

BLOODSTONE

A JON SHANNOW
ADVENTURE

DAVID GEMMELL



BALLANTINE BOOKS

Shannow edged to the right to a break in the undergrowth and stepped out onto the walkway some fifteen yards from the Hellborn group. There were five in all, and each held a weapon pointed at his three companions. The Hellborn leader was still speaking. “Tonight we shall be in hell, with servants and women and fine food and drink. Your souls will carry us there.”

“Why wait for tonight?” asked Shannow.

The Hellborn swung to face him, and Shannow’s guns thundered. The Hellborn leader was hurled back, his face blown away; another man spun back, his shoulder shattered. Shannow stepped to his right and continued to fire. Only one answering shot came his way; it passed a few feet to his left, smashing into the stone head of a statue demon and shearing away a horn.

The last echoes faded away. Amaziga was kneeling beside Gareth. “Jesus wept, Shannow!” whispered the young man. “You really are death on wheels ...”

By David Gemmell

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Bloodstone

A Jon Sfiannow Adventure

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Bloodstone is dedicated with love to Tim and Dorothy Lenton for the gift of friendship and for shining a light on the narrow way at a time when all I could see was darkness.

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Prologue

I HAVE SEEN the fall of worlds and the death of nations. From a place in the clouds I watched the colossal tidal wave sweep toward the coastline, swallowing the cities, drowning the multitudes.

The day was calm at first, but I knew what was to be. The city by the sea was awakening, roads choked with vehicles, its sidewalks full, the veins of its subways clotted with humanity.

The last day was painful, for we had a congregation I had grown to love, peopled with godly folk warmhearted and generous. It is hard to look down upon a sea of such faces and know that within a day they will be standing before their maker.

So I felt a great sadness as I walked across to the silver and blue craft that would carry us high toward the future. The sun was setting in glory as we waited for takeoff. I buckled the seat belt and took out my Bible. There was no solace to be found.

Saul was sitting beside me, gazing from the window. "A beautiful evening, Deacon," he said. Indeed it was. But the winds of change were already stirring.

We rose smoothly into the air, the pilot informing us that the weather was changing for the worse but that we would reach the Bahamas before the storm. I knew this would not be so.

Higher and higher we flew, and it was Saul who first saw the portent.

"How strange," he said, tapping my arm. "The sun appears to be rising again."

"This is the last day, Saul," I told him.

Glancing down, I saw that he had unfastened his seat belt. I told him to buckle it. He had just done so when the first of those terrible winds struck the plane, almost flipping it. Cups, books, trays, bags all flew into the air, and there were screams of terror from our fellow passengers.

Saul's eyes were squeezed shut in prayer, but I was calm. I leaned to my right and stared from the window. The great wave had lifted and was hurtling toward the coast.

I thought of the people of the city. There were those who were even now merely observing what they saw to be a miracle, the setting sun rising again. They would smile, perhaps, or clap their hands in wonder. Then their eyes would be drawn to the horizon. At first they would assume that a low thundercloud was darkening the sky. But soon would come the terrible realization that the sea had risen to meet the sky and was bearing down on them in a seething wall of death.

I turned my eyes away. The plane shuddered, then rose and fell, twisting and helpless against the awesome power of the winds. All the passengers believed that death would soon follow. Except me. I knew.

I took one last glance from the window. The city looked so small now, its mighty towers seeming no longer than a child's finger. Lights shone at the windows of the towers; cars still thronged the freeways.

And then they were gone.

Saul opened his eyes, and his terror was very great. "What is happening, Deacon?"

"The end of the world, Saul."

"Are we to die?"

"No. Not yet. Soon you will see what the Lord has planned for us."

Like a straw in a hurricane the plane hurtled through the sky.

And then the colors came, vivid reds and purples washing over the fuselage, masking the

windows. As if we had been swallowed by a rainbow. Then they were gone. Four seconds, perhaps. Yet in those four seconds I alone knew that several hundred years had passed.

“It has begun, Saul,” I said.

THE PAIN WAS too great to ignore, and nausea threatened to swamp him as he rode, but the Preacher clung to the saddle and steered the stallion up toward the Gap. The full moon was high in the clear sky, the distant mountain peaks sharp and glistening white against the skyline. The sleeve of the rider's black coat was still smoldering, and a gust of wind brought a tongue of flame. Fresh pain seared him, and he beat at the cloth with a smoke-blackened hand.

Where are they now? he thought, pale eyes scanning the moonlit mountains and the low passes. His mouth was dry, and he reined in the stallion. A canteen hung from the pommel and the Preacher hefted it, unscrewing the brass cap. Lifting it to his lips, he found that it was filled not with water but with a fiery spirit. He spit it out and hurled the canteen away.

Cowards! They needed the dark inspiration of alcohol to aid them on their road to murder. His anger flared, momentarily masking the pain. Far down the mountain, emerging from the timberline, he saw a group of riders. His eyes narrowed. Five men. In the clear air of the mountains he heard the distant sound of laughter.

The rider groaned and swayed in the saddle, the pounding in his temple increasing. He touched the wound on the right side of his head. The blood was congealing, but there was a groove in the skull where the bullet had struck, and the flesh around it was hot and swollen.

He felt consciousness slipping from him but fought back, using the power of his rage.

