebecca remarked.

Prince Aaron nodded in agreement.

“The first man I need to speak with is you, Master Patrick Novarro of Blackharbor University,” he said. “Your knowledge of ancient Thurian history is vouched for by my old headmaster, and that man’s word is gold to me.”

“I’m honored by Headmaster Roosen’s recommendation,” I replied.

Rebecca pressed her cheek to my bicep.

“The second man is a warrior who has firsthand experience battling demons from the underworld. My cousin, the Marquis Drake, suggested him first, and McShane vouches for him, as do my two most trusted spies. The Lion and the Archer send their highest regards to the Paladin.”

The Lion and the Archer? Could that be Vas and Jeb Li?

“I’ll do my best to aid you, milord,” I said.

McShane returned with a pitcher brimming with water. Aaron drained half in one long draught. He looked at me, and his shoulders sagged.

“The leader of the invaders is the Monbetan warlord Temujin—the Iron Panther. He’s a ruthless, cunning foe, and his soldiers are being called a ghost army. Not because they are the undead but because they only leave ghosts in their wake.

“The cities of Chgyou-Te, Jahara, and Daarmoor are no more. That’s been verified by the Lion and the Archer.” He drank more water then continued. “We attempted to keep the news contained,

but we failed. The morale of our troops began to waiver as the reports became common knowledge.

“Now, a damned ancient prophecy is being repeated over and over. If I cannot refute this prophecy, I fear our troops will desert because they’ll believe our cause is doomed before the first battle.”

I sighed. He was talking about the Grenburke thousand-year calendar.

“I wish I had paid more attention in ancient history class when I was here,” the prince said. “Help me, Master Novarro. Give me the words to convince others this is a false prophecy. The kingdom may fall if we cannot.”

Rebecca tightened her hold on my arm.

“Oh, my blaze,” she murmured. “This is the last year in the calendar. The year they predicted would bring the end of days.”

“No,” I said.

I uncurled her arm from mine then moved to the headmaster’s library. I scanned the books lining his shelves. Finally, I found the volume I was seeking. I placed it on the desk and looked for the page I wanted. Rebecca and Prince Aaron joined me, one on each side.

Before the nomad peoples who migrated to this region, the ones who would become the Thurian people, an ancient civilization had populated these lands. It is not known whether disease, famine or invading army destroyed their society, but they ceased to exist.

Several of their temples and buildings survived the ages, however. In their temple at Grenburke Loch, looted long ago, a hidden and undisturbed library was discovered, and among the preserved tablets and scrolls was an almanac that contained prophecies for a thousand years. One scholar had calculated this was the last year of that calendar. Another had written that the last year of the calendar marked the end of days. Few scholars were found to support their interpretations, but the myth of the end-of-days prediction remained and flourished.

I pointed at a quatrain on the handprinted page.

“There are one hundred chronicles, and each chronicle has a quatrain for every day in a ten-year calendar. This is the last prophecy in the hundredth chronicle. It doesn’t say the end of days have

come. It predicts a fall harvest that is so bountiful none in the region will starve that winter.”

The prince frowned.

“But many of the ancient predictions have come to pass.”

“That is truth, scholar,” added McShane.

“It is...but it isn’t.” I shook my head. “If the four of us wrote a thousand predictions of things to come, worded so they could be interpreted in many ways, and didn’t specify the date of their occurrence, then over a thousand years some would inevitably come to pass. Some of my students this term particularly liked the prophecy that a race of three-breasted women who lived only to serve their masters carnally would be found.”

“I do remember that one,” the prince said with a shrug. “So, tell me, Master Novarro, how do I convince our soldiers, who are mostly unschooled and superstitious, that the prophecy is untrue?”

“First, our schooled but still superstitious nobles and officers must believe. You, sire, must give a rallying speech that’ll be quoted down through the ages. I read the speech you gave here at your graduation. You have the gift. You must convince the nobles and officers, and they, in turn, will convince their troops.”

The prince grimaced.

“I didn’t write my graduation speech. A good friend did.”

“Then have him pen this one, too.”

Aaron nodded.

“I will summon Martin as soon as we return to camp,” he agreed. “You said the speech was first. Is there another task you recommend?”

I turned pages until I found the quatrain I wanted.

“Second, you make sure that every knight, soldier, squire, cook, and gravedigger knows this prophecy by heart.” I pointed at the eagle on the royal crest. “It says a great eagle warrior will lead his people out of their darkest hour and into the blessed sunlight.”

“It’s written in ancient Grenburke. Is that what it actually says?”

“My translation’s close enough. This symbol stands for *eagle*...or goose. Maybe singing nightingale. I have a tendency to confuse the bird hieroglyphics.”

The prince chuckled.

Rebecca caressed my backside. I closed the book.

“How can the Paladin assist you, Your Highness?”

Prince Aaron straightened to his full height and firmed his shoulders.

“I need the Paladin to go into the mountains ahead of my army. The Lion and the Archer have reported that Temujin has a most trusted advisor who must be taken prisoner or slain before we do battle. They say it is the she-demon Croell.”

INTERLUDE

T*emujin's gold-trimmed black armor, from helmet to boots,* was drenched in blood and dirt. While no one would recall the name of this town, he reasoned, they'd remember when the infidels' cannon killed two horses from underneath him, slew five warriors who rode at his side, yet he had been unscathed. The dents in his breastplate, made by musket ball and arrow and broadsword would be seen as another sign of their righteous path.

Three years ago, a young seer had come before him with a vision. He was to lead his people on a holy war to honor the goddess Cithah, and for doing so, the goddess would make him immortal. This battle was once again proof of that bargain.

He swung his curved sword and beheaded the bound woman. Then he pitched the blade to a nearby soldier to be taken away and cleaned and resharpened. Thirty decapitated bodies—men, women and children—lay sprawled in a row on the red-soaked ground. He had personally executed this group of heathens. Cithah demanded the blood of all infidels, disbelievers and blasphemers, and he would see it done.

Raising the visor of his helmet, he studied the landscape. Every building in town was aflame. In front of the false church, its profane priests and nuns had been impaled on two-meter-high stakes. Captured enemy officers had been hung alive by their heels with

their intestines pulled from their bodies for the camp dogs to feast upon. The slaves—all Monbetan, no heathens were allowed to be slaves—had begun salting the fields and dumping infidel bodies into the springs and wells.

This victory had been foretold, as had the others, and the talking bones were never wrong.

Temujin walked to his waiting chariot. Four soldiers who had permission to lay hands on his body struggled to lift him aboard. Then, because horses could be frightened and bolt, eight slaves pulled him to his tent. As he passed them, all soldiers and slaves prostrated themselves to their warlord king.

Four more soldiers, again with his consent, helped him from the chariot. He entered the royal tent. The canopy and walls were iron sheeting; no arrow or musket ball could breach them.

His slaves scurried to dress him in clean, polished armor. Guards surrounded them. Half faced outward to ensure no enemy would have access to him in this vulnerable time. The others faced inward, watching the slaves. The mere hint of disloyalty would bring the slave's immediate death.

"You may lay your hands upon me," he said.

Once he was dressed in the clean armor, the slaves fell to the ground then crawled backward from his presence.

"Bring the priestess," he ordered.

A soldier rushed from the tent.

Temujin desired rest, but that would have to wait until later. He looked at the vertical bed he'd had designed. Rugila had been murdered while that warlord lay naked in his bed, and the giant Hasar was killed by a thrown stone between the eyes, so Temujin never rested or slept lying down, and always in his armor.

The great Attila had perished clutching his burst heart after several days of celebration and copulating. Temujin never consumed alcohol or smoked opium; he had no wives or concubines. The priestess came to him on every eighth day to release his powerful manly juices.

Ögedei died choking on poison in his evening meal. Temujin had three food tasters.

Tazui, Temujin's father, had been ripped apart when his royal dogs turned on him. No mongrel was allowed near Temujin. He

had seen twenty-eight winters and, with the blessing of the goddess, intended to see eternity.

Scowling, he surveyed the tent. His advisor was not here. No one else dared to keep the warlord king waiting, yet Croell came and went at her own pleasure. Despite her brilliant battle strategies, this set the wrong example. But it would be tolerated. Yes, it would. Until it was tolerated no longer.



Croell watched Hemphill approach the horses. The tall Westerner stood out among the Monbetan soldiers and slaves, but no one would harm him—the red-and-black sash around his waist guaranteed him safe passage. Red and black were her colors.

The Monbetan people feared the goddess Cithah and their warlord king; they feared Croell more. They had several examples of her wrath to draw on.

The archdemon looked forward to the coming days. Marquis Drake had sent welcome news; the Paladin had joined Prince Aaron. He was coming into the mountains ahead of the army. Novarro, no longer protected by the Master's oath, would die there by her hand.

Had it been her choice, his death would have already been accomplished, but the Master said she must wait. Now, the waiting was almost over. The Paladin would soon have Elias's sword in his possession—the flaming sword that could slay any demon. It could also slay angels. She hoped the Paladin's bitch and the Archangel Magdalene would be with him when he came, but, if not, she would find them once she had the sword in her hands.

Brother would be avenged.

She'd sent Drake's courier back with orders. The marquis would do as she commanded, for the mortal was ambitious. Prince Aaron and his army would be defeated. King Harold would die. The Thurian people would be in chaos and panic—after all, the Iron Panther took no prisoners.

But a savior would rise up and negotiate a treaty—the marquis. Two conditions would ensure treaty. First, all would convert to worshipping the goddess Cithah. Every other religion would be abolished, and any who continued to practice their faith would

be put to death. Second, a tribute would be paid each year to Temujin. Marquis Drake would be named the supreme overlord of Thuria and the surrounding provinces.

Temujin would agree, because his goddess's bones would tell him to.

The Master knew Croell did not care who won the soon-to-be battle. She had one goal—death for one mortal, one half-mortal, and one archangel. The rest was part of the Master's plan, and others would see to that.

Croell signaled to her brother's two wolves. They understood what she wanted and took flight westward.

Qalakai stood nearby, her thin arms crossed over her tiny breasts, impatiently tapping her foot. The priestess, nineteen winters old, at first glance looked like most Monbetan woman—short and small-boned. Then one saw her disturbing violet-colored eyes. Devil's eyes, people whispered.

The most fearful thing about her to the superstitious Monbetans, though, and which drew whispers of witchcraft, was the six fingers on each hand, but no harm would befall Temujin's seer as long as the warlord lived.

Qalakai seemed to forget, however, that her oracular powers had been a gift from Sulhoth and now Croell, and what Croell gave she could take away.

"I will not be ignored," the priestess snapped. "Or be made to stand idle at your beck like a gelded slave. I am the High Priestess Qalakai. Cithah speaks Her divine word through me."

The archdemon grabbed the woman by the throat. Qalakai clawed at the throttling hand as she choked.

Finally, Croell released her. She collapsed to her knees, gasping for breath. Croell squatted in front of her, and she trembled.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I-I am..." Qalakai rasped, "...your servant, mistress."

"You were insolent and disrespectful. You must be punished."

"I will be obedient and respectful in all ways at all times."

"You keep forgetting that pledge." Croell opened her hands. In one was a large winged spider, and in the other was a fire locust beetle. "Imagine them, with progeny, crawling over your frail body, looking for openings that could be used as a nesting place."

The priestess recoiled, terrified.

“P-Please, mistress. What do you wish of me?”

Croell closed her hands, and the creatures vanished.

“Temujin calls for you. This you will tell him...”



Qalakai rushed inside the tent. She dropped prostrate in front of Temujin and kissed his boots. She remained there until he gave her permission her to rise. Then she hurried to the small table scattered with her bones, crystals, and oils. She placed bones and oil into a bowl, stirring them with her fingers.

Temujin wondered if the goddess would bless his offerings this day.

Qalakai stared into her bowl.

“I cannot read the message, milord,” she said. “We need to add blood to the bones for me to be able to hear the words of the goddess. She demands a sacrifice.”

