

Excerpt from *the Penitent* – Part I

CHAPTER ONE

He finally found the chance to lie down in the predawn hour. He was tired beyond his capacity to care about putting the threadbare blanket over him. It had been given to him not so long ago in the early morning hours. The night was enough for him. Instead of using the blanket beside him, he wrapped the evening around him darkly. Appropriate for his mood.

He smiled bleakly at the irony between himself and the blanket. *We are two of a kind. Worn out from use. Tired, tattered. Timeworn.*

After a long while of staring at the inside of his eyelids when sleep simply evaded him, he stood up and went to sit between the roots at the base of a large tree. He shrugged himself into a comfortable position against the smooth bark. His mind cast itself back to the beginning of the day before. It was not a good memory.



Even though it had been nine in the morning, the battle already had been over for several hours. Shrugging off two bodies that had collapsed on top of him, he stood up, surveying with great curiosity what was around him. The dead stretched to the end of his sight in all directions. Cries, moans, cursing, and weeping—from those still alive—shared time with the sound of the ravens and crows who took advantage of this tribute of war. They fed greedily on the dead horses and harvest of warriors, battling in their own turn as the mortals and their mounts did earlier with one another, over the choicest of morsels to be found for their ravening palate. Their sing-song clamor had a keening and urgency that matched his own mood. An aftermath of woe, anger, delight and hunger that seemingly could not be filled.

He took a sword-ripped cloak from a fallen officer and wiped the remains of combat off himself. Unknowingly, he took back the two-edged, falchion sword he had wielded in hand-to-hand fighting from the body of the last slain soldier he had killed. The sound of its being withdrawn from the corpse did not sicken him physically as much as it repulsed his sense of order and balance in the world. He wiped off the sword and sheathed the blade in his empty scabbard. Both of his hands searched for knives on his belt that were not present.

At that moment in time, he did not think that taking any living being from the world in such fashion created a balance of harmony in the universe. Not so much that he was a philosopher of such rationality, it was something he felt deeply inside himself. He threw the cloak, now filthy from the gore of war, away without consciously thinking about it.

In his empathy with the crying of the birds around him, each warrior he had felled in his life as a soldier took a toll from him. He could feel each man and youth in battle that he had killed scream in the frustration and fear of their being separated from the thin thread of life. He felt old.

Neither the energy of his youth nor the power in the force of his arms gave him confidence. He felt jaded beyond belief. All he wanted to do was to find rest. An oasis of peace to help still the rage filling the world around him.

The sun waged its own war with an oncoming storm. Wind swept by him in fitful gusts. Sunlight seemed shattered by clouds parrying it away from shining down onto the scenes around him. Shadows coursed by, sounding in his mind as harp strings plucked by an angel of war. Like furies in pursuit of vengeance they screamed by him in flickering vibration. Untouched by their ire he sought a nearby stream that he had passed over the night before.

No one approached him because it seemed as though there was no one there able to do so. In his present condition, he was alone with his thoughts to estrange him from his own company

CHAPTER TWO

It took him a while to leave the killing fields behind him.

The young warrior found it difficult to walk. He saw, soon enough after arising from the battlefield that blood was slowly leaking from a wound to the back of his head. He had to rest often. He stumbled constantly. Fatigue, thirst, a craving to eat, loss of blood and the shock of battle, all took their toll on him. After what seemed like a long time, he discovered that he was going in a large circle on the outside edge of the field of war. He sank to his knees and blacked out onto the ground



His father was talking to him. The older man's grey eyes looked deeply into the boy's own. He was being told something very solemn.

"You must never forget," he informed him, "that we lost your mother when you were born. I don't blame you for that, but we both now have shared her loss for five years. I'm still a young man. I'm in the pride of my life. I want a wife and more children to raise around me. Are you listening to me, boy?"

"Yes, Da," he responded steadfastly to his father's question.

"Unfathomable as it seems to me, what with everything so ill that happened then, I have found another woman. She is everything I can ask for. She will be moving in with us soon."

The boy frowned at this news. He was puzzled at what his father was telling him. He was not sure that having a new mother was what he wanted. He was used to things being the way he knew them to be.

“Your mother was the light of my life, don’t you ever forget that,” his father continued. “When she passed, the glow of her shining in my world was snuffed out faster than a candle being put out in a gale. The candle that was her life had all its tallow and beeswax taken completely away. There was nothing else left to make light.

“At least, now, while you and I cannot relight that same candle, we can rekindle another and let its light shine, so that love again fills our lives with its glow.”

The shutters and doorway to the street were wide open. The boy could hear the sounds of the village outside. The light of day poured into the room in which his father was talking to him. As he loved his father so much, he tried to understand what his dad was trying to say to him.

A tear formed in one of his father’s eyes. It grew large enough to spill down the cheek bone of his face. It dropped on the back of the boy’s right hand, which was resting on a table in front of him.

As the tear dropped from his hand onto the boy’s hand, his father said, “The night your mother died, God rest her soul, I had a shroud—a linen cloth— placed over her head and the length of her body. When I put it on her, I had to remove you from around her dead arms. You were very quiet for a first-born one. The mid-wife wouldn’t touch you. Said you were a bad omen. I was the one who placed you on your mother's stomach just before she died.”