Tugging the reins, he guided the stallion up through the Gap, then angled it to the right and down the long wooded slope toward the road. The slope was treacherous, and the stallion slipped twice, dropping to its haunches. But the rider kept the animal's head up, and it righted itself, coming at last to level ground and the hard-packed earth of the trade road.

The Preacher halted his mount, then looped the reins around the pommel and drew his pistols. Both were long-barreled, the cylinders engraved with swirls of silver. He shivered and saw that his hands were trembling. How long had it been since those weapons of death had last been in use? Fifteen years? Twenty? *I swore never to use them again. Never to take another life,*

And you were a fool!

Love your enemy. Do good to him that hates you.

And see your loved ones slain.

If he strikes you upon the right cheek, offer him the left.

And see your loved ones burn.

He saw again the roaring flames, heard the screams of the terrified and the dying ... Nash running for the blazing door as the roof timbers cracked and fell on her, Dova kneeling beside the body of her husband, Nolis, her fur ablaze, pulling open the burning door, only to be shredded to ribbons by the jeering, drunken men outside ...

The riders came into sight and saw the lone figure waiting for them. It was clear that they recognized him, but there was no fear in them. This he found strange, but then he realized they could not see the pistols, which were hidden by the high pommel of the saddle. No could they know the hidden secret of the man who faced them. The riders urged their horses

forward, and he waited silently as they approached. All trembling was gone now, and he felt a great calm descend on him.

“Well, well,” said one of the riders, a huge man wearing a double-shouldered canvas coat. “The Devil looks after his own, eh? You made a bad mistake following us, Preacher. It would have been easier for you to die back there.” The man produced a double-edged knife. “Now I’m going to skin you alive!”

For a moment he did not reply; then he looked the man in the eyes. “*Were they ashamed when they had committed the abomination?*” he quoted. “*No, they were not ashamed, and could not blush.*” The pistol in his right hand came up, the movement smooth, unhurried. For a fraction of a second the huge raider froze, then he scrambled for his own pistol. It was too late. He did not hear the thunderous roar, for the large-caliber bullet smashed into his skull ahead of the sound and catapulted him from the saddle. The explosion terrified the horse and all was suddenly chaos. The Preacher’s stallion reared, but he readjusted his position and fired twice, the first bullet ripping through the throat of a lean, bearded man, and the second punching into the back of a rider who had swung his horse in a vain bid to escape the sudden battle. A fourth man took a bullet in the chest and fell screaming to the ground, where he began to crawl toward the low undergrowth at the side of the road. The last raider, managing to control his panicked mount, drew a long pistol and fired; the bullet came close, tugging at the collar of the Preacher’s coat. Twisting in the saddle, he fired his left-hand pistol twice and his assailant’s face disappeared as the bullets hammered into his head. Riderless horses galloped away into the night, and he surveyed the bodies. Four men were dead; the fifth, wounded in the chest, was still trying to crawl away and was leaving a trail of blood behind him. Nudging the stallion forward, the rider came alongside the crawling man. “*I will surely consume them, saith the Lord.*” The crawling man rolled over.

“Jesus Christ, don’t kill me! I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t kill any of them, I swear it!”

“*By their works shall ye judge them,*” said the rider.

The pistol leveled. The man on the ground threw up his hands, crossing them over his face. The bullet tore through his fingers and into his brain.

“It is over,” said the Preacher. Dropping the pistols into the scabbards at his hips, he turned the stallion and headed for home. Weariness and pain overtook him, and he slumped forward over the horse’s neck.

The stallion, with no guidance from the man, halted. The rider had pointed him toward the south, but that was not the home the stallion knew. For a while it stood motionless, then it started to walk, heading east and out into the plains.

It plodded on for more than an hour, then caught the scent of wolves. Shapes moved to the right. The stallion whinnied and reared. The weight fell from its back ... and then it galloped away.

Jeremiah knelt by the sleeping man, examining the wound in the temple. He did not believe the skull was cracked, but there was no way to be sure. The bleeding had stopped, but the massive bruising extended up into the hairline and down across the cheekbone almost all the way to the jaw. Jeremiah gazed down at the man’s face. It was lean and angular, the eyes deep-set. The mouth was thin-lipped yet not, Jeremiah considered, cruel.

There was much to learn about a man by studying his face, Jeremiah knew, as if the

experiences of life were mirrored there in code. Perhaps, he thought, every act of weakness or spite, bravery or kindness, made a tiny mark, added a line here and there that could be read like script. Maybe this was God's way of allowing the holy to perceive wickedness in the handsome. It was a good thought. The sick man's face was strong, but there was little kindness there, Jeremiah decided, though equally there was no evil. Gently he bathed the head wound, then drew back the blanket. The burns on the man's arm and shoulder were healing well, though several blisters were still seeping pus.

Jeremiah turned his attention to the man's weapons: revolvers made by the Hellborn and single-action pistols. Hefting the first, he drew back the hammer into the half-cocked position, then flipped the release, exposing the cylinder. Two shells had been fired. Jeremiah removed an empty cartridge case and examined it. The weapon was not new. In the years before the Second Satan Wars the Hellborn had produced double-action versions of the revolver with slightly shorter barrels and squat rectangular automatic pistols and rifles that were far more accurate than these pieces. Such weapons had not saved them from annihilation. Jeremiah had seen the destruction of Babylon. The Deacon had ordered it razed stone by stone, until nothing remained save a flat, barren plain. The old man shivered at the memory.