Temujin nodded. Sacrifice proved devotion. Qalakai scanned those within the tent then tipped her chin at a soldier standing at rigid attention near the entrance. Temujin knew she had selected that soldier because she had offered her body to the man before the battle began two days ago, and he had been repulsed.

The warlord motioned to his guard captain. Two guards grabbed the soldier, pinning his arms as Captain Jalayir slit the man’s throat.

Qalakai went to them and touched the tip of the sixth finger on her right hand to the dying man’s wound. Then, stirring the bones in the bowl with that finger, she returned to her table.

Captain Jalayir and the guards carried the dead soldier from the tent. Temujin blinked. He had not seen his advisor approaching, but Croell, cloaked in her red-and-black robe, her terrifying face hidden inside the hood, now stood in the entrance. She bowed and waited for Temujin to invite her inside.

The warlord liked this. It was proper. He waved for her to advance. It almost made him forget his irritation that Croell had not been here when he’d arrived. Almost.

Qalakai stared into the bowl.

“The goddess smiles on you, milord,” she said. “No one, not even Attila or Rugila, has honored her more than you have. You

are among the chosen. You will be greatly rewarded for your devotion to the faith. Your name will be remembered in fear and awe through the ages.”

Temujin accepted what was no more than his due.

“I am strengthened in my resolve by the praise of our goddess.”

The priestess glanced at Croell then gazed back into the bowl. She touched the bones.

“The goddess says she has a task for your advisor. She must go into the mountains ahead of us.”

“The wishes of the goddess will be obeyed without question,” the warlord said. “I command it.”

“I shall leave with first light,” replied Croell.

“Good. What further words does the goddess have for her devoted servant?”

“She says farewell for this day, and as she has said before, no warrior will slay you. No warrior’s weapon shall pierce your body. But beware the swift waters—the heathen hides there, and death is his companion.”



Croell watched as Temujin ordered all others to leave so he could rest. The priestess had done well this day; Brother could not have chosen a better tool to offer Temujin three years ago.

She’d allow Qalakai’s petty revenge against the soldier who had spurned her to go without punishment—the woman had earned that small reward. Without her, Temujin would have been much more difficult to handle. With her, and her prophecies that had come true, supplemented with the lies Croell slipped in, Temujin was doing exactly as the Master had planned.

Soon the Master would have his retribution on all mankind.

And she would have hers.

37

As I entered our bedchamber, Rebecca came to me, throwing her arms around my neck, kissing me and leading me onto the bed. I straddled her hips and gripped her wrists, pinning her naked body down with mine.

"I don't want you to go with me," I said.

"I took our weapons out of the trunk," she said, ignoring me. "I put an edge on the blades and cleaned your pistol. You should fire it a few times before we depart."

I released her wrists.

"I've never been on a railroad train before," she continued. "How fast does it go? Will I be scared?"

I did not reply. I gazed into her eyes. Sadness filled me.

She traced her fingers across my shirt over my chest.

"If you were facing only the soldiers of this ghost army, my love, you could have no better companion than McShane. But he's untested in battling an archdemon and, perhaps, other demons. For that, I am your best partner, and you know it."

"I said I didn't *want* you to go, not that you weren't coming with me. We're about to break the truce agreed upon at the Gate and hunt one of *his* legion. This time, I fear, even our united strength may not be enough to overcome Croell."

I started to move off her, and she grabbed my belt with both hands.

"I do wish Vas and Jeb Li were here," she muttered, as if she didn't really want me to hear her.

"You miss Vas?"

"Didn't say I missed that ill-mannered, foul-smelling git." She chuckled. "Can you imagine Vas here at the university? It'd be comedy."

I looked at my pistol and dagger, at her sword and stiletto, on the table.

"I love our life here, Patrick," she said. "I want you to know that. I wasn't sure I would when we first arrived. I thought I'd be so lonely and bored while you were away teaching your classes I'd get into trouble."

"Well..."

"Are you still mad at me?"

"We should've discussed your training class before you began."

"We did," she replied. Then she smiled. "You might've been drifting into sleep, but you moaned consent."

I sighed.

Two nights ago, after the meeting with Prince Aaron, Rebecca had told me about her new role as teacher. She'd overheard Squire James Drake telling his friends his greatest fear was that when the enemy killed him, his wounds would be in the back and not in the front. She nearly cried hearing that, she'd said.

Later, she'd caught young Drake alone and demanded he meet her by the oak grove after last class. When he arrived at the scheduled time, she commanded to know what had prompted his statement about being work for the army gravediggers. He'd answered that he had no skills as a fighter and questioned his own courage.

Rebecca had drawn her *miséricorde* stiletto and promised he'd have some skills, if she had any say in the matter.

"Damn," she'd said, "he was so blazing awkward. Almost stabbed himself the first time he was handed the blade."

Rebecca had to resort to putting her hands on him to guide his movements, and had him put his on her to make sure he understood what she was telling him. She was relentless in her insisting a person her size could stop or kill a bigger opponent. At last, he began to get the basics.

"He'll never be a great blade fighter, but the change in his confidence was worth it."

By the end of the first week, Rebecca had noticed other squires watching from a distance. The second week, the others timidly approached. They asked her to teach them what she was showing James. She found she couldn't say no to any of them.

Rebecca blamed me. Said that before we'd met, she wouldn't have cared what happened to these silk-tailored pampered boys. They would've only been marks she relieved of their heavy purses. Then, disgusted with herself, she added that she hadn't picked a pocket or lock in three months.

"Three months?" I replied. "We've been here for ten."

She grinned at me.

"Did I say three? I meant ten."

Now, I removed her hands from my belt and stepped off the bed to sit in a chair and tug off my boots. Rebecca rolled onto her side toward me.

"Tomorrow we meet McShane and company, so this will be the last night in our bed for quite a while. I intend to make it memorable."

I loosened the ties of my shirt.

"Meeting *him* in a couple days. Tomorrow, we're riding to Grenburke Loch."

Rebecca bolted upright.

"Have you seen the Archangel Magdalene since Valkyries Gate?"

"No."

"Lenore?"

I frowned. I'd meant to tell her, but I hadn't worked it out in my own thoughts yet.

"Yes," I admitted. "In a dream. I've had the same dream three nights in a row."

She nodded.

"You and I are at Grenburke Loch..." she said.

"...not at the temple..."

"...at the caves in the hills *beside* the temple."

"Lenore is leading us..."

"...to the third cave..."

"...it's not very deep..."

"...and it's empty..."

"...but Lenore..."

“...wants us the go there.”

Rebecca and I'd had the same exact dream. Lenore had told both of us to go there.

Why?

What was there for us to find?

Rebecca started to speak. I raised my hand for her not to. I listened.

“There are people outside our door,” she whispered.

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There's only one," I said, *picking up my pistol and checking* the load. "He's talking to the door."
"Why hasn't he announced himself?"

"I'll ask."

Cocking my pistol, I strode from the bedchamber across the sitting room to the door. It was just one voice on the other side, and his words were unclear. I raised the pistol then whipped the door open wide.

James Drake jumped back off the stoop, shocked, nearly tripping over his own feet. I lowered the pistol. The squire's tailored, and usually immaculate, suit was wrinkled and soiled as if he'd slept in it; the coat appeared to have been wadded up for a pillow. A food stain marred his white shirt where he had missed his mouth.

"Is there cause for you to be outside my door, squire?" I demanded.

"I apologize..."

He stopped talking as the blood drained from his face, and he fixed his gaze on his shoes. I glanced over my shoulder. Rebecca stood behind me with her short sword. She was still naked. She frowned, puzzled, as she recognized our visitor.

I stepped outside and closed the door.

"Speak to me," I ordered.

At first, he didn't. Then: "I apologize for the late hour, Master Novarro. I have a matter of utmost import to discuss with you."

"Then talk, and be on point, squire."

"Father paid the king's military magistrate one hundred in silver," James blurted, stumbling over the words. "Another man will serve in my stead. Thirty silvers would have been more appropriate. I am no longer in the army."

"That is an accepted way in the kingdom. Seldom used, however."

James continued. "We're under threat of siege and annihilation. I wish to do my part to defend the kingdom. I didn't ask for or want Father to negate my duty."

"How do you believe I can assist you in this matter?"

"I have come to offer my services—my life, if required—to you, Master Novarro."

"Your service and life." I shook my head. This didn't make sense. "Once again, and for the last time, how do you believe I can assist you?"

"I overheard Father and Cousin Aaron talking. Our prince is sending you and Father into the mountains on a most vital mission that will assist in defeating the invaders. I wish to accompany you."

The marquis would be accompanying us? This I hadn't known. Nor did I like.

The door opened behind me. Rebecca, now wearing a high-necked, long-sleeved dressing gown, stood in the doorway.

"Mister Novarro," she said, "either invite the gentleman inside or ask that he depart. I will not have men loitering outside the door to our home as if it were a tavern." She winked at me.

"Squire Drake, we will continue this conversation inside, as milady wishes," I said.

I saw a wolf—and it was most definitely a wolf and not a dog—standing in the shadows of the house across the lane. The animal melted back into the darkness.

Troubling. Wild wolves were never seen on campus.

I allowed James to enter as I studied the shadows around us.

INTERLUDE

M*cShane, shoulders back, eyes straight ahead, marched along* the row of tents with the flanged mace in his fist perfectly aligned with the stripe down his uniform breeches.

The other masters-at-arms stood on both sides of the entire length of the row at attention and saluted him with filled tankards. No ass-chafing officers, no lowly dirt-eaters—only masters-at-arms.

All—cavalry, infantry, and artillery, from Thuria, Rivenran, Cordoba, the Cape, Cimera Plains and some volunteers from the Frontier—were honoring him in the oldest soldier tradition. He'd never heard of another Zar master-at-arms, or any Zar officer or soldier, for that matter, being given tribute by any army other than their own.

Piss on them and on their traditions.

He reached his own tent. His tent-mate Diego, from the Cordoban infantry, stepped outside and held the flap open for him.

“Roasted mutton shank, boiled onions and peas, rye bread and sugared peaches. It is ready for you and still hot. There is also an unopened bottle of that Tasmanian rum you swill. Enjoy. The quarters are yours alone this night.”

“Damn, how will I sleep without hearing your chafer snoring and smelling your farts?”

The infantryman did not speak of McShane's mission. To a man, they respected their commander Aaron Lakesnow, and they

knew the good prince had handpicked him for this undertaking. To talk of any mission, except in the planning stages or when instructing your own company of dirt-eaters on what was expected of them, would invite jinx. To voice your intended plans when you returned was to have God's hex painted on you.

What superstitious claptrap.

"See you in Hell," Diego said. "Save me a chair in the fire, you ugly son of a chafer."

"Hell won't take miserable gits like us," McShane answered.

Diego laughed.

Three messenger lads rushed into the lane. One handed a parchment to Diego. The others went to Kamal of the Cimeran cavalry and to Goodweaver of the Rivenran artillery. McShane did not linger to see how they responded to their new orders. He'd handpicked them himself. How they felt about the assignment and his being in charge was of no consequence.

In the tent, he tossed the mace onto his cot. The food actually smelled good for once, and he was gnawing-belly hungry. He popped a hot onion into his mouth as he sat, pulling the small table closer. He hefted the bottle of rum and decided to save it for later. He was not in the mood tonight, for Novarro would be soldiering with him.

He detested the man. Despite the stories of the Paladin's brave deeds, despite his young king Ulrich's admiration for him, McShane knew what Novarro truly was—a paid assassin. It didn't matter that the victim had deserved his fate and worse. A paid assassin belonged to a cowardly, beneath-contempt breed. That could be carved in hard oak then bronzed.

Outside, down the row, as he'd heard every night in camp, Goodweaver recited scripture in his big voice. It was always the same verses, and soon other believers would join him. They would drown out all other noise in this part of the camp for more than an hour.

McShane shook his head.

It was all myth and fable. There was no God, or gods, no Heaven, no Hades. There was no Creator's divine plan, no afterlife. There was just life and the code one chose to live by. And whether one adhered to his code without fail every time or changed it daily did

not matter a twist in the end. All people, without exception, died, and the world continued on without them. Nature, through cataclysm and plague, showed time and again it did not care if a person was good or bad, young or old, smart or feeble-minded, virgin saint or pox-ravaged whore. There was no planned order to who survived and who did not.