His father paused in the telling of his son’s birth. He stood upright and looked out the nearby window. Hawkers in the lane were crying out for their wares of cloth, rags, and vegetables to be sold to passersby and to those within doors hearing their sing-song voices spill out the value of their goods.

“I was crushed by this...,” his father did not finish his statement. He let the phrase drop away from him. Instead, he cast out his arms to indicate everything around him. He bowed his head.

He looked up again and then at the boy sitting in front of him. “Your mother wanted your name to be Paul. Like her father,” he explained. “With that cloth covering over her,” he said, “and everything else. With the darkness and gloom of her passing on me and you, I named you Pall—with a double L.”



The memory of that day passed.

He opened his eyes and saw that he was still on the edge of the battlefield. He sat up off the ground and looked at the carnage all around him. The crows and ravens swooped everywhere on the field. They fought one another for the best pieces and morsels of the dead. The darkness of a violent storm rapidly approached.

CHAPTER THREE

He finally knelt down at the edge of the stream he had been seeking. As he scooped a cupped hand of water close to his mouth, he smelled a coppery flavor from it. He let the remaining amount of water fall away to the ground when he saw that it was completely red in his hand. The stream swirled by him gurgling in what sounded like muted death rattles.

“Not much to look at or smell, but once you get it past your nose and eyes, it does what it’s supposed to do,” said a man standing up across from him on the other side of the creek. He was tall and dressed in the garb of many of the fallen warriors he had seen on the battlefield. His bow, already fully bent, was in his steady hands, nocked with an arrow. It was fletched with two barred green hens and a solid blue vane for the middle feather.

Looking at him from across the stream, the man looked formidable. The arrow was perfection in itself, not crooked as poplar would be no matter the finesse in the craftsmanship of the arrow maker. Birch, probably. Maybe spruce, he thought to himself. He also saw that the almost seven-foot length of the bow was comfortably being held with what appeared to be a 36-inch arrow. He became amazed, even tongue-tied, when he saw that the draw length had to be between 160 to 180 pounds.

“Not much of a talker, eh,” stated the bowman. “Tell you what; come across the stream over to me. Don’t make any sudden moves.”

Out of curiosity rather than fear, he did as he was instructed to do. He struggled with his memory upon sight of this giant. He was almost certain that he had met another of his size. *Perhaps the same one*, he thought.

Aspen leaves behind him on the bank shivered in a slight breeze that started as he approached midway in the stream. It was getting noticeably cooler. The sunlight, what had been left of it before, disappeared entirely.

“Stop right there,” he was told. “Let’s have a little palaver, you and me. That is, if you see fit to join in. Otherwise, ain’t much purpose of me just holding this thing drawn at you. May as well just let fly and forget the jawin.”

He watched the man’s eyes intently. He tried to see how he was breathing. His talking disarmed him even more completely. A slight smile started to form on the young soldier’s face.

“Now if I didn’t think you were a total fool before, I’m beginning to believe you’re daft, what with that half smile you’re startin to get goin there now.” The man shifted slightly to his right about four feet.

Closer to my heart, he mused silently.

“Either you’re going to tell me your name, or I’ll just call you Dead,” the bowman said to him.

He started walking again toward his adversary. Slowly. It started raining fitfully. “Pall—with a double L,” he responded.

Just then, the shoulder of a body floating by in the stream touched him. He looked down at it and frowned. Entangling with him, it stopped his forward progress across the stream.

“Friend of yours? Or enemy?”

He shrugged, not saying anything else aloud.

“Like I said, not too conversational.” He beckoned him to approach closer with a slight diagonal jerk of his head.

Pall pushed the floating corpse away from him. Gently. Firmly. With respect, not repugnance. The bowman nodded approval at this gesture, while moving another four feet to the right. The bow remained fully drawn in a rock solid fashion.

The water level was now barely to Pall’s knees. The breeze began in earnest to become fitful and more forceful. The rain paused in its downfall toward the two men on the ground. It became noticeably cooler.

“When you reach my side of the bank, take a seat right there.” The bowman pointed with his chin to indicate the spot where the young man first saw him stand up in front of him.

The water still blushed vermilion as Pall reached the stream bank. He sat down and as he did so, the bowman moved in front of him, facing the stream while the young man’s back was turned away from it.

“John Savage,” he said.

The young soldier nodded in turn to this introduction. The breeze changed almost to a gale. Tree limbs, branches, even the younger tree trunks, moved in chaotic thrumming to its sway.

“I take it that you just arrived from that field of killing a mile back, south of here,” Savage stated.

Another nod was given in reply to this statement.

The arrow remained trained on his heart.

Ten feet away from him. Lightning flashed.

“Where’s the rest of your comrades?”

He shrugged his shoulders and gave a quizzical look at Savage.

A boom of thunder bellowed from what seemed like the bottom of the world.

“Well, silent Pall with a double L, what kind of name is that?”

“It means a shroud that’s put over the dead,” he replied.

For the first time since Pall originally saw him, Savage shivered.

Lightning struck again. A clap of thunder stuttered into being almost in time with the suddenness of its searing light. The wind stopped. Rain, as if in vengeance of the death that occurred earlier all around them, came down in a merciless torrent.

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