The injured man groaned and opened his eyes. Jeremiah felt the coldness of fear as he gazed into them. The eyes were the misty gray-blue of a winter sky, piercing and sharp, as if they could read his soul. "How are you feeling?" he asked, as his heart hammered. The man blinked and tried to sit. "Lie still, my friend. You have been badly wounded."

"How did I get here?" The voice was low, the words softly spoken.

"My people found you on the plains. You fell from your horse. But before that you were in a fire and were shot."

The man took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "I don't remember," he said at last.

"It happens," said Jeremiah. "The trauma from the pain of your wounds. Who are you?"

"I don't remem ..." the man hesitated. "Shannow. I am Jon Shannow."

"An infamous name, my friend. Rest now and I will come back this evening with some food for you."

The injured man opened his eyes and reached out, taking Jeremiah's arm. "Who are you, friend?"

"I am Jeremiah. A Wanderer."

The wounded man sank back to the bed. "*Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, Jeremiah,*" he whispered, then fell once more into a deep sleep.

Jeremiah climbed from the back of the wagon, pushing closed the wooden door. Isis had prepared a fire, and he could see her gathering herbs by the riverside, her short, blond hair shining like new gold in the sunlight. He scratched at his white beard and wished he were twenty years younger. The other ten wagons had been drawn up in a half circle around the riverbank, and three other cookfires had been lit. He saw Meredith kneeling by the first, slicing carrots into the pot that hung above it.

Jeremiah strolled across the grass and hunkered down opposite the lean young academic. "A life under the sun and stars agrees with you, Doctor," he said amiably.

Meredith gave a shy smile and pushed back a lock of sandy hair that had fallen into her eyes. "Indeed it does, Meneer Jeremiah. I feel myself growing stronger with each passing

day. If more people from the city could see this land, there would be less savagery, I am sure.”

Jeremiah said nothing and transferred his gaze to the fire. In his experience savagery always dwelled in the shadows of man, and where man walked evil was never far behind. But Meredith was a gentle soul, and it did a young man no harm to nurse gentle dreams.

“How is the wounded man?” Meredith asked.

“Recovering, I think, though he claims to remember nothing of the fight that caused his injuries. He says his name is Jon Shannow.”

Anger shone briefly in Meredith’s eyes. “A curse on that name!” he said.

Jeremiah shrugged. “It is only a name.”

Isis knelt by the riverbank and stared down at the long, sleek fish just below the glittering surface of the water. It was a beautiful fish, she thought, reaching out with her mind. Instantly her thoughts blurred, then merged with the fish. She felt the coolness of the water along her flanks and was filled with a haunting restlessness, a need to move, to push against the currents, to swim for home.

Withdrawing, she lay back ... and felt the approach of Jeremiah. Smiling, she sat up and turned toward the old man. “How is he?” she asked as Jeremiah eased himself down beside her.

“Getting stronger. I’d like you to sit with him.” The old man is troubled, but trying to hide it, she thought. Resisting the urge to flow into his mind, she waited for him to speak again. “He is a fighter, perhaps even a brigand. I just don’t know. It was our duty to help him, but the question is: Will he prove a danger to us as he grows stronger? Is he a killer? Is he wanted by the Crusaders? Could we find ourselves in trouble for harboring him? Will you help me?”

“Oh, Jeremiah,” said Isis softly. “Of course I will help you. Did you doubt it?”

He reddened. “I know you don’t like to use your talent on people. I’m sorry I had to ask.”

“You’re a sweet man,” she said, rising. Dizziness swept over her, and she stumbled. Jeremiah caught her, and she felt swamped by his concern. Slowly strength returned to her but the pain had started in her chest and stomach. Jeremiah lifted her into his arms and walked back toward the wagons, where Dr. Meredith ran to them. Jeremiah sat her down in the wide rocking chair by the fire, while Meredith took her pulse. “I’m all right now,” she said. “Truly.”

Meredith’s slender hand rested on her brow, and it took all her concentration to blot out the intensity of his feelings for her. “I’m all right!”

“And the pain?” he asked.

“Fading,” she lied. “I just got up too quickly. It is nothing.”

“Get some salt,” Meredith told Jeremiah. When he returned, Meredith poured it into her outstretched palm. “Eat it,” he commanded.

“It makes me feel sick,” she protested, but he remained silent, and she licked the salt from her hand. Jeremiah passed her a mug of water, and she rinsed her mouth.

“You should rest now,” said Meredith.

“I will, soon,” she promised. Slowly she stood. Her legs took her weight, and she thanked both men. Anxious to be away from their caring glances, she moved to Jeremiah’s wagon and

climbed inside, where the wounded man was still sleeping.

Isis pulled up a chair and sat down. Her illness was worsening, and she sensed the imminence of death.

Pushing such thoughts from her mind, she reached out, her small hand resting on the fingers of the sleeping man. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to fall into his memories floating down and down through the layers of manhood and adolescence, absorbing nothing until she reached childhood.

Two boys, brothers. One shy and sensitive, the other boisterous and rough. Caring parents, farmers. Then the brigands came. Bloodshed and murder, the boys escaping. Torment and tragedy affecting them both in different ways, the one becoming a brigand, the other ...

Isis jerked back to reality, all thoughts of her illness forgotten as she stared down at the sleeping man. I am staring into the face of a legend, she thought. Once more she merged with the man.