McShane pulled out the canvas bag from under his cot. All of his worldly possessions were inside, yet if he lost it tomorrow, he'd just shrug and keep going.

As he put the rum into the bag, he felt the bottle thump against metal. He lifted the cloth-wrapped pistol from the bottom of the bag and opened it. The firearm was a revolver, presented to him two years back by John Gabriel Molina, the same gunsmith who had designed and made Novarro's weapon. He set the pistol beside the mace and sliced off a thick wedge of mutton.

How had he ended up in this damnable position? He was risking his life to help save chafing kingdoms and provinces he didn't give a piss about. He should ride out for the frontier.

These people didn't know his true name. He had no family, no children, no ties whatsoever to hold him here. There had never been a comrade he wouldn't have sacrificed or left behind if the need arose. There had never been a woman he hadn't paid for.

Well, that was a lie. If not, he was at least deceiving himself.

He looked at the pistol again, he was no longer hungry. He picked up the revolver and mace and stretched out on the cot.

Before hair had sprouted on his upper lip or between his legs, he'd escaped from the First Church bishop's farm he'd been sold to. He kept his own company and wandered from town to town. When he was hungry, he got food; when he needed clothes, he took them, sometimes even if another was already wearing them. If he saw something he desired, or thought he might one day, it was soon in his possession. Those who tried to stop him suffered for it.

He fell in with a low group of ronin. They were a cowardly, beneath-contempt lot. He watched the masterless warriors and learned, trained, and did every shat task in camp. By the time hair was showing on his chin and crotch sack, he no longer did camp

work. The beatings had ended, and the warriors had ceased demanding, or even asking, he do such tasks.

They were afraid of him by then.

The troop hired out to any who would pay them; cause or reason were no concern of theirs. All that mattered was the coin promised, and all the spoils of battle they could carry.

When he was sixteen, the noble who hired the troop betrayed them; McShane was the only one to survive the ambush. He didn't seek revenge against the treacherous noble. There was no benefit to him in that. He did steal the noble's fastest horse and head for the next province.

Eventually, he reached the capital of Zar. He found himself fascinated by the Zar soldiers. They were a poorly trained and slothful lot—but they were well-fed and well-clothed. He decided he deserved some easy days and would enlist.

But there was a problem. The Zar army only accepted native-borns, not foreign dirt-eaters. Then he thought of one of the ronin, a man named McShane. When in his cups, which was most of the time, the git would always talk about the women he'd taken as battle spoils, and his home in the Zar town of Gaul. The man had been away on a hunt when a fire consumed his family's house. All perished, from babe to grandpater. He could claim that identity, he knew, for there was no one who could challenge his stated heritage.

He didn't overlook any aspect that could expose him as a fraud and devised and memorized details of a history he could recite when asked. Then, he enlisted as Ethan McShane. No one, not officer or fellow dirt-eater, ever asked about his family and past.

He liked that he was left alone for the most part. In a short time, he had distinguished himself—in the art of combat, as the training officers and masters-at-arms called it, for he had far more skill than they did.

Soon, whenever a dangerous mission arose, he was picked to take part in it. He liked that. Then they put him in-charge of the advance squad. They were impressed that he always returned with his orders completed and all his dirt-eaters alive. His were the "charmed" squad. Except that one time at La Traversée, but the git who slew his dirt-eater died immediately with skull crushed.

McShane was surprised when he was promoted to master-at-arms and put in charge of combat training for the new recruits. He was more thunderstruck when the commander told him that, if he learned to read and write and his numbers, he would go much higher in the ranks. He learned some words and numbers, but he had no interest in becoming an ass-chafing officer. He had been in the Zar army for more than fifteen years, and he found he liked being a member of this community and fulfilling the responsibilities he was given.

Two years ago, it had all changed. He was ordered to track down and bring back, alive or dead, a deserter who had taken two mules-worth of expensive medical supplies. It was known the dirt-eater had kin in Shankur; more than one of the man's comrades said he would head there.

He was in Shankur for a month before he found the deserter. During that time, he had spent many an evening with a young woman named Pilar Molina, the daughter of John Gabriel Molina. Pilar had, not long before he arrived, left the abbey where she had been studying to become a nun. He was glad she had.

Wife, family, and children had never before been a consideration for him. Now, he imagined a future with Pilar. It felt strange and foreign, but the night he proposed to her was right and good. She accepted without hesitation. Her father asked what had taken him so long when all in town knew their pairing was inevitable and God's will.

The following day, McShane found the deserter. He was at the poor lepers' hospital in nearby Xadag. The man's brother was the colony doctor, and he was bedridden. A woman called Kay was caring for the wretched living there by herself. The stolen supplies the deserter had brought saved many who would have died without.

McShane understood his mission. He knew the army's and the king's laws. He was well aware of the sacred commandments the kingdom's order was founded upon. *One shall not steal* was paramount among them. He knew what was expected of him.

Yet he told the deserter he wasn't taking him back. He did add that, if the man ever returned to Zar, he would kill him without hesitation or qualm. The man blessed the master-at-arms.

Later, McShane had allowed two of the murderers of Barnabas Kim-chi Roby to go free and unnamed.

The evening before he left Shankur, he explained to Pilar that he had to return to his post to give his resignation. He could not be listed as deserter. She agreed with him. She said she would anxiously await his return.

As he prepared to depart, her father gave him the revolver. The entire family and several others from town wished him safe journey and quick homecoming.

Home...family...

On the road back, the master-at-arms knew he'd never return. Pilar deserved a good and decent man, one much better than him. He had given his oath to her, but it was best if she thought he had perished along the trail. He couldn't change who he was.

McShane sat up on the cot. He found the cleaning kit in his bag. He'd take the revolver with him. At first light, with the three other masters-at-arms, he would ride out to the train.

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R*ebecca and I dismounted near the third cave. This was, without* doubt, the place in our dreams where Lenore wanted us to come. Neither of us had been here before, yet we knew the trails to take. I was troubled by this revelation. I could not explain why.

The previous night, as we slept, more had become clear to us. Our chances of defeating Croell without aid were meager. Rebecca, as a half-mortal daughter of Satan, could slay her, but the archdemon would surely have soldiers whose single purpose would be to kill Rebecca.

I knew now I couldn't have left Rebecca behind. Once Croell realized she was not with me, she'd have dispatched her assassins. Rebecca would have been alone when she battled them. That I couldn't allow.

But we needed more than ourselves to defeat the archdemon. My beloved Lenore was leading us to that advantage.

While imprisoned in the palace on the River Styx, she'd learned that every demon had at least one vulnerability, sometimes more. For some, it was weapons made with silver, for others a stake through the heart, and for still others it was decapitation. The Holy Cross and the Star of David repelled many, wolfsbane and rare marrow root kept some at bay. No single weapon affected all of them—except one.

Lenore had overheard that the demons and devils—even the twelve archdemons—all could be slain by the flaming weapons of the warrior angels. Hidden somewhere in this tomb was the sword of Elias.

Even if they had known where Elias was laid to rest, Satan's legions could not trespass on holy ground. The archangels and warrior angels were sworn to secrecy. Lenore, however, had not yet taken that vow.

I untied the spade, spike and hammer from my saddle. The cave was perhaps two rods deep and six rods wide. It wasn't impressive, as one expected the tomb of a warrior angel would be. Modest and humble, it was.

Rebecca studied the entrance.

"It's empty," she said. "Nothing but rock and earth. But this is the cave Lenore showed me."

"Me, too."

I scanned the top of the hill the cave cut into. On the crest, looking down, were two huge black wolves. I cursed. I remembered them. They had been at the Gate.

The wolves retreated.

"Is that the temple?" Rebecca asked.

"Yes."

A large flat of land stretched out beyond the hills. In the center of the field was the temple of Grenburke. A circle of ancient oak and willow trees surrounded the ruins. Men, with the exception of the library where the ancient prophecy calendar and other scrolls were discovered, had looted the temple centuries ago. The people who built it were long gone before then. What happened to them was still mystery.

I went closer to the cave. Sunlight filled the wide fissure. The floor was covered in animal tracks but no human footprints. No man had been here recently, if ever. I studied the walls and low ceiling. All appeared to be natural. The tomb was well hidden.

I moved inside. In my dreams, Lenore had not pointed out a particular place. It seemed to be understood we would know.

"Patrick."

"Yes?"

"I can't come inside."

I turned. Rebecca still stood at the entrance.

"No need to be afraid," I said.

"I'm not afraid," she snapped. "I'm being kept out."

She stepped forward but it was as though she had run into a wall. Raising her hands, she pushed hard against the air. I could see the muscles in her forearms trembling from her determined exertion.

I was angry. It was her father's blood keeping her out. The cave had been blessed, and no demon could enter.

She stepped back. Sorrow etched her face. All she had done, all she had forsaken had not been enough.

"She is not her father!" I yelled.

My voice echoed in the cave, and dirt and rock began to fall from ceiling and walls. Dropping the tools, I covered my head with my arms and squatted down.

Suddenly, Rebecca was sheltering me with her body.

The avalanche ceased. The dust settled. I rose, looking into her eyes. She was clearly bewildered. Then she shook her head, not understanding what had happened either.

She surveyed the interior of the cave.

"Let's find the tomb."

Nothing unique or unusual stood out, just plain rock and hard-packed dirt. Not even a weed growing in a crack in the stone. No distinctive formation stood out. Nothing.

"Here," Rebecca said, tugging on gloves.

Written on a flat rock in the wall was one word:

Lenore

She'd written it. I would know her lettering anywhere.

R*ebecca and I dug.*

It was challenging. The rock and earth did not yield easily, and we were soon soaked with sweat. I removed my tunic.

Moments later, Rebecca did the same. I started to say something to her then decided it was pointless and I'd only be wasting words. We persevered on and slowly burrowed into the wall.

At last, I hammered the spike into the barrier and there was no resistance. I pulled it loose, and white light streamed out from the round opening.

The warrior angel's tomb was here.

Rebecca and I looked at one another. We smiled. We toasted with pulls from the almost-empty waterskin. And dug with renewed energy. The opening grew wider and wider. White light lit the interior; it radiated from the walls, ceiling and floor of the tomb.

Finally, the opening was large enough for me to slip through. I tossed the spike and hammer aside as Rebecca grabbed the base of the opening to climb inside. I clutched her belt, pulling her away. She twisted toward me.

"I'm going inside," I said. "You're not."

She started to argue then decided not to. The look on my face, the tone of my voice told all. She nodded that she understood.

I crawled into the tomb. Immediately, I bowed my head in respect. The walls, ceiling and floor were as plain as the cave. There

were no burial offerings. The angel lay on the ground in the center of the tomb with only his magnificent wings, fanned wide, between him and the earth.

Rebecca peered in.

“Patrick, are you alright?”

“I am fine,” I answered. But I was lying.

“He’s beautiful,” she said. “He looks like you. You could be brothers.”

“Rebecca!” I snapped.

She disappeared from sight.

Elias appeared to be merely asleep, his hands folded atop his breast. His remains had not withered or decayed during the millennium he had been entombed. He was smaller than I thought he’d be, about the same height as Rebecca.

Then I saw the ugly wound on his side. What happened to angels when they died? Did they have souls like mortals? Did they go to the Abyss like demons who perished? Or did they simply cease to be? I had no answers.

His eyes opened. I stepped back, startled. Then I realized his eyes were still closed—I had only imagined them opening.

I picked up his shield. It appeared to be polished silver rimmed with a mysterious hardwood and was as light as air. I passed it through the opening to Rebecca.

Then I collected the sword. It had no weight to it at all. The hilt was of the same unknown wood that was on the shield. The blade was smooth and polished, but there were traces of scorching.

I touched my finger to the edge. Blood dripped down the blade. I’d never seen any weapon this sharp.

I frowned. Could a sword this light be a demon-slayer? Turning, I swung it at the edge of the opening. The blade cut into the earth and rock as if it were parchment.

