

## REFLECTIONS

Christopher stood in front of the mirror, naked, admiring Krel-lyan's handiwork. The dents of a lifetime were erased, washed away by the power of the Saint's magic, leaving his skin smooth and unwrinkled. Too smooth: he had no calluses on his hands or feet. He'd have to be careful until he made new ones.

But now he had that ageless look that the elite of the Kingdom shared. Inside he was still a forty-year-old man. On the outside he could pass for twenty-something. The magic hadn't made him any stronger or faster than he had been. The hardness under his skin was earned the old-fashioned way, the profit of surviving the arduous lifestyle of this world. The reflexes he had cultivated in twenty years of amateur hobby had been honed by a year of deadly serious craft. But the scars he had also gained were gone. The regeneration had kept the good and replaced the bad.

With a trivial exception, one easily corrected with ordinary cosmetic surgery. Christopher wasn't about to suffer through that needlessly—it was a decision he'd leave to his wife, when he saw her again. The indiscriminate regeneration spell had replaced all of his missing flesh.

And it was starting to look like *when*, not *if*. He was no longer a lonely, penniless wayfarer lost on a strange world. The lost and strange remained, but now he had allies, an army, and bags of money. Most importantly, the bargain he had made with the god Marcius made sense to him. This world needed a good shaking up, a transfer in the balance of power. The people on the bottom needed more, at the expense of the people on top, and Christopher had just the lever to do it. They had said in the Wild West, "God didn't make men equal,

Samuel Colt did.” On this world, it would be Crazy Pater Christopher and his buckets of dirt that made men equal. The nobles had tael, the source of magic and unnatural vitality that made a man as hard to kill as an elephant. Now the commoners would have elephant guns.

“If you are finished admiring yourself, we have business to discuss,” Cardinal Faren said from the doorway. The great Cathedral in Kingsrock had a number of plainly furnished cells for the use of traveling priests. This was not one of them. They had put Christopher in the most luxurious room in the Cathedral, normally reserved for visiting nobles recovering from some horrific disease or injury. The height of luxury was signified by the private fireplace and a full-length mirror. Other than that, the room had what a charitable description could only call “rustic charm.”

An objective description would be “medieval primitiveness,” but Christopher was used to that by now.

“Why haven’t you had this done?” Christopher asked while stepping into trousers.

“I do not require it, save for vanity. Which is better served by signs of wisdom.” The old man’s crinkled face was framed by a full head of carefully coiffed white hair. This world shared the usual fetish for the young and beautiful, but it also had a strong veneration for the old. Especially old men. Not many men around here lived to be old.

“What business?” Christopher finished dressing by hanging his sword at his side. It was like putting on a necktie; he felt slightly naked without it in any formal situation.

“You’re rich,” Faren said. “We need to talk about how we’re going to spend your money.”

Saint Krellyan was waiting for them in his private chambers, deep in the heart of the Cathedral. The Saint’s age was problematic. Chronologically he was about the same age as Christopher; physically he looked half of that, but his eyes seemed even older than Faren’s.

“Rank is uppermost on my mind,” Krellyan said. “You must

promote yourself. Your assassin still lurks, and as a lowly first-rank you are much too easy to kill. You cannot serve under Lord Nordland anymore and expect to survive your term of service. Nor would you be likely to find any friendlier assignment.”

“But as a fifth-rank, you can take command of the draft levee in your own right,” Cardinal Faren pointed out. “You will be a legitimate member of the peerage, vastly harder to kill, and protected by your own loyal army. I am not certain that will be enough, yet I am certain any less guarantees you will not survive the next three years. And I think your men will need your protection as much as you need theirs.”

The Saint put a lump of bright-purple tael on the desk. It represented over half of Christopher’s newfound wealth.

“This will advance you to the rank of Curate,” Krellyan said. “It will take at least four days for your rank to fully manifest, so you should begin now. You have already lost three weeks, and I think you have little time to spare.”

Christopher had not sought rank, privilege, command over others; he had only wanted to go home. But he had a job to do, and doing it would require him to accept certain responsibilities, not least of which was surviving. And the men who had stood and fought for him while Nordland fled would not be any more popular with the lord than he was.

He picked up the lump and put it in his mouth, where it dissolved like flavorless cotton candy. Over the next few days it would integrate itself into his brain. After that, the only way to get it out again would be to kill him and boil his head.

There were plenty of people who wouldn’t have a problem with doing that. The people who had tortured him, smashing his legs into bone meal and driving nails through his eyes, weren’t even the top of the list. His assassin, that nameless woman who had stalked him almost since he had arrived, who had illicitly interceded in his state-sponsored “interrogation” by crushing his teeth and his genitals with a hammer, wasn’t the top of the list either. She wanted him to suffer

too much to just be dead. But Lord Nordland, and perhaps the entire ruling class of the realm, would be more than relieved to drop his head in a kettle and finally be done with his trouble-making. They'd already tried it once.

But they had failed. Well, not failed, strictly speaking. He hadn't survived the torture. Driven to utter despair by pain, he'd used his last spell to commit suicide, killing himself with his own magic. He had his assassin to thank for that mistake on their part, but he wasn't feeling particularly grateful. After that they *had* boiled his head. And worse.

"Three weeks? But why?" Christopher demanded. A week was ten days here, so it was a whole month by Christopher's calendar.

"Why not three thousand?" Faren answered. "Knowing Krellyan's power, they should have burned your body to ash. Instead we found your empty skull on our doorstep."

"A gruesome gift, however welcome," Krellyan said.

"There is more good news," Faren said. "They did not find you guilty of treason, which would have forbidden us from bringing you back. They did not *officially* keep your body past ordinary hope of revival or *officially* mutilate your corpse. So you are legally free to continue your improbable career."

"Speaking of which, I wish to know what your intentions are," Krellyan stated. "You may rest here for a few days, until your rank asserts itself. Then you must go back into the world. What will you do then?"

"Faren is right," Christopher said. "I have to accept responsibility for the men. How do I do that?"

"You petition the King," Faren answered, in his capacity as the Church's top legal officer. "Normally the Church does not intervene in the assignment of our draft regiment, save to make sure it goes to a Bright. In this case we will."

"Nordland will be offended, again," Krellyan sighed, "when you snatch his regiment out from under him."

“It can’t be helped,” Faren said, dismissing the problem with a wave of his hand. “After that, you petition the King for a posting. He will send you to some county on the edge of the Kingdom. We cannot exercise any influence on that decision.”

“He won’t send me back to Nordland’s county, will he?” Christopher asked.

“I have no idea,” Faren said. “He will send you where he feels you are most needed. Or at least, he is supposed to. I am certain that politics influence the decision, and I am equally certain those political channels are open only to our enemies and not to us. Wherever he sends you, you must make the best of it.”

“And try not to draw attention to yourself,” Krellyan said, although his tone of voice revealed little hope. Christopher bit his tongue, unable to speak without committing blatant dishonesty. He intended to cause far more trouble than anyone could have guessed. He knew they hadn’t guessed it, because if they had, he’d already be dead. Again.