The Jerusalem Man, haunted by the past, tormented by thoughts of the future, riding through the wild lands, seeking ... a city? Yes, but much more. Seeking an answer, seeking a reason for being. And during his search stopping to fight brigands, tame towns, kill the ungodly. Riding endlessly through the lands, welcome only when his guns were needed, urged to move on when the killing was done.

Isis pulled back once more, dismayed and depressed—not just by the memories of constant death and battle but also by the anguish of the man himself. The shy, sensitive child had become the man of violence, feared and shunned, each killing adding another layer of ice upon his soul. Again she merged.

She/he was being attacked, men running from the shadows. Gunfire. A sound behind her/him. Cocking the pistol, Isis/Shannow spun and fired in one motion. A child flung back, his chest torn open. Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!

Isis clawed her way free of the memory but did not fully withdraw. Instead she floated upward, allowing time to pass, halting only when the Jerusalem Man rode up to the farm of Donna Taybard. This was different. Here was love.

The wagons were moving, and Isis/Shannow rode out from them, scouting the land, heart full of joy and the promise of a better tomorrow. No more savagery and death. Dreams of farming and quiet companionship. Then came the Hellborn!

Isis withdrew and stood. “You poor, dear man,” she whispered, brushing her hand over the sleeping man’s brow. “I’ll come back tomorrow.”

Outside the wagon Dr. Meredith approached her. “What did you find out?” he asked.

“He is no danger to us,” she answered.

* * *

The young man was tall and slender, with a shock of unruly black hair cut short above the ears but growing long over the nape of his neck. He was riding an old, swaybacked mare up and over the Gap and stared with the pleasure of youth at the distant horizons, where the mountains reared up to challenge the sky.

Nestor Garrity was seventeen, and this was an adventure. The Lord alone knew how rare adventures were in Pilgrim’s Valley. His hand curled around the pistol butt at his hip, and he allowed the fantasies to sweep through his mind. He was no longer a clerk at the timber

company. No, he was a Crusader hunting the legendary Laton Duke and his band of brigands. It did not matter that Duke was feared as the most deadly pistoleer this side of the Plague Lands, for the hunter was Nestor Garrity, lethal and fast, the bane of warmakers everywhere, adored by women, respected and admired by men.

Adored by women ...

Nestor paused in his fantasy, wondering what it would be like to be adored by women. He had walked out once with Ezra Fear'd's daughter, Mary, taken her to the summer dance. She had led him outside into the moonlight and flirted with him.

Should have kissed her, he thought. Should have done some damn thing! He blushed at the memory. The dance had turned into a nightmare when she had walked off with Samuel Klares. They had kissed. Nestor had seen them down by the creek. Now she was married to him and had just delivered her first child.

The old mare almost stumbled on the scree slope. Jerked from his thoughts, Nestor steered her down the incline.

The fantasies loomed back into his mind. He was no longer Nestor Garrity, the fearless Crusader, but Jon Shannow, the famed Jerusalem Man, seeking the fabled city and with no time for women, much as they adored him. Nestor narrowed his eyes and lifted his hat from where it hung at his back. Settling it into place, he turned up the collar of his coat and sat straighter in the saddle.

Jon Shannow would never slouch. He pictured two brigands riding from behind the boulders. In his mind's eye he could see the fear on their faces. They went for their guns. Nestor's hand snapped down. The pistol sight caught on the tip of his holster, twisting the weapon from his hands. It fell to the scree. Carefully Nestor dismounted and retrieved the weapon.

The mare, pleased to be relieved of the boy's weight, walked on. "Hey, wait!" called Nestor, scrambling toward her. But she ambled on, and the dejected youngster followed her all the way to the bottom, where she stopped to crop the dry grass. Then Nestor remounted.

One day I'll be a Crusader, he thought. I'll serve the Deacon and the Lord. He rode on.

Where was the Preacher? It should not take this long to find him. The tracks were easy to follow to the Gap. But where was he going? Why did he ride out in the first place? Nestor liked the Preacher. He was a quiet man and throughout Nestor's youth he had treated him with kindness and understanding. Especially when Nestor's parents had been killed the summer ten years earlier, drowned in a flash flood. Nestor shivered at the memory. Seven years old—and an orphan. Frey McAdam had come to him then, the Preacher with her. He had sat at the bedside and taken Nestor's hand.

"Why did they die?" the bewildered child had asked. "Why did they leave me?"

"I guess it was their time, only they didn't know it."

"I want to be dead, too," the seven-year-old had wailed.

The Preacher had sat with him then, quietly talking about the boy's parents, of their goodness and their lives. Just for a while the anguish and the numbing sense of loneliness had left Nestor, and he had fallen asleep.

The previous night the Preacher had escaped from the church despite the flames and the bullets. And he had run away to hide. Nestor would find him, tell him that everything was all right now and it was safe to come home.

Then he saw the bodies, the flies buzzing around the terrible wounds. Nestor forced himself to dismount and approach them. Sweat broke out on his face, and the desert breeze felt cool on his skin. He could not look directly at them, so he studied the ground for tracks.

One horse had headed back toward Pilgrim's Valley, then had turned and walked out into the wild lands. Nestor risked a swift, stomach-churning glance at the dead men. He knew none of them. More important, none of them was the Preacher.

Remounting, he set off after the lone horseman.