I stopped at an arm’s length and pulled the blade out. Not a nick or scratch was on it.

“Patrick?” Rebecca called again.

“Here.” I handed the sword to her.

From the corner of my eye, I saw something white lying on the ground. It was a feather from his wings. I twirled it by the

quill between my fingers. As I gazed once more at the remains of the warrior angel, I said a prayer. Then I crawled out of the tomb.

Back in the cave proper, stunned, I stood without speaking. Rebecca had her back to me. She had the shield slung on her left arm, the sword gripped in her right hand, and she was moving about, fighting imaginary foes. I smiled, amused by her play.

Behind me, the light ceased. I turned. The wall was solid earth again. It was as if we had never opened it. The flat rock was back in place, but Lenore's name was no longer written there.

Rebecca spun about, saw me and stopped her mock battle.

"Did you get all the villains?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Missed one."

"Can't have that, milady."

She chuckled as she slid the shield from her arm and held it and the sword out to me. I took the sword but not the shield. I stepped close to her, slipping the feather behind her ear.

She kissed me.

"My angel," she said.

I frowned at her. She giggled then put her hand over her mouth. Rebecca had a hearty laugh and a wicked, teasing chuckle. She never giggled like a young lass. The sound appeared to have surprised her even more than me.

We returned to the horses.

"There was a stream about a quarter-league back," Rebecca said, tugging on her jerkin. "We can refill the skins, and cool ourselves in it."

I looked up at the top of the hill. The winged wolves were not there. Was there an ambush down the trail? If not, had they only been ordered to spy.

I knew Croell would want to know if we had the sword, but something felt wrong.

I needed to speak with the Archangel Magdalene. I called to her. I prayed. I pleaded. The archangel did not come.

In the far distance, thunder rumbled. As I listened, it sounded strangely like pleased laughter.

INTERLUDE

Husband.”

Geoffrey Drake read the testament verse again, although he could recite it from memory, for reading the words in original Athenian he believed gave it even more power.

...but the wound had healed: and all the kings and holy men proclaimed it miracle. And people from all seas and lands came to worship him. From his mouth came great things, and the people heard and rejoiced.

But he also spoke blasphemies they did not hear.

He will rise to reign over all the seas and lands, and the rivers and fields will flow with blood and cries of woe from those he brands enemy. He will appear as man. but he is the Beast, born of the Whore of Miserywolf and fathered by the banished angel Lucifer.

“Husband,” his wife repeated.

Drake looked up from the book to where she sat at the other end of the table.

“Yes, madam?”

"Our eldest child has arrived. Late, as seems to be his rude custom these days."

"I am aware."

James stood beside his chair midpoint between his parents. He shoved the tail of his shirt into his breeches. His tie hung unknotted around his neck, and his hair stood wild from his night's rest.

"I had to wait for him," Drake added. "So now he will await my convenience."

"Yes, husband," Lady Catherine said. "You have barely eaten any of your morning meal. Was it improperly prepared? Are you feeling ill?"

"The meal was properly prepared, and I am perfectly well. Thank you for your concern." He allowed a small smile of appreciation to appear.

"Do you still depart on the prince's behalf at midday?" she inquired.

"I do if Hemphill has all secured, which he will."

"The children and I will pray each day for success in your undertaking and for your swift return to your family."

Catherine was displeased with Hemphill's prominent station of employment, he knew. The defrocked priest was the subject of unkind gossip among her circle of titled ladies. But she would never question his decisions. He was the man of the house, and his word was law, as the Holy Testaments said was to be.

Drake studied her as she ate with bird-like precision. Their fathers had arranged the marriage. His family had a title and hers a dowry he had been able to increase many times over. Their first meeting had been at the church when vows were exchanged.

He had never regretted the union. While upon occasion, when he was disappointed with her, he reminded himself that she thought as a female and not as a man would. He should not judge her too harshly. Part of being the lord of the house was to guide his wife to the righteous path and to forgive her lapses.

He realized after several minutes there was more she wanted to say. There was always more.

"Are there matters we should discuss before my departure?"

Relief etched her features.

"Yes, husband."

"Please tell me. Your burdens are my burdens." This was a lie. Most of his wife's concerns were, and always had been, of import to the female mind but usually trivial and of no consequence.

"The children," she said.

Drake sighed. He could not stop himself. Catherine saw his reaction and lowered her eyes.

He loved his children and would do all that was needed to protect them, but he did not understand them. James was a disappointment in every respect. He was a proper man in age only. Their daughters Jeyne and Catelyn were a mystery, as all females were to him.

"Time is short. Please voice your concerns, madam."

"Yes, husband," she answered. "I was approached by the new priest...I cannot recall his name."

"That is because so far he has not done anything for our congregation that is worth remembering."

"I agree with your assessment. He approached me the other day. He intends to form a choir to sing at Sabbath day services. First he asked if I would assist him in the selection of the hymns that would be performed. Then he asked if Jeyne could be one of the choir."

"We attend the Sabbath services to gain knowledge of the Word and to save our souls from damnation. We are not attending so we may be entertained as if at a pagan celebration. I will speak with the archdiocese and put an end to this priest."

"Thank you." Catherine shifted uneasily in her chair. "The Queen's Winter Ball will soon be upon us."

"I am aware." This year, along with other highborn ladies, Jeyne would be presented to the court. The ceremony would announce that she had reached marriageable age and that her family would consider worthy suitors. The bachelors at court would request dances of their favorites during the rest of evening to show their interest.

Catherine was more nervous than Jeyne. What if no gentlemen requested to dance with her? What if Jeyne spent the night against the wall unasked with the Duke of Navarone's spinster daughters. Jeyne was not a handsome young woman by any culture's definition.

He knew she would be asked—the dowry that would accompany her into marriage would guarantee that. Then again, the aftermath of the approaching storm might make all a waste of time.

“I escorted our daughters to the dressmaker’s last week,” continued Catherine.

Again, he thought, a triviality only of import to the female mind.

“Jeyne selected the perfect ivory cloth for her gown. Catelyn, however, wanted a bright green material.

“As we had neared the dressmaker’s shop, that Novarro creature had walked toward us—I give thanks to Heavenly Father that she did not attempt conversation with us. The material Catelyn wanted was similar to the color that scandalous woman was wearing; I was mortified by her inappropriate choice. Why are that woman and her husband still at our university?”

Drake touched the red-and-black sash in his coat pocket. Soon Novarro would only be spoken of with other past events.

“That problem will soon be remedied,” he said. “You have my oath on that, madam.”

He motioned for his son to sit. James dropped into the chair.

“Father, I would like—”

“Stop. You are here to listen, not to voice your wants. You task my patience and good will.”

James nodded that he understood.

“I am the master of House Drake, and all within its walls will adhere to my canon as long as I draw breath.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Someday, you will be the master, and I fear for the House when that day arrives. When I look at you, I see your mother’s father. I will grant that he had a fair head for business, but his faith and character were weak. Life in this world is a test to reveal whether one is worthy of Heaven’s reward, not a game of amusements and frivolity.”

“This is true, son,” Catherine added.

James did not respond.

“I pray to Heavenly Father and Son, James, that I am wrong about you,” Drake continued. “We live in a perilous age, and only the strong and righteous will survive it.”

Catherine nodded.

“Amen, world without end,” she murmured.

James stared at the tabletop. Drake sighed. He prayed his son would not begin weeping. He would have, not long ago. Mayhaps, he grudgingly admitted, his son’s blade training with the damnable Novarro woman *had* added a measure of iron to his spine.

James looked at his father. His jaw was clenched tight. Was he holding back tears? Drake wondered. Or was he about to voice willful defiance? Either would be rewarded with swift punishment.

James remained silent.

“During my absence,” Drake told him, “you will oversee all household business. Your mother will come to you with any concerns. You will protect and cause this House to prosper as if you *were* its master. I will judge the results upon my return. You *will* make decisions, James. Do not disappoint me by doing nothing. Am I clear on this?”

“Yes, Father, you are clear on what you expect.”

“Good. Now you may break your fast or depart, whichever you choose.”

James rose to his feet.

“Good day, Father. Blessed morning, Mother.”

He headed toward the kitchen.

Drake watched him leave and prayed his son would rise to fulfill his birthright. His eldest had shown noble character when he volunteered to join the prince’s army, but that could not be allowed. The kingdom’s army would fall before the heathen invaders, and he would not have his son’s corpse lie on a forgotten battlefield as feast for mongrels and worms.

He knew the likelihood of his own return was slim. The archdemon Croell had lied to him about his reward, and he had allowed it. His carefully neutral demeanor had not revealed his true understanding to the demon.

Marquis Geoffrey Drake returned to the Holy Book.

For five winters, the Hell-born Man and his Beast Prophet shall rule all the seas and lands. The faithful shall be tested. Many will perish.

Then, in the sixth spring, Our Lord's Chosen Son will return to earth, and all Heaven's angels shall follow him. For six days, there will be a great battle between the two armies around and in the Valley of Megiddo.

On the seventh day, as the sun rises, Mankind will find the Hell-born Man and the Beast Prophet slain, and their followers captured. And the demon overlord Satan will be bound in chains and tossed into a lake of relentless fire.

For an age and an age, Peace will reign over the world and Mankind.

For an age and an age, Peace will reign over the world and Mankind, he reread; then he closed the book.

Before that could be, Hell's legion had to rule for five years. The sooner that reign commenced, the sooner everlasting Peace would come; and once again the world would be a Garden of Eden.

James Drake struggled to stay in the saddle as he rode toward the mountains. The horse was the gentlest and most even-gaited in the stable, but his skill as a rider was seriously flawed. When he was a lad, he'd even tied himself to the saddle once to make sure he didn't fall again; but the cinching was poor, and he'd ended up swinging from the steed's belly. The stablehands had barely suppressed their laughter at his situation.

Father, his face rigid and disapproving—the expression James saw most often—cut him loose. Then he had dismissed, without any severance pay, every man within sight.

He knew Father loved him, but it was apparent Father didn't like him much.

For a long time, he'd thought it was because he had inherited Grandfather's soft, pudgy body and Grandmother's round, plain face—Father disdained them for what he called their limp moral values. They professed belief in Heaven's Trinity but only attended scripture services on the days of the Savior's Birth and the Resurrection.

Then, as he grew older, he realized it was not his appearance Father disliked. It was that he had no talent for anything. He was fair at many things but never exceptional in any one of them, and his passions never lasted for long. He'd become keen on a subject;

then after a month or so, he'd drop it and wonder why he'd been so enthusiastic about it to begin with.

This trail would take him to a spot he knew where, tomorrow morning, he could jump onto the train carrying Father and the others toward the Ghost Army. The spot was past the last train stop, so he couldn't be put off. Jumping onto a moving train had sounded so simple when he'd thought of it.

He doubted anyone would notice if he missed and was crushed under the wheels. Of course, he had to survive the overnight weather first. And not fall out of the saddle into some stony ravine before he got there.

From the corner of his eye, James saw a patch of wild flowering succulent plants by the side of the trail. That had been one of his major follies. It began when he overheard two old gypsy women say that the juice of the aloe would remove boils and cysts from the skin. His experiments with the plant's sap and leaf gel showed that different mixtures did aid those ailments but also soothed and smoothed the skin.

So, he tested other plants. He'd learned, to his own dismay, that some caused a miserable rash and painful blisters.

Then, quite by accident, he'd found that mold from soybean curd and certain tree mosses promoted faster healing in small wounds. He'd applied a poultice of mold and herbs to a wound one of the hunting dogs had sustained. The handlers were sure the injury would mortify and the hound would die, so they allowed the marquis's son to torture it. All were surprised when the dog healed and was soon back to its normal self.

He had gone to Father to tell him of his accomplishments, only to be stopped after a few sentences. The rigid and disapproving face appeared. The Drakes, Father said, did not toil in the dirt with their hands. They hired peasants to do that.

And so ended his period of scientific exploration, never to be attempted again.

James knew he disappointed Father in everything the man held in high esteem. Wherever Father went, other men sought him out for advice and opinion. Many were proud to call him friend. No one sought James's company and friendship. No one called him *chum* or *mate*.

Once, when he was eight, he became pals with the blacksmith's lad, who was the same age. For an entire fortnight, where a person saw one they saw the other. They shared adventures and jokes and planned new excursions.

Father had been away on business, but Mother saw them together. She doted on his enchanting sisters, schooling them in proper etiquette and decorum. She often went for days without acknowledging her only son. But she took notice of him and the blacksmith lad.

She had a stern talk with the blacksmith then with him. It was inappropriate and unseemly to behave as if equals with a person of inferior station, and she would not have it.

He never saw the lad again.

But this past semester at university had been different. On three separate occasions, James had been congratulated by his fellow squires. He'd enjoyed the attention, although he understood that pride was one of the deadliest of sins.

The first time had been in ancient history class. Master Novarro was discussing the architectural design of the temple at Grenburke Loch and how it was believed it was achieved. The other squires were asking questions and debating various points with Master Novarro's encouragement. James hadn't been listening, however. He was concentrating on the quatrain the instructor had been attempting to translate for more than six years...



Suddenly, the hieroglyphs in the first line made sense.

"False," he blurted out without thinking.

Master Novarro approached him. James expected to see Father's rigid and disapproving look on the instructor's face. Instead, he appeared pleased.

"Finally, Squire Drake, after abstaining for most of the semester, you join the discussion," Master Novarro said. "Which point do you think is false?"

James stared at him, his voice gone.

"I do want to hear your opinion," the instructor encouraged him.

James aimed his finger at the quatrain.

“The symbols in the first line mean *false*.”

Master Novarro gazed at the quatrain. Several squires snickered. The instructor studied the quatrain for such a long period the class became restless, and many squirmed in their seats. One squire cleared his throat loudly to attract Master Novarro’s attention. It didn’t work.

James looked at the door. He could feign a head malady or belly pain and make his escape.

Master Novarro turned back to him.

“I would’ve never drawn that conclusion from those two hieroglyphs side-by-side. I wouldn’t have made that leap. But you’re right. Now I see it clearly. Well done, Squire Drake. Well done, indeed.”

After class, the other squires clapped him on the shoulder. They told him “well done, old boy.” They did that for several days.



The second occasion was when he announced he had joined the King’s Army. He truly believed it was his duty to protect and defend king, country and family, despite the probable consequences. Father had taught him that.

Despite his downplaying the decision and mocking himself, he was surprised when several squires congratulated him on his bravery then asked his advice whether they should do the same.

When he told his family, he’d expected to at last see a look of pride on Father’s face. Perhaps even hear him say, “Now, my son, you’re a man.” Instead, Mother had wept, asking how had they gone so wrong in rearing the boy and saying she looked hideous in mourning black. Then his sisters were sobbing and throwing their balled handkerchiefs at him. Father raged about the room poking holes in the air with his fist.

He did not recall all Father had said, but certain words burned in his memory—*fool...damned fool...insanity...idiocy...obey me...will not defy...mass unmarked grave...soon-forgotten battlefield...Aaron’s futile crusade*.

Father had stated he would get James released from his enlistment, and he did, despite James’s unheard protests. Father told him his only role as the Drake heir was to watch over his mother and sisters while Father was away.

This morning, James had waited for an hour after Father departed for the train. Then, he rode toward the mountains. Master Novarro had, gently but firmly, declined his offer to join them in their endeavor. Lady Novarro had said he was most brave to present his offer, which he knew she intended as praise, but her words cut deeply when it was clear she didn't want him to come along, either.

The hell with both Father and Master Novarro, he'd decided. It was his duty, and his privilege, to defend his homeland against the invaders.

James touched the dagger sheathed on his belt. The third occasion when he had been the center of attention and gossip was in some ways the best of the three. In others, it was the worst possible.

Shortly after he'd announced his enlistment, Lady Novarro had approached him. Master Novarro's wife was not the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but her manner and conduct stirred him, most embarrassingly, as none other had before.

James had been alone when Lady Novarro spoke with him. She said to meet her at the oak grove after last class and to wear old clothes, if he had any. She added that if he failed to appear, she would track his ass down and harsh payment would be extracted for the discourtesy.

He was flummoxed as to her reason. Sinful thoughts raced across his imagination, but he knew that could not be. Many squires had voiced lustful comments and desires about her, but none came to be fulfilled. He, himself, had asked for warm weather at several morning-prayer sessions—the lady's bare feet and the occasional glimpse of unclothed leg were intoxicating.



As he neared the grove, part of him screamed to run away but another part reasoned that defying Lady Novarro would be far worse.

She was waiting for him. She was dressed in boy's clothing, although no one would ever mistake her for a lad.

"You will return alive and whole to the university after your army service to finish your studies," she said.

"T-That—" he began.

"I will not allow otherwise."

He replied slowly, carefully choosing his words.

"I have no illusions about myself, Lady Novarro. I have no skills as a fighter, and I have severe suspicions about my courage."

The lady drew a stiletto from her sheath.

"You'll have skills, Squire Drake. You have my oath on that."

So the lessons began.



He was a disaster, James freely admitted. "No skill" was a modest assessment. Still, Lady Novarro had persisted. She had showed him how to hold the blade and how to thrust and cut. She explained the spots on the body that would disable, and the ones that would kill. Her assurance that a smaller person could defeat a much bigger opponent she made him repeat until he voiced the sentence with conviction.

He became red-faced and stopped listening when she put her hands on him for demonstration, even when she flipped him hard to the ground. It was worse when she expected him to touch her in an exercise.

The first time he unintentionally—at least, he thought it was unintentional—pressed his arm to her bosom, he had jumped back as if scalded to the bone. Lady Novarro grabbed his hand and put it on her breast, for an eternity it seemed; then she released him.

"You did not hurt my tit, James," she said. "You did not *arouse* my tit. Only one man can do that. Whether your foe is male or female, chivalry in battle will get you killed."

Nodding that he understood, he muttered he needed water. He went to the bucket they had for that purpose and had a dipper. And he prayed Lady Novarro had not taken note of the sinful, painful rising of his member his breeches barely concealed.

She told him to practice at night before retiring. He did. Soon, other squires were watching his practice with intent curiosity. By the end of the first week, he believed he grasped the basics.

Once, on the last day of that week, he had blocked one of her thrusts and countered, putting his hand to the side of her neck. Lady Novarro tapped his chest with a fist and said, "Very good." He thought his face would surely split from the width of the smile that grew on it.

As he departed the grove, for the first time pleased with his progress, he spotted several squires who were becoming his friends watching him from concealment. After Sabbath services the next day, they approached him. They asked if Lady Novarro would train them in hand-to-hand fighting. James told them it would be her decision.

At next meeting, the other squires came with him. They asked. Lady Novarro shook her head, exasperated, and she cursed Master Novarro aloud.

Then she agreed.

James looked up at the snow-draped alps rising in the distance. Despite Father's and Master Novarro's disapproval, he would do this. He must. As positive as he was that the Lord in Heaven was on the kingdom's side, he was sure this was the road he was meant to take.

No matter the ultimate consequences.

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T*he storm cradled the crests of the mountains. Massive black* clouds filled the horizon above and below us as far as eye could see. The train chugged, moaning and groaning, upward toward the apex of the tempest. A thick plume of smoke, with traces of fire, bellowed from its stack.

“I hate the cold,” Rebecca said, pressing her body against mine. “And soon we’re going to be wet, too. Once this is over, we’re riding to our beach in Cordoba.”

I hugged her tighter. She was making plans for the future; I loved her for that. I was concentrating on only the present.

The engine rumbled once more, and once more, the entire train vibrated. Prince Aaron’s first train through the mountains had been run using a system of pulleys, ropes and chains. Last summer, he had designed and overseen the construction of a steam-coach.

I’d seen a steamcoach once in Quantero, but this looked nothing like that machine. This was built with a boiler that operated a piston that turned the wheels. It was Aaron’s fourth model—the others had all exploded.

One elderly man and two boys rode in the engine cab; they appeared to be a grandfather and his grandsons—Grandfather the engineer, grandsons the stokers feeding wood into the boiler’s hungry fire chamber.

The engine pulled three cars. The first was a tender piled high with wood for the boiler. Next came the enclosed coach Aaron had built for his own travels. It had leaded-glass windows, chairs, tables and even a small bed. Most homes were not furnished as well. The marquis and his man Hemphill had not ventured out of it.

Rebecca and I stood on the last car, which was flat and open to nature with stakes at measured intervals circling the perimeter. Our supplies were lashed to the stakes to keep them from sliding off on curves and turns.

Rebecca stepped away from me and looked over the flatcar's edge. She touched the warrior angel's feather pinned to her coat over her breast.

"Is this as fast as it goes?" she asked. "I stroll quicker than this. Thought I'd be scared."

"Going down the other side will be faster," I replied.

I didn't add that, as far as I was concerned, we were going fast enough. The rails we were riding on caused me more than a little unease. They were made of wood and often split or were crushed by the weight of the train. People had been killed and maimed when the trains derailed.

"The prince's men will be waiting for us with horses there, right?"

"You've asked that before, and I've answered before. Don't you believe me?"

"I'm cold, and soon I'll be wet. If I have to walk as well I won't be the jovial person I usually am."

"I know."

She moved behind me and tested the sheath and bindings of the sword slung across my back. I could easily draw Elias's sword over my right shoulder. My pistol was tucked in its familiar spot behind my belt. My dagger was in my boot. It felt natural. Was I deceiving myself thinking I could live as a university instructor?

Glancing at Rebecca, I frowned.

"Where's the shield?"

She pointed. It leaned against her saddle.

"Keep it with you at all times," I said.

"Croell isn't going to attack yet. She'll wait until nightfall. She likes the dark."

I clenched my jaw.

“Please.”

“Yes, my love.” She kissed the corner of my mouth then went to the shield. “Blaze, damn, shat. Never should’ve let you see how to bend me to your will.”

“I can’t go to our beach alone.”

She whipped back to me.

“If you ever take another woman to our beach, I will haunt you. I will ensure your manroot stays shriveled and useless, and it will burn like a volcano with every piss.”

I chuckled.

“You carry the glory,” she continued, “but it belongs to me, too, as does the rest of you, and I do not share.”

“Understood, milady.”

She picked up the shield.

“You think I’m joking. You find me amusing. Better not test me, sir. Warning has been given.”

Smiling, I surveyed the flatcar.

McShane and Diego were checking the already-primed-and-loaded rifles they had brought along. McShane held one up to the dim sunlight. Frost glistened on the hammer.

The Zar master-at-arms and I had said less than a handful of words to one another since boarding the train. Diego from Cordoba, I learned, was considered one of the best rifle marksmen in Prince Aaron’s army. Wearing the spurred boots favored by the Rashid horsemen, Kamal of the Cimera Plains watched the rails disappear behind us—we would not be caught unaware if attacked from the rear.

It was said Kamal could get an exhausted horse, one that had collapsed and was near death, back on its feet riding it for several more leagues.

Goodweaver from Rivenran puffed on his pipe filled with corn-silk as he built small throwing explosives like the ones Jeb Li had made before we invaded Tynan’s keep.

I noted that McShane had his flanged mace, but today, he also had a pistol. It was a revolver.

I went over to him. He pointed his chin at the sheathed sword.

“Is that the angel’s blade?”

“Yes.”

“Show me, scholar, how it spits fire.”

“It only flames in battle with demons.”

“Of course,” he replied. “But the sword will defeat all demons we encounter?”

“If I can get close enough to use it.”

From the look on his face, I knew he didn’t believe. I’d met many who shared his view. They didn’t understand how I could believe in the Heavenly Father and His Son, and I didn’t understand how they could not.

“Master-at-arms,” I said, “if I were you, I’d take your companions back to Zar.”

“You are not me, and they are not my companions. They are soldiers with orders from our commander.”

I gestured at the pistol.

“Did John Gabriel Molina of Shankur make that for you?”

“No.”

“I thought I recognized the work.”