People were moving on the main street of Pilgrim's Valley as Nestor Garrity rode in, leading the black stallion. It was almost noon, and the children were leaving the two school buildings and heading out into the fields to eat the lunches their mothers had packed for them. The stores and the town's three restaurants were open, and the sun was shining down from a clear sky.

But a half mile to the north smoke still spiraled lazily into the blue. Nestor could see Beth McAdam standing amid the blackened timbers as the undertakers moved around the debris, gathering the charred bodies of the Wolverers. Nestor did not relish facing Beth with the news. She had been the headmistress of the lower school when Nestor was a boy, and no one had ever enjoyed the thought of being sent to her study. He grinned, remembering the day he had fought with Charlie Wills. They had been dragged apart and then taken to Mrs. McAdam; she had stood in front of her desk, tapping her fingers with the three-foot bamboo cane.

"How many should you receive, Nestor?" she had asked him.

"I didn't start the fight," the boy had replied.

"That is no answer to my question."

Nestor had thought about it for a moment. "Four," he had said.

"Why four?"

"Fighting in the yard is four strokes," he had told her. "That's the rule."

"But did you not also take a swing at Mr. Carstairs when he dragged you off the hapless Charlie?"

"That was a mistake," Nestor had said.

"Such mistakes are costly, boy. It shall be six for you and four for Charlie. Does that sound fair?"

"Nothing is fair when you're thirteen," Nestor had said, but he had accepted the six strokes, three on each hand, and had made no sound.

He rode slowly toward the charred remains of the little church, the stallion meekly following his bay mare. Beth McAdam was standing with her hands on her ample hips, staring out toward the wall. Her blond hair was braided at the back, but part of the braid had come loose and was fluttering in the wind at her cheek. She turned at the sound of the approaching horse and gazed up at Nestor, her face expressionless. He dismounted and removed his hat.

"I found the raiders," he said. "They was all dead."

"I expected that," she said. "Where is the Preacher?"

"No sign of him. His horse headed east, and I caught up with it; there was blood on the saddle. I backtracked and found signs of wolves and bears, but I couldn't find him."

"He is not dead, Nestor," she said. "I would know. I would feel it here," she told him, hitting her chest with a clenched fist.

“How did he manage to kill five men? They were all armed. All killers. I mean, I never saw the Preacher ever carry a gun.”

“Five men, you say?” she replied, ignoring the question. “There were more than twenty surrounding the church, according to those who saw the massacre. But then, I expect there were some from our own ... loving ... community.”

Nestor had no wish to become involved in the dispute. Wolverers in a church was hardly decent, anyhow, and it was no surprise to the youngster that tempers had flared. Even so, the Crusaders had not been called out to a brigand raid on Shem Jackson’s farm, there would have been no violence.

“Anything more you want me to do, Mrs. McAdam?”

She shook her head. “It was plain murder,” she said. “Nothing short.”

“You can’t murder Wolverers,” Nestor said, without thinking. “I mean, they ain’t human, are they? They’re animals.”

Anger shone in Beth’s eyes, but she merely sniffed and turned aside. “Thank you, Nestor for your help. But I expect you have chores to do, and I’ll not keep you from them.”

Relieved, he turned away and remounted. “What do you want me to do with this stallion,” he called.

“Give it to the Crusaders. It wasn’t ours, and I don’t want it.”

Nestor rode away to the stone-built barracks at the south end of town, dismounting and hitching both horses to the rail outside. The door was open, and Captain Leon Evans was sitting at a roughly built desk.

“Good morning, sir,” said Nestor.

Evans looked up and grinned. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with an easy smile. “Still looking to sign up, boy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Been reading your Bible?”

“I have, sir. Every day.”

“I’ll put you in for the test on the first of next month. If you pass, I’ll make you a cadet.”

“I’ll pass, sir. I promise.”

“You’re a good lad, Nestor. I see you found the stallion. Any sign of the Preacher?”

“No, sir. But he killed five of the raiders.”

The smile faded from Captain Evans’s face. “Did he, by God?” He shook his head. “As they say, you can’t judge a man by the coat he wears. Did you recognize any of the dead men?”

“Not a one, sir. But three of them had their faces shot away. Looks like he just rode down the hill and blasted ’em to hell and gone. Five men!”

“Six,” said the captain. “I was checking the church this morning; there was a corpse there. It looks like when the fire was at its worst, the Preacher managed to smash his way out at the rear. There was a man waiting. The Preacher must have surprised him, there was a fight, and the Preacher managed to get the man’s gun. Then he killed him and took his horse. Jack Sha says he saw the Preacher riding from town, said his coat and hair were ablaze.”

Nestor shivered. “Who’d have thought it?” he said. “All his sermons were about God’s love and forgiveness. Then he guns down six raiders. Who’d have thought it?”

“I would, boy,” came a voice from the doorway, and Nestor turned to see the old prophet making his slow way inside. Leaning on two sticks, his long white beard hanging to his chest,

Daniel Cade inched his way to a seat by the wall. He was breathing heavily as he sank to the chair.

Captain Evans stood and filled a mug with water, passing it to the prophet. Cade thanked the man.

Nestor faded back to the far wall, but his eyes remained fixed to the ancient legend sipping the water. Daniel Cade, the former brigand turned prophet, who had fought off the Hellborn in the Great War. Everyone knew that God spoke to the old man, and Nestor's parents had been two of the many people saved when Cade's brigands had taken on the might of the Hellborn army.

"Who burned the church?" asked Cade, the voice still strong and firm, oddly in contrast to the arthritic and frail body.

"They were raiders from outside Pilgrim's Valley," the captain told him.

"Not all of them," said Cade. "There were townsfolk among the crowd. Shem Jackson was seen. Now, that disturbs me, for isn't that why the Crusaders were not here to protect the church? Weren't you called to Jackson's farm?"

"Aye, we were," said the captain. "Brigands stole some of his stock, and he rode in to alert us."

"And then stayed on to watch the murders. Curious."

"I do not condone the burning of the church, sir," said the captain. "But it must be remembered that the Preacher was told—repeatedly—that Wolverers were not welcome in Pilgrim's Valley. They are not creatures of God, not made in his image, nor true creation. They are *things* of the Devil. They have no place in a church or in any habitat of decent folk. The Preacher ignored all warnings. It was inevitable that some ... tragedy ... would befall. We can only hope that the Preacher is still alive. It would be sad ... if a good man—though misguided—were to die."

"Oh, I reckon he's alive," said Cade. "So you'll be taking no action against the townspeople who helped the raiders?"

"I don't believe anyone *helped* them. They merely observed them."

Cade nodded. "Does it not strike you as strange that men from outside Pilgrim's Valley should choose to ride in to lance our boil?"

"The work of God is often mysterious," said Evans, "as you yourself well know, sir. But tell me, why were you not surprised that the Preacher should tackle—and destroy—six armed men? He shares your name, and it is said he is your nephew or was once one of your men in the Hellborn War. If the latter is true, he must have been very young indeed."

Cade did not smile, but Nestor saw the humor in his eyes. "He is older than he looks, Captain, and no, he was never one of my men. Nor is he my nephew—despite his name. With a grunt the prophet pushed himself to his feet. Captain Evans took his arm, and Nestor ran forward to gather his sticks.

"I'm all right. Don't fuss about me!"

Slowly and with great dignity the old man left the room and climbed to the driving seat of a small wagon. Evans and Nestor watched as Cade flicked the reins.

"A great man," said Evans. "A legend. He knew the Jerusalem Man. Rode with him, some say."

"I heard he *was* the Jerusalem Man," said Nestor.

Evans shook his head. "I heard that, too. But it is not true. My father knew a man who fought alongside Cade. He was a brigand, a killer. But God shone the great light upon him."

The Deacon stood on the wide balcony, his silver-white beard rippling in the morning breeze. From that high vantage point he gazed affectionately out over the high walls and down on the busy streets of Unity. Overhead a biplane lumbered across the blue sky, heading east toward the mining settlements, carrying letters and possibly the new Barta notes that were slowly replacing the large silver coins used to pay the miners.

The city was prospering. Crime was low, and women could walk without risk, even at night, along the well-lit thoroughfares.

"I've done the best I could," whispered the old man.

"What's that, Deacon?" asked a slender, round-shouldered man with wispy white hair.

"Talking to myself, Geoffrey. Not a good sign." Turning from the balcony, he reentered the study. "Where were we?"

The thin man lifted a sheet of paper and peered at it. "There is a petition here asking for mercy for Cameron Sikes. You may recall he's the man who found his wife in bed with a neighbor. He shot them both to death. He is due to hang tomorrow."

The old man shook his head. "I feel for him, Geoffrey, but you cannot make exceptions. Those who murder must die. What else?"

"The Apostle Saul would like to see you before setting off for Pilgrim's Valley."

"Am I free this afternoon?"

Geoffrey consulted a black leather-bound diary. "Four-thirty to five is clear. Shall I arrange it?"

"Yes. I still don't know why he asked for that assignment. Perhaps he is tired of the city. Or perhaps the city is tired of him. What else?"

For half an hour the two men worked through the details of the day, until finally the Deacon called a halt and strolled through to the vast library beyond the study. There were armed guards at the doors, and the Deacon remembered with sadness the young man who had hidden there two years before. The shot had sounded like thunder within the dome building, striking the Deacon just above the right hip and spinning him to the floor. The assailant had screamed and charged across the huge room, firing as he ran. Bullets had ricocheted from the stone floor. The Deacon had rolled over and drawn the small, two-shot pistol from his pocket. As the young man had come closer, the old man had fired, the bullet striking the assassin just above the bridge of the nose. The youngster had stood for a moment, his own pistol dropping to the floor. Then he had fallen to his knees and toppled onto his face.

The Deacon sighed at the memory. The boy's father had been hanged the day before, after shooting a man following an argument over a card game.

Now the library and the municipal buildings were patrolled by armed guards.

The Deacon sat at a long oak table and stared at the banks of shelves while he waited for the woman. Sixty-eight thousand books, or fragments of books, cross-indexed, the last remnants of the history of mankind, contained in novels, textbooks, philosophical tomes, instruction manuals, diaries, and volumes of poetry. And what have we come to? he thought. A ruined world, bastardized by science and haunted by magic. His thoughts were dark and

somber, his mind weary. No one is right all the time, he told himself; you can only follow your heart. A guard ushered the woman in. Despite her great age, she still walked with straight back, her face showing more than a trace of the beauty she had possessed as a younger woman.

"Welcome, Frey Masters," said the Deacon, rising. "God's blessing to you and to your family."