“After our meeting in La Traversée, I found a gunsmith in Cordoba who said he could make the pistol design I described to him. He did.”

I smiled.

“You have an eye for detail. I wouldn’t like to play cards or dice with you.”

“No need for talk, Novarro,” McShane said. “We are not friends. We are soldiering together and no more.”

“I never believed otherwise.”

“Good.” He looked at Rebecca. “At La Traversée, I hunted assassins. The owners of the tavern were the ones who hired them.”

I remained mute.

“I knew that before I arrived. I did not reveal all the cowardly assassin Clegg Flint said before he died. I wanted you to know. I do not want you to take me for a fool.”

“I’ve taken you for many things. Fool has never been one of them.”

“Good. You understand the way of things, then.”

“Why did you not arrest the tavern owners?”

"Some men need killing. Roby most certainly did. But I had my orders. My commander said to find three assassins and was satisfied with the corpses I brought him. He did not ask more of me, and I never volunteer what is not asked. I follow orders, as I do today."

"Understood."

"I do not care whether you understand or not."

But I did. Most certainly.

From my coat, I withdrew an extra pouch of rounds I had hand-made for my pistol.

"Load your weapon with these. Silver-tipped. They'll stop some demons."

McShane shook his head.

"I'll stay with iron shot."

"As you will, then," I said. "The prince gave an inspired speech to the nobles and officers."

"He did. We do agree on that."



At sunrise, before we boarded the train, Prince Aaron had addressed his nobles and high officers.

"Soon, we will face an enemy that yearns to destroy all that we love and cherish and honor. Those who survive this battle and return home safe will stand with head held most high as our victory becomes legend, as have the great battles at Amazonhenge Towers, the Bay of Shoi-ming, and the First Citadelcourt. We will show our scars proudly and remember the fears we put aside this day and the feats we accomplished. We will speak with reverence the names of noble companions who fell and hallowed the ground with their lifeblood. Those who do not join us shall lament their own manhood.

"For we who ride forth together, we who stand resolute between the enemy and our families, shall be brothers for all time. We did not invite this challenge, but we will rise together in just purpose, and, with God at our side, we shall triumph!

"Who rides with me?"

Not a single noble or officer spurned the prince. All shouted their pledges of loyalty. It was an incredible sight to behold.



McShane and I saw the figure at the same time. The train was moving slowly past, and within arms-length of, a mountainside. A lone person stood among the low clouds. As the royal coach breasted him, he jumped onto its roof and nearly tumbled off the far side. Then he crawled to the coach ladder to climb down.

“What the blue blaze is that git James doing?” Rebecca called to us.

INTERLUDE

Satan watched the train struggle up the grade toward the crest-line.

Come to me, Paladin. Come to me, daughter. Bring the sword and shield to me.

Rain and sleet fell around him but did not touch him; for he did not wish it. He studied the bridge that stretched across the deep canyon. Far below, flowing between the chasm's rocks, was the swift river the humans called Ageddon. He liked the sound of that name.

The Lord of Hell waved his hand, and the bridge section nearest him crumbled to ash. Then he pointed with his other hand. A thick fog no mortal eye could penetrate cloaked the breach. He knew his enemies were hiding on the train; that should entice them into revealing themselves. He could, if he wished, reduce the entire train and all aboard, including the hidden ones, to cinders; but he would not. Mankind was not worthy of God's love, and these few had a role to play in their own annihilation.

Allowing each detail to play out was his challenge. And his preference.

He glanced to the east. The warlord was nearing the mountains. It did not matter whether his army or Prince Aaron's won the battle. The treasure was on the train.

Behind and below him, on the plateau, tongues silent and heads bowed, his legions waited. He turned to them.

Croell and her two wolves stood apart from the others. She held a double-bladed sword its hilt carved from Judas Iscariot's femur. She was ready for battle. But he knew she had her own plan. Her disobedience would not be forgiven.

Nearest him, kneeling in respect, was Mammon. The Dire-beast stood between Croell and Mammon. Beyond the two archdemons were armed ghouls and clawed gargoyles. They would die for him without a moment's hesitation.

The winds whipped harder, driving rain and sleet across the flat terrain. Satan gazed at the train again.

Come to me, Novarro and Rivkah. Soon, very soon, prophecy will be truth, and your life's blood will no longer matter.

Rebbecca and I entered the royal traveling coach, McShane and Diego directly behind us. Marquis Drake gripped his son by the lapels and had pinned him against the wall.

“My commands will not be disobeyed,” he shouted. “I ordered you to remain at the manor with your mother and sisters.”

James, his face drained of color, his jaw clenched tight, did not respond.

Rebecca started forward, and I stopped her. This was a matter between father and son. We should not, and would not, become involved.

James found his voice. It was low and trembling.

“Our king and country are under siege. What honor do I bring to the House of Drake if I stay behind and allow others to fight in my stead? Am I to be one who laments the loss of his own manhood?”

“I am the House of Drake,” the marquis roared. “It is for you to do as I say. No other course is permissible. And no one will dare besmirch your manhood.”

“I will, Father.”

The marquis stood silent for a moment. Then he released the coat.

“I am sure you have many talents, James, that I am unaware of. Being a warrior is not one. I will not allow you to squander

your life. I will have the train stop, and you will disembark to return to the manor.”

James glanced toward us then faced his father.

“No, Father. Respectfully, I have no illusions of being a hero, but I must do my part. If I don’t accompany you and the others, I will join the army under an assumed name. I must stand by my beliefs, or why would others respect them? You taught me that.”

“Your beliefs are what I say they are! You stupid fool, she has beguiled you.” The marquis glared at Rebecca. “Your virgin heart does not yet know the ways of harlots.”

I stepped forward, hand curling around my pistol grip. Hemphill rose from his chair.

“Sit down, dirt-chaffer,” McShane growled.

Hemphill hesitated then did as commanded.

James stepped between the marquis and me.

“Apologize to Lady Novarro,” he said. “Immediately.”

“You *dare* command me?”

The duel challenge was on my tongue, but James spoke first.

“So be it, then, Father,” he said. “I am no longer of the House of Drake.”

The marquis stared at him; it was clear he had never expected anything like this from his son. He raised a hand to slap him, but the hand did not descend.

“Apologies, woman,” he muttered with ill grace, his hand dropping to his side.

Rebecca curtsied.

“Kiss my ass, milord.”

The marquis ignored her. He untied his black-and-red sash and knotted it around James’s waist.

“Stay close, James,” he ordered, “and do not take this off.”

I glanced at Hemphill. He was wearing a black-and-red sash, too. Outside, I heard the train’s iron wheels roll onto a wooden bridge. Rain and sleet peppered the coach windows.

Then the train jerked and slowed. I looked out the window. Far below us, cutting through a deep canyon, was the River Ageddon. The train rolled to a halt.

Rebecca grabbed my arm.

“My father is near. I feel his presence.”

I pushed past James and the marquis, went out the coach door and climbed onto the tender. We were stopped in the middle of the bridge. The engineer and the two young stokers leaned out of the engine cab studying a thick fog that completely hid the end of the bridge. Why would they stop the train for fog? What did they see that we couldn't?

Rebecca and McShane climbed up beside me, followed by Drake and James.

"What's wrong?" James asked.

The answer emerged from the fogbank. Croell and Mammon, side by side, marched down the track toward us. Directly behind them was the monster Direbeast. Then came armed ghoul soldiers, clawed gargoyles and the two winged wolves.

44

Rebbecca drew her sword.

“We may be in trouble.”

“Where’s the shield?” I snapped.

“Right where I left it.”

The archdemons stopped. Mammon raised his clenched fist. The ghouls came to a halt but were clearly eager for mortal blood and flesh. The wolves and gargoyles hovered in the fog above them.

“To the flatcar,” I ordered. “We’ll make our stand there.”

McShane, not waiting for any command, had already swung down and bolted back into the royal coach. Rebecca jumped onto the roof of the coach, dashing toward the end. Drake grabbed James, their faces almost touching.

“Find Hemphill! Stay with him!”

“F-F-Father,” James stuttered. “I ... We...”

Drake shoved him toward the rear of the tender and watched him climb down.

I called to the engineer, “Come with us!”

They didn’t respond, just stared at Hell’s legions.

Drake aimed his cocked pistol at me.

“Relinquish the sword.”

I’d dropped my guard and now wondered if I was fast enough to draw down on him before he killed me.

"I am not a murderer," he said, spit bubbling over his lower lip. "But I will be if required. Praise Heaven. World without end."

Praise Heaven? World without end? The man was insane. But he was hesitating. He should've killed me at first opportunity and taken the sword from my corpse. I slowly thumbed the hammer back on my pistol.

"Father! Hurry!" James called. "We'll fight them together in Heaven's name!"

As I pulled and aimed my pistol, he lowered his. I didn't fire. Drake's features were twisted in confusion.

"Dear Lord," he whispered. "What have I done?" He climbed down to the platform. "Go inside, James! Please, go!"

"Come on!" I yelled to the crew again. The engineer looked back at me. And smiled.

"Let's go introduce ourselves, Patrick," he called. "It's the courteous and polite thing to do."

I didn't understand. Then I saw Drake race in front of the engine toward the demons. I aimed at the spot directly between his shoulder blades.

"I do not see the sword," I heard Croell say as he neared her.

Drake fired his pistol, and the round hit the archdemon between her breasts. Croell grunted and swung her clawed hand, shredding the marquis's face from his head as Mammon cut him in half with his scythe.

A wolf dove toward the train. I fired. It yelped in agony and burst into flame.

Croell and Mammon leapt over the side and moved swiftly along the bridge beams toward us until I couldn't see them any longer. The Direbeast roared. Lucifer's army charged.

Suddenly, without warning, I staggered back, nearly falling off the tender as three blinding lights surged upward from the engine. The gargoyles shrieked in terror. The first lines of ghouls behind the Direbeast halted; several were knocked off the bridge by the ones surging behind them.

The monster screamed in fury.

The engineer and stokers were gone. In their stead, three warrior angels—one with flaming crossbow, one with sword, and the third holding daggers in each hand—ascended into the air to join

the Archangel Magdalene. I stared, disbelieving, at the silver-armored warriors.

The angel with the bow sending arrow after arrow into the flying gargoyles had the face of Tom Kree. The two with blades advanced toward the Direbeast and ghouls. One had the mortal face of DeQuinn Mercy, the other Friar Sebastian.

The last wolf and the gargoyles sailed wide around the train then darted toward the flatcar. I jumped down onto the platform of the royal car. Drake had blocked the door with his dagger so that no one inside—in particular his son—could not come back out.

Several gargoyles separated from the pack. They dived in a V straight at the royal coach. I fired again. The coach rocked violently as they slammed into the side. I heard an agonized scream and pistol fire from within.

I kicked the door open. The entire side of the coach had been ripped away, sleet and snow whipping inside the wide gash. Still screaming, Hemphill lay split from collarbone to crotch with two gargoyles gorging on his entails. I fired twice, the shots almost sounding as one. The beasts exploded in a quick blaze.

A gargoyle retreated from the coach with Diego's head clenched in its maw. McShane, cloaked in thick ash, fired his pistol point-blank into an advancing creature. It burst into flame, setting the drapes afire. The master-of-arms bolted out the rear door to the flatcar.

A scarred gargoyle snapped at James, barely missing his face. James stabbed his dagger into the beast's throat. It ignited, torching the sleeve of his coat. He slapped the flames out as he stepped to the gash and readied for the next assault.

"Get out, dammit!" I commanded.

He looked at me, clearly proud that he had stood his ground. But he realized he could do no more.

The fire consuming the drapes, despite the sleet, moved onto the remains of the coach wall.

"Go, James!" I shouted, heading toward him.

"Where's Father?"

The floor beneath his feet erupted, and Croell arrowed up into the coach. James was hurled through the opening in the coach

wall, and yelled as he plummeted toward the swift white-capped river far below. I fired my last two rounds into Croell, and the archdemon, shrieking, dived back under the train.

“For Leopard,” I growled at the hole.

I pulled rounds from my coat to reload. A gargoyle swooped into the coach, bellowing. I shook out the spent rounds. It stomped toward me. I reloaded.

The gargoyle stopped, twisted its ugly head toward the opening, and whimpered. The Direbeast roared, wrenching the coach from the tracks and ripping it away from its moorings with the other cars. As I dashed for the door, the gargoyle following me, the coach shifted onto its side and, for a moment, hung in mid-air. The gargoyle screamed. I dived through the doorway.

As knew the goddess Cithah spoke to the warlord king by way of the bones. He knew about the warning to Temujin. *No warrior will slay you. No warrior's weapon shall pierce your body. But beware the swift waters—the heathen hides there, and death is his companion.*

He also knew, learned in the hard lessons of youth, that all prophecies and fortuneteller divinings were pig shat. No one knew what was to be. That was one of life's truths.

So, on this day, on the eastern border beside the river flowing out of the Thurian Mountains, they would show all that the goddess was a demon in disguise. When the lifeblood left the Iron Panther's body by way of their lethal wounds, all would know Cithah gave false counsel.

He lay still, not even breathing, as the warhorse waded from the river and stopped beside where he lay concealed. He'd painted his face and body brown, green and black then settled under a blanket covered with brush and sand. The camouflage blended in perfectly with the riverbank. 'Twas as if he were invisible.

Jeb Li had picked a grove of trees close by.

Without looking up, he knew the rider of the warhorse was Captain Jalayir of Temujin's personal guard. Six other horsemen were with him. Earlier, at dawn, the Ghost Army scouts had reached

the river. He and Jeb Li had watched the soldiers explore the river until they found that this ford, downstream from the towering Ageddon falls, near the railroad bridge, was the best crossing for several leagues.

They had allowed the scouts to pass unharmed, even when they killed the three mounted Thurian soldiers waiting for the train. That had taken great restraint. They had no orders to prepare an ambush, but after seeing how the Ghost Army had laid waste to the cities and villages in their path thus far, they knew what they needed to do.

The Iron Panther would not see sunset this day.

Vas knew his good friend and he would not see sunset, either. That was acceptable as long as Temujin was slain first. 'Twould be a good death. In the afterlife, in the Hall of Warriors, they would discuss the battle in detail between drinking endless pints of aged ale and lying with lusty willing wenches and muses.

He saw Temujin, in his gold-trimmed black armor, riding toward the river, his army spread out behind him as far as the eye could see. More of his personal guard rode on each side of him. Following on foot, at a respectful distance, was the High Priestess Qalakai.

Vas frowned. The captain's warhorse was relieving itself, and the piss was flowing under his camouflaged cover. He continued to lie unmoving, his hand resting on his double-bladed axe.

They would spring the ambush when Temujin crossed the river. First, Jeb Li would ignite his black-powder balls. After the explosions, amidst the smoke and confusion, Vas would rush from his hiding spot and ensure the Iron Panther was Hellbound. Then he and his good friend would make their last stand. Before they were slain, if the gods were pleased with him, he would kill one more than Jeb Li. If the gods were feeling mischievous, Jeb Li would down one more than him.

What if, he suddenly wondered, we slay the same number? No, that can't happen. That would be unfair.

Captain Jalayir reined his warhorse about, and its rear hoof grazed the spiked cap over Vas's stub. It appeared the guards intended to wait here for their warlord to join them.

Vas watched as Temujin rode up to the far bank then pointed at the railroad bridge. Soldiers dashed to the bridge, some with axes and some with torches. The warlord looked downriver and up. A cluster of broken boards and a twisted window frame flew past in the swift current. Then, satisfied the way was clear, he urged his stallion into the water.

The guards on the far bank remained where they were. Qalakai stopped beside them and placed her six-fingered hand on one man's leg. He reined his horse away from her. She smiled and continued to the water's edge. The other guards moved back.

Vas curled his fist around his axe handle.

In the river, the stallion neighed, unsure and skittish, as the current tugged at its body and its hooves sought hold of the shifting bottom. The animal stopped at midstream. Temujin spurred him again and again. The horse neighed louder as another shattered board cut through the water near them. Temujin whipped the animal's neck with the reins, drawing blood, and spurred its flanks harder.

Then...

A man launched himself up from the river in front of the stallion, clawing at its head and reins. The horse, terrified, reared, and the man was swept downriver. The warlord struggled to remain in the saddle as the stallion toppled into the current and vanished underwater.

Vas stared, disbelieving.

The guardsmen and nearby soldiers stayed where they were. Not one, on horseback or afoot, moved toward the river. The stallion, with no rider or saddle, rose from the water and climbed the far bank.

Qalakai jumped into the river.

"Help him!" she shouted, laboring toward the place Temujin had gone under as the current battered against her.

An iron-gloved hand punched to the surface.

"Save his lordship!" yelled Qalakai, grabbing the hand with both of hers. "The goddess commands you!"

Captain Jalayir spurred his warhorse into the river. With all her strength, Qalakai pulled on the hand, attempting to raise Temujin from the water. He didn't move.

The captain stopped beside the priestess.

“Help me!” she cried.

He shook his head.

“We do not have permission to touch his person.”

Qalakai fell backwards, going underwater. She regained her footing and stood, gripping the now-empty glove.

Jalayir leaned toward the priestess and plunged his knife deep into her throat. Qalakai toppled face-first into the water, and the current swept her downriver. The captain rode onto the far bank.

Vas remained under the camouflaged cover as the rest of the advance guard headed back across the river. Jalayir pointed at the horizon then nudged his mount forward. The word spread quickly through the Ghost Army. Guardsmen, soldiers, and slaves followed the captain back toward their home.

Vas stood and shook his axe at them in frustration. This could not be. There would be no great battle. A score of enemy soldiers would not fall to his blade. No warrior’s death would be achieved. ’Twas was not to be the good day he had hoped for.

“Vas!” called Jeb Li from downriver.

Swiftly, Vas ran to him. As he neared, he saw his friend dragging onto shore the man who had leapt out of the river in front of Temujin.

“Is he alive?” Vas asked, dropping to one knee.

“Barely. His lungs are filled with river water. Several broken bones.”

Vas looked at the bruises and cuts on the unconscious, pale face.

“More boy than man,” he said. “Will he die?”

James Drake coughed hard, water coursing from his mouth and nose. Color seeped back into his face, and he moaned.

“The boy who slew the Iron Panther will live,” said Jeb Li. “You and I will ensure he does.”

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I *landed hard on the flatcar floor. My pistol bounced from my* hand, skidded across the planks, and off the side. Rising, I drew Elias's sword over my shoulder. Flames curled from its blade.

Chaos was all around me. The royal car, thrown from the tracks and fully ablaze, plunged toward the river below; and the flatcar, unmoored, gaining speed as it rolled downhill. Bellowing, the Direbeast slashed at the Archangel Magdalene as she swept down at the monster. The three warrior angels battled the armed ghouls on the ash-covered tracks in front of the engine. A fourth warrior angel attacked a triad of gargoyles above us with blazing lance.

McShane fired his rifle, its shot true, into the gargoyle gripping Diego's head in its maw then tossed the weapon aside and grabbed another. Kamal, weaponless, deep wounds in his chest and back, tackled a gargoyle. They crashed through two tie-stakes, plummeting off the rear of the flatcar and under the wheels. Goodweaver lay dead with his left arm torn from him and his throat ripped wide; his dagger rested atop a mound of embers.

Rebecca came beside me. She had Elias's shield and her short sword. Ash decorated her hair and coat. A bruise colored her cheek, and a thin line of blood trailed down her chin from her split lip.

"You're late," she growled, shifting position so we were back-to-back.

“You’re spoiled.”

She laughed.

A two-headed gargoyle swooped straight at me. I swung the sword and severed both heads. Rebecca slammed the shield into the face of a horned gargoyle, and it burst into flames.

The flatcar rolled faster and faster down the tracks. I saw the Archangel Magdalene raise her hands skyward, and lightning, a thousand bolts, speared the Direbeast. The monster exploded into rolling fire.

McShane cursed as the last winged wolf tore the rifle from his grip. The creature attacked, jaws wide and claws raised. As its talons swiped his chest, the master-at-arms shattered the wolf’s jaw with his mace then hammered deep into its skull. Ashes spiraled into the wind.

The gargoyles withdrew, clustering above and behind us. There were too many. Row after row, wingtip to wingtip, they spread out. Their intent was clear. They would attack in mass.

I glanced at Rebecca.

“Oh, shit,” she muttered.

McShane, blood expanding across his tunic, drew his pistol. The angel with the flaming lance rushed between the gargoyles and us. The other three angels joined him, but they waited. Then Magdalene appeared beside them, and as one, they charged the demons.

The flatcar gained more speed, the wind whipping and slashing us as we raced downhill through low clouds. Rebecca pressed her cheek to my shoulder.

At the front of the flatcar, Croell and Mammon climbed onto the plank floor from beneath the car then rose to their full height. The car careened around a curve, one side’s wheels lifting from the track; Goodweaver’s body slid off the platform. Then, it crashed back down onto the rails, bone-jarring us all.

Croell, with her double-bladed sword, made the sign of the pentagram. Mammon leveled his stare at me. McShane triggered his pistol twice, and the rounds slammed into Croell above her breast scars. No blood appeared from the wounds. He fired again.

The archdemon marched toward the master-at-arms. Rebecca rushed to McShane’s side and raised the shield in front of them.

McShane fired his pistol once more. The round hit the archdemon square between the eyes. Croell continued, unscathed, toward them.

I advanced on Mammon; the sword blazed white fire in my hand. We moved in a tight semi-circle, studying and measuring one another as if in a macabre dance.

Finally, we went at one another.

We attacked, we defended. Both of us managed to stay upright on the jostling flatcar, neither gaining the upper hand. Then, he repelled my assault and countered, his curved blade slicing my left bicep. Gritting my teeth, I fell back. Mammon rushed me, sweeping his scythe and nearly decapitating me. I returned thrust, pivoting from the hip with all my strength. He leapt aside, and my blade missed. Without pause, I reversed my swing, and the fiery blade cut into Mammon's skull face.

He screamed. The bone split, black sizzling and crackling out of the wound, smoke coiling from his empty eye socket. I attacked with a kill-thrust.

Mammon dove from the flatcar.

I went to one knee, watching the wounded monster rise up on the tracks. Then he was gone.

My left arm burned, and my blood spotted the planks. Coming about, I struggled to my feet as the car barely stayed on the rails at each curve.

Croell had forced Rebecca and McShane to the edge of the car bed. Her sword slashed from the left, then the right. Rebecca blocked one blow with the shield then the other, again and again. She and McShane waited for an opening.

I lurched as fast as I could to join them.

Two gargoyles attacked from the rear. McShane saw them. He raised his pistol, but the hammer thudded against an empty chamber. He gripped the mace in his fist.

Croell fainted at him and, as Rebecca moved the shield to protect him, thrust the blade straight into her breast.

Rebecca crashed into a stake, cracking it. She stood for a moment, looking stunned that she was not dead or even wounded. She pressed her hand to the angel feather pinned to her coat.

The master-at-arms spun about, hammering the skull of one attacking gargoyle, slaying it as the other whipped past him. He

pivoted and leapt at the archdemon, raising his mace high. Croell stabbed him in the gut and drove the blade through his body to its hilt.

She ripped the sword free. McShane grunted but remained on his feet. With the last of his strength, he threw the mace at Croell.

"I'm Heath Darkchyl!" he called.

Croell screamed, thrusting her blade through the second gargoyle. As it burst into flames, she spiked it into McShane. Fire swallowed him, and he folded onto the planks.

Croell turned toward Rebecca.

"For my brother."

Rebecca anchored her stance, raising shield and short sword.

Closing on the archdemon, I swung the sword. The blade slashed her shoulder, and she whirled growling, maggots flying from her hair.

The flatcar rounded a hard curve full-out; the sound of crackling rails cut the air. The wheels on the far side of the car rose high from the tracks. I went down, sliding toward the edge.