Her hair was silver, the lights from the ornate arched and stained-glass windows creating soft highlights of gold and red. Her eyes were blue and startlingly clear. She smiled thinly and accepted his hand, then sat opposite him.

"God's greeting to you also, Deacon," she said. "And I trust He will allow you to learn compassion before much longer."

"Let us hope so," said the Deacon. "Now, what is the news?"

"The dreams remain the same, only they are more powerful," she said. "Betsy saw a man with crimson skin and black veins. His eyes were red. Thousands of corpses lay around him and he was bathing in the blood of children. Samantha also dreamed of a demon from another world. She was hysterical upon waking and claimed that the Devil was about to be loosed upon us. What does it mean, Deacon? Are the visions symbolic?"

"No," he said sadly. "The Beast exists."

The woman sighed. "I, too, have been dreaming more of late. I saw a great wolf, walking upright. Its hands held hollow talons, and I watched as it sank them into a man, saw the blood drawn out of him. The Beast and the wolf are linked, aren't they?" He nodded but did not answer. "And you know far more than you are telling me."

"Has anyone else dreamed of wolves?" he asked, ignoring the comment.

"Alice has seen visions of them, Deacon," said Frey Masters. "She says she saw a crimson light bathing a camp of Wolverers. The little creatures began to writhe and scream; then they changed, becoming beasts like those in my dream."

"I need to know *when*," said the Deacon. "And *where*." From his pocket he took a small golden stone, which he twirled against his fingertips.

"You should use the power on yourself," said the woman sternly. "You know that your heart is failing."

"I've lived too long, anyway. No, I'll save its power for the Beast. This is the last of them, you know. My little hoard. Soon the world will have to forget magic and concentrate once more on science and discovery." His expression changed. "If it survives."

"It'll survive, Deacon," she said. "God must be stronger than any demon."

"If He wants it to survive. We humans have hardly made the earth a garden, now, have we?"

She shook her head and gave a weary smile. "Yet there are still good people, even though we know that the path of evil offers many rewards. Don't give in to despair, Deacon. If the Beast comes, there will be those who will battle against it. Another Jerusalem Man, perhaps. Or a Daniel Cade."

"Come the moment, come the man," said the Deacon with a dry chuckle.

Frey Masters rose. "I'll go back to my dreamers. What would you have me tell them?"

"Get them to memorize landscapes, seasons. When it comes, I need to be there to fight it. And I will need help." Standing, he held out his hand, and she shook it briefly. "You have said

nothing of your own dreams, Frey.”

“My powers have faded over the years. But yes, I have seen the Beast. I fear you will not be strong enough to withstand it.”

He shrugged. “I have fought many battles in my life. I’m still here.”

“But you’re old now. *We* are old. Strength fails, Deacon. All things pass away ... even legends.”

He sighed. “You have done a wonderful job here,” he said. “All these fragments of a lost civilization. I would like to think that after I am dead men and women will come here and learn from the best of what the old ones left us.”

“Don’t change the subject,” she admonished him.

“You want me to spare the man who killed his wife and her lover?”

“Of course—and you are still changing the subject.”

“Why should I spare him?”

“Because I ask it, Deacon,” she said simply.

“I see. No moral arguments, no scriptural examples, no appeal to my better nature?”

She shook her head, and he smiled. “Very well, he will live.”

“You’re a strange man. Deacon. And you are still avoiding the point. Once you could have stood against the Beast. Not any longer.”

He grinned and winked at her. “I may just surprise you yet,” he said.

“I’ll grant you that. You are a surprising man.”

Shannow dreamed of the sea, the groaning of the ship’s timbers almost human, the waves like moving mountains, beating against the hull. He awoke and saw the lantern above his bed gently swaying on its hook. For a moment the dream and the reality seemed to blend. Then he realized he was in the cabin of a prairie wagon, and he remembered the man ... Jeremiah ... ancient and white-bearded, with but a single long tooth in his upper mouth. Shannow took a deep, slow breath, and the pounding pain in his temples eased slightly. With a groan he sat up. His left forearm and shoulder were bandaged, and he could feel the tightness of the burned skin beneath.

A fire? He searched his memory but could find nothing. It doesn’t matter, he told himself. The memory will come back. What is important is that I know who I am.

Jon Shannow. The Jerusalem Man.

And yet ... Even as the thought struck him, he felt uneasy, as if the name were ... what? Wrong? No. His guns were hanging from the headboard of the bed. Reaching out, he drew a pistol. It felt both familiar and strange in his hand. Flicking the release, he broke open the pistol. Two shells had been fired.

Instantly, momentarily, he saw a man fall back from his horse, his throat erupting in a crimson spray. Then the memory vanished.

A fight with brigands? Yes, that must have been it, he thought. There was a small hand mirror on a shelf to his right. He took it down and examined the wound in his temple. The bruising was yellow, fading fast, and the groove in his skull was covered by a thick scab. His hair had been trimmed close to his head, but he could still see where the fire had scorched the scalp.

Fire.

Another flash of memory! Planks ablaze and Shannow hurling his body at the timbers time and again until they gave. A man beyond with pistol raised. The shot hitting his head like a hammer. Then that vision also faded.

He had been in a church. Why? Listening to a sermon, perhaps.