Rebecca lost her grip on the shield and her sword, and as she pitched backward over the side, she grabbed a tie-stake with both hands. She hung there, the wind ripping at her body, and struggled to lift herself back on board. Kicking up, she caught the edge with her toe. Then she slid her foot onto the planking. The flatcar slammed back down on all wheels.

The stake splintered in half.

Rebecca fell.

I grabbed her wrist. Below, a vast, clouded chasm rushed past.

"Behind you!" she shouted.

I held onto her with my left hand, tearing my wound wider, dark pain ripping through my arm as I twisted toward the archdemon.

Croell seized Elias's shield and advanced toward us.

"Let go!" cried Rebecca. "Let me go!"

My grip tightened.

"My love," Rebecca whispered.

Then she slashed her *miséricorde* across my hand.

Rebecca fell without a sound, vanishing into the clouds. My heart stopped.

Then Lenore soared from the heavy mist with Rebecca, unconscious, cradled in her arms. In my mind, I heard her say she would take Rebecca to where she'd be safe. And they were gone.

I pivoted and faced the archdemon, holding Elias's sword with only one hand. The flames had receded into the blade. My left arm now hung nearly useless, and more blood dripped onto the planks.

"She will not escape me," Croell said.

The flatcar rolled to a stop. Croell bowed her head. I stood where I was. My end was near. This I knew. But I'd see the archdemon to the Abyss before I was done.

Satan walked between us. From behind the crest of the nearby ridge, the wounded Mammon and the other nine archdemons appeared. Giant dragon-hounds trotted at their sides. They were followed by more armed ghouls and clawed gargoyles. Then came winged wolves, serpentine draco and horned kraken.

The Archangel Magdalene appeared at my right side. The four warrior angels formed a line on the other. I glanced over my shoulder. A thousand warrior angels filled the rainswept sky.

Satan strode to us.

"I know he will not *give* me the sword."

“Patrick Novarro has the choice, Lucifer,” replied the archangel. “He always has.”

“I won’t,” I responded.

“A one-against-one duel. No others. Winner takes sword.”

“We have faith in Patrick Novarro,” she said.

Satan nodded.

“But is faith enough?”

“I accept,” I said, stepping forward. “Croell and I. Till last one standing.”

“Agreed.”

Satan tapped my wound. I winced in pain.

“I will allow Magdalene to heal your wound, Novarro,” he said. “But fight as-is and win, and I will allow you and Rivkah to live the remainder of your lives at the university without fear of harm. As you well know, once they are sealed in blood, I am bound by my pacts.”

“You believe his wounds give Croell advantage,” protested Magdalene.

“Agreed,” I said nevertheless.

Satan slit the palm of his hand with one fingernail. Then, he grabbed my arm and pressed the two wounds together. He stared deep into my eyes, and I stared back. A cold beyond any I had ever known arced through my body and mind. I reeled. The Abyss loomed before me. My soul screamed as if part of it had died, but no sound came from my mouth.

Satan released me.

“The covenant is sealed.”

The cold and terror departed, only traces lingering within me. He strode to the end of the flatcar and crouched down to watch. Magdalene stepped in front of me.

“Bless you, Patrick Novarro,” she said. “We pray for your safety and victory.”

I nodded. I’d be saying a prayer, too.

The angels went to the opposite end of the flatcar. The wind had ceased. No birds, no animals called out. The army of warrior angels was silent, as were the archdemons and legions.

The quiet bellowed.

I faced Croell, raising the sword in both hands. White flames rose once more along the blade. She aimed her sword toward the underworld. Dark fire hissed along its blades. Then she pounded the femur hilt against the Elias shield.

“No,” I said to her.

Croell’s eyes narrowed. She did not understand.

I suddenly felt stronger. I could and would defeat her. Croell and Satan wouldn’t win this day, I vowed.

We met in the center of the flatcar. There was no preamble, no measuring of one another as I had with Mammon. Immediately, we dueled. We thrust, blocked, then thrust and blocked again. Burning embers tattooed the air with each clash of blade against blade.

Croell fainted to the right then, as I moved to block, thrust her blade at my breast. I blocked then attacked, managing to slash the archdemon’s side. Black blood misted the air. Without pause, Croell slammed the shield into me. As I staggered back, she sliced my right forearm with her blade.

Bracing my feet, I pivoted from the hip, swinging the sword with all my remaining strength.

And missed.

Croell pierced my right thigh. I staggered and went to my knees, and as I did, she cut my right shoulder. The kill-thrust was only a moment away.

She stepped back. I tried to lift the sword with both trembling hands. As light as it was, I couldn’t raise it.

Lowering the blade to the planks, I curled my right arm against my chest, holding the sword only with the hand of my wounded left. Croell didn’t attack. She stared down at me with an expression as though she were eagerly awaiting something.

Suddenly, I understood. Her intent wasn’t to kill me. Her plan was to possess my body and use me to kill Rebecca, myself a prisoner able only to watch, helpless. Only after that would I die.

Croell shifted to shadow, thin as wisp. She spiraled away then drifted toward me. I tightened my fist around the sword’s hilt, ignoring the pain, praying my left arm had more strength remaining than I thought.

The shade settled above me. I heard Croell laugh, pleased.

I thrust upward, spearing the shadow. The blade was nearly wrenched from my hand as it struck invisible barrier. Elias's sword was still in my grip, aflame, but the blade was broken in half.

Croell returned to her demon shape. The sword had pierced the shield, ripping a huge hole in it. The other half of the blade impaled the archdemon's breast and jutted out her back. The blade and shield flamed white, engulfing her.

She leapt at me, her sword held high. Smoldering ash gusted across me as the flames consumed her.

I looked at the wounds on my left arm. They were healed. I watched as the other wounds closed.

Satan rose to his feet.

"Elias's sword has nearly been in my possession three times now. In the next thousand years, a fourth opportunity will come."

The Archangel Magdalene and the warrior angels rejoined me.

"Return the sword to the safety of Elias's tomb, Novarro," he continued. "Then take Rivkah and go live your mortal lives." He paused. "But remember always, Paladin, I made no promises regarding your children and grandchildren."

So many had perished under the blades of Temujin's ghost army. McShane and the others had lost their lives in the fight this day. Satan had been defeated, but it was not a great victory.

Still, I told him, "You lost."

He didn't respond. He was smiling as he and his army vanished.

Suddenly, a memory came to me.

And I was afraid.

The false Prince shall come,

Riding a pale horse,

Wielding a warrior angel's broken sword;

And Hell's Damned shall follow with him.

A *red owl called from a stark tree that stood among the graves* and crypts. Rebecca curled her body against me, her hands and arms inside my coat and her face pressed to my chest. We waited, concealed, inside the thicket. It was nearly the midnight hour. A deep chill lingered in the air. On the morrow, perhaps, we'd ride to our beach in Cordoba for a few days.

After my duel with Croell, Magdalene and the warrior angels escorted me to the meadow where Rebecca awaited me. I expressed my devoted thanks to everyone. Most of all, I expressed my love and gratitude to Lenore. She answered with a gentle smile. Yes, she had earned, and deserved, Heaven's embrace.

Rebecca hugged each warrior angel in turn; she spent a very long time with the fourth. Later, she told me the silent angel looked exactly like her brother Bram.

I hid Elias's sword with aid from Magdalene and Lenore. My intent was to ensure Satan would never possess the broken blade that and the false-prince prophecy wouldn't come to be—at least, not because of my actions. I said that even angels could be seduced and deceived by the demon overlord. Magdalene and Lenore didn't disagree.

I didn't return it to Elias's hidden tomb. My chosen place was the only one that assured Satan couldn't retrieve it. We traveled down the River Styx, taken by the Boatman.

I threw the sword into the Abyss.



Satan gazed into the void, watching the thunderous, relentless torrent pound the jagged rocks before vanishing into the darkness.

He was astonished.

This had never occurred before. Wedged in the stones at the edge of the blackness was the angel's broken sword. No mortal had ever thought to throw the sword into the Abyss.

He had walked a thousand worlds in a hundred universes. In all of those worlds, mortals had a soul and were given free will to choose their life's path. He had neither; but he knew his part, his role in the Lord God's Plan as well as Magdalene and the others knew theirs. They performed their tasks with the same zeal despite knowing the ordained conclusion.

Patrick Novarro had done what no one had done ever. The man was now an honored enemy.

"Bring the Damned here," he said to the lower demons cowering behind him. "I care not whether they go alone or in groups. Send them down to retrieve the sword. Keep sending them. Eventually, one will succeed. We have all the time we need, and we will never lack for mortal damned."

The demons hurried away.

This time, he could triumph.

This time, he had hope.



Rebecca and I traveled to Blackharbor to report to King Harold and Prince Aaron. At the palace, we saw Vas and Jeb Li. It was a glorious reunion.

They'd agreed to remain in Thuria to train an elite band of warriors for the kingdom.

We visited the injured hero, James Drake. He was clearly overwhelmed by all the attention he was receiving. He blushed so hard when Rebecca kissed his cheek I thought his face would explode into flame.

He would take his father's seat in the House of Lords the next session, but he told us he intended to finish his education at the

university before starting down this new road. We were certain he would do well.

Rebecca was very smug and spirited on our last day. Soon I learned why, and I should've known beforehand. As we said our goodbyes to the amused Prince Aaron, Rebecca laid before him all the possessions she'd stolen from the guards watching her. Then she again returned the prince's gold signet ring to him.



I hugged Rebecca tighter to me.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "There's still time to change your mind."

"This is truly where you grew up?"

"Yes. The cottage down the road is where Lenore and I made our home. The people who rebuilt it after the fire did so on a good foundation."

"I think Bram and I passed through here once. I may be mistaken, though. So many of these towns look the same."

I took by her chin, raised her face to mine and looked into her eyes.

"I'll ask again. Are you sure about this?"

She smiled. "Where you go, my love, I go," she replied. "Where I go, you go. We are in agreement and of like mind before we put thought to spoken word. I didn't steal a dagger from a warrior angel for a souvenir. "

"Good. Because the hour has come."

The red owl called a second time, and a female settled on the branch beside the male. Rebecca drew the warrior angel's dagger from its sheath. I pulled McShane's revolver from my belt.

Mammon rose out of the darkness. The lure—a warrior angel's dagger—had brought him here, as we had known it would. We were the last mortals the archdemon ever saw. The Abyss is now his tomb.

He is only the first. Rebecca and I will hunt Satan's legions, demon and mortal. They will come to fear us more than they fear their Master.

We are Paladin.

END

Author's Note

Certain chapters appeared originally in magazines and anthologies in a slightly different form:

“The Covenant,” *Parchment Symbols*, August 1999

“In the Garden on the Far Shore of the Styx,” *Pirate Writings*, July 1998

“Sanctuary Defiled at Ananyas,” *Fantastic: Stories of the Imagination*, May 2000

“The Beast of Lyoness,” *Clash of Steel #3: Demon* {anthology}, March 2006

“Along the Outer Rim of Titan's Anvil,” *Villainy Anthology*, Hall Brothers Entertainment, June 2011

About The Author

CHRISTOPHER STIRES lives in Riverside CA. He is a novelist, short-story writer and struggling screenwriter. He has written three novels for Zumaya Otherworlds: *Rebel Nation*, an alternate history political thriller; *Dark Legend*, a paranormal thriller/ghost story; and *The Inheritance*, winner of the 2003 Dream Realm Award for Horror. He has had more than 70 short stories and articles appear in publications in the United States, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Finland, France, Greece, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

About The Artist

FIONA JAYDE is a space pilot, a ninth-degree black belt in three styles of martial arts, a computer hacker, a mountain climber, a jazz singer, a master painter, a super-spy with a talent for languages, and an evil genius. All in her own head.

In life, she tinkers with images to create cover art for amazing books, possesses a brown belt in tae kwon do and blue belt in aikido, is a web developer who is scared to death of heights, loves jazz piano, and can bench-press about twenty pounds—with effort. She learned English from reading Nora Roberts and watching *Growing Pains*, and when not plotting murder and mayhem loves fantasy art à la Luis Royo and Boris Vallejo and is fascinated and creeped out by H. R. Giger.