Easing himself from the bed, he saw that his clothes were folded neatly on a chair by a small window, the burned coat having been cleaned and patched with black cloth. As he dressed, he looked around the cabin of the wagon. The bed was narrow but well made of polished pine, and there were two pine chairs and a small table by the window. The walls were painted green, there were elaborate carvings around the window in the shape of vine leaves, and a strange motif had been carved above the door: two overlapping triangles making a star. A bookshelf sat on two brackets above the bed. Buckling his gun scabbards to his hips, Shannow scanned the books. There was a Bible, of course, and several fictions, but at the end was a tall, thin volume with dry, yellowed pages. Shannow pulled it clear and carried it to the window. The sun was setting, and he could just make out the title in faded gold leaf. *The Chronicle of Western Costume* by John Peacock. With great care he turned the pages. Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Tudor, Stuart, Cromwellian ... Every page showed men and women dressed in different clothing, and each page carried dates. It was fascinating. Until the coming of the planes many men had believed that only three hundred years had passed since the death of Christ. But the men and women traveling in those great ships of the sky had changed all that, consigning the previous theories to the dust of history. Shannow paused. How do I know that? He replaced the book, then moved to the rear of the cabin, opening the door and climbing unsteadily down the three steps to the ground.

A young woman with short blond hair was walking toward him, carrying a dish of stew. "You should still be in bed," she admonished him. In truth he felt weak and breathless and stumbled back on the wagon steps, accepting the stew.

"Thank you, lady." She was extraordinarily pretty, her eyes blue-green, her skin pale tan.

"Is your memory returning, Mr. Shannow?"

"No," he said, then began to eat.

"It will in time," she assured him. The outside of the wagon was painted in shades of green and red, and from where he sat Shannow could see ten other wagons similarly decorated.

"Where are you all going?" he asked.

"Where we like," said the girl. "My name is Isis." She held out her hand, and Shannow took it. Her handshake was firm and strong.

"You are a good cook, Isis. The stew is very fine."

Ignoring the compliment, she sat down beside him. "Doctor Meredith thinks you may have a cracked skull. Do you remember nothing at all?"

"Nothing I wish to talk about," he said. "Tell me about you."

"There is little to tell," she told him. "We are what you see, Wanderers. We follow the sun and the wind. In summer we dance, in winter we freeze. It is a good way to be."

"It has a certain charm," said Shannow. "Yet is there no destination?"

She looked at him in silence for a moment, her large blue eyes holding his gaze. "Life is a journey with only one destination, Mr. Shannow. Or do you see it otherwise?"

"It doesn't pay to argue with Isis," said Jeremiah, moving into sight.

Shannow looked up into the old man's grizzled face. "I think that is true," he said, rising.

from the step. He felt unsteady and weak and reached out to grasp the edge of the wagon. Taking a deep breath, Shannow moved into the open. Jeremiah stepped alongside, taking his arm.

“You are a tough man, Mr. Shannow, but your wounds were severe.”

“Wounds heal, Jeremiah.” Shannow gazed at the mountains. The nearest were speckled with stands of timber, but farther away, stretching into an infinite distance, were other peaks, blue and indistinct. “It is a beautiful land.” The sun was slowly sinking behind the western peaks, bathing them in golden light. Off to the right Shannow focused on a rearing butte, the sandstone seeming to glow from within.

“It is called Temple Mount,” said Jeremiah. “Some say it is a holy place where the old gods live. For myself I believe it to be a resting place for eagles, nothing more.”

“I have not heard the name,” Shannow told him.

“The loss of memory must cause you some anguish,” said Jeremiah.

“Not tonight,” Shannow answered. “I feel at peace. The memories you speak of hold on death and pain. They will come back all too soon; I know this. But for now I can look at the sunset with great joy.”

The two men walked toward the riverbank. “I thank you for saving my life, Jeremiah. You are a good man. How long have you lived like this?”

“About twelve years. I was a tailor, but I longed for the freedom of the big sky. Then came the Unifier Wars, and city life became even more grotesque. So I made a wagon and journeyed out into the wilderness.”

There were ducks and geese on the river, and Shannow saw the tracks of a fox. “How long have you nursed me?”

“Twelve days. For a while the others thought you were going to die. I told them you wouldn’t; you have too many scars. You’ve been shot three times in your life: once over the hip, once in the upper chest, and once in the back. There are also two knife wounds, one in the leg and a second in the shoulder. As I said, you are a tough man. You won’t die easy.”

Shannow smiled. “That is a comforting thought. And I remember the hip wound.” He had been riding close to the lands of the Wall and had seen a group of raiders dragging two women into the open. He had ridden in and killed the raiders, but one of them had managed a shot that had clipped Shannow’s hipbone and ripped through his lower back. He would have died but for the help of the man-beast Shir-ran, who had found him in the blizzard.

“You are miles away, Mr. Shannow. What are you thinking?”

“I was thinking of a lion, Jeremiah.”

They strolled back up the riverbank and toward the camp-fires in the circle of wagon. Shannow was weary and asked Jeremiah to lend him some blankets so that he could sleep under the stars.

“I’ll not hear of it, man. You’ll stay in that bed for another day or two, then we’ll see.”

Too tired to argue, Shannow pulled himself up into the wagon. Jeremiah followed him.

Fully clothed, Shannow stretched out on the narrow bed. The old man gathered some boots and made to leave, but Shannow called out to him. “Why did you say I had an infamous name?”

Jeremiah turned. “The same name as the Jerusalem Man. He rode these parts some twenty years ago. Surely you have heard of him?”

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