

## Prelude: The Pledge - Part II

Contributed by Jerrold Nikolaisen  
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The scene outside the mansion was unlike anything Stephen de Laurent had ever seen or could ever even have imagined. His soldiers had all been slaughtered &ndash; piled in a huge mound of bodies that was just now being set afire by a group of Bretonnian knights clad in dark armour.

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Prelude: The Pledge - Part I

The servants and local farmers were all gathered in a group &ndash; milling about behind three regal looking knights in gleaming, near white steel. Atop the outer walls of the manor grounds stood two score or more bowmen &ndash; some men &ndash; but mostly elves. What drew the Baron's attention though was the throng of beastmen &ndash; more than a hundred strong &ndash; twitching and snarling as they crouched on the ground &ndash; bound as they were and secured by collar, manacle and chain &ndash; held in place by these haunted looking Men-at-arms.

'How could I not have heard the attack?' he wondered. Then the Baron remembered what he had been doing &ndash; the screams that had filled his own ears.

The golden knight commanded him to stop. Stephen stood and gazed at the scene. Suddenly &ndash; vines sprung up from the ground and enveloped him. They bound his feet, legs, arms and neck. He couldn't move.

'What is this?' Baron Stephen de Laurent demanded. 'What treachery&hellip;'

The elf cut him off. 'Silence de Laurent. You have no place to speak of treachery. Be still and wait. Wait for Kristian Barqvist de la Ra'stede &ndash; Steward of the Loren &ndash; First Son and Lord Commander of the Ra'stede.' He continued, 'Wait for the proclamation of your fate.'

'Kristian who?' wondered the Baron. He tried to turn his head but could not due to the restricting vines. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw her &ndash; the witch. She held her eyes firmly upon him &ndash; intently watching while muttering her curses.

'The vines must be her doing&hellip;' he thought, 'but why? What was going on? Surely these Bretonnians must know that they'll hang for this treason? What are the elves and beastmen doing here with his countrymen? What is this madness?'

Suddenly a commotion arose behind him. The beast handlers were all chanting something.

&ldquo;RAAAA&hellip; EEEEEDE!&rdquo;

Over and over again &ndash; they chanted it.

&ldquo;RAAAA&hellip; EEEEEDE! RAAAA&hellip;EEEEDE!&rdquo;

Then the Baron saw him &ndash; a knight &ndash; cloaked in fur wearing an ornate yet crude headpiece &ndash; an impressive sight. Dressed in black armour with a cloak of white fur, he approached the Baron carrying a large covered bundle in his arms.

The knight walked straight up to the Baron and stood in front of him. Stephen thought he could see the man&rsquo;s eyes through the visor. &lsquo;Were they glowing?&rsquo; he wondered, &lsquo;and what did he hold in his arms? It looks like&hellip; a body.&rsquo;

The knight set the bundle down on the ground at the Baron&rsquo;s feet and walked away. He strode over to stand near a pack of the beastmen who instantly tried to clamor away from the black knight. The men handling the beasts had to work hard to restrain them.

Someone screamed.

&ldquo;Ahh &ndash; eee &ndash; ahh &ndash; eee!&rdquo;

A crazed Wildman ran up to the Baron. He had dark skin covered with tattoos and long dark hair. He held a strange staff-like weapon in his hands.

He stomped his feet as if for some kind of dance and yelled again.

&ldquo;Ahh &ndash; eee &ndash; ahh &ndash; eee!&rdquo;

The beastmen went into a frenzy and started howling. They might have burst free from their handlers had the other knights not assisted &ndash; warhorses and lances set to kill.

Once the beastmen had settled, the tattooed man turned to face the commoners.

&ldquo;He took an oath,&rdquo; the man screamed while pointing at the Baron, &ldquo;to protect the innocent!&rdquo;

&ldquo;Instead,&rdquo; he continued as he uncovered the bundle, &ldquo;he defiles and murders the innocent!&rdquo;

At the Baron&rsquo;s feet lay the young servant from his chambers. A blood curdling scream came from within the throng of peasants as a woman tried in vain to push past the white knights who restrained her.

Stephen de Laurent now realized what was happening. This was some kind of posse come to kill him &ndash; he was about to die &ndash; bound &ndash; he&rsquo;d die a dishonourable death.

&lsquo;My Lady &ndash; my Goddess, protect me&hellip;&rsquo; he prayed.

His thoughts were disrupted by a scream from the black knight.

&ldquo;Aahhrrggg!&rdquo;

With that, the knight whirled about &ndash; his morning star taking flight. The nearest beast-handling Man-at-arms ducked just in time to avoid being struck by the weapon but a barbed ball found its way directly into the head of a beastman &ndash; crushing its skull and killing it instantly.

The knight approached the Baron.

&ldquo;I am Kristian Barqvist de la Ra&rsquo;ede!&rdquo; the knight hissed at him. &ldquo;Pray thee not to the Lady of the Lake &ndash; de Laurent! You are forsaken! Your time ends this night!&rdquo;

The black knight stepped aside as the tattooed man picked up the dead, naked girl and carried her toward the peasants. He asked, &ldquo;Who is the father?&rdquo;

A man came forward &ndash; sobbing, and knelt before this strange man holding his dead daughter. The Wildman screamed, &ldquo;Enough &ndash; you fool! Do not weep! This evil man murdered your daughter whom he had sworn on his life to protect! What is your name?&rdquo;

&ldquo;Bantmeal &ndash; Simon Bantmeal,&rdquo; the poor farmer sobbed.

The tattooed man pulled an ornate dagger from his belt and placed it in the father&rsquo;s hand.

&ldquo;Take this knife farmer! Take this knife and avenge your daughter! It is your duty!&rdquo; the Wildman screamed.

Simon Bantmeal grasped the knife. He looked at the Baron &ndash; defiant. He looked at his wife &ndash; destroyed. He looked at his daughter &ndash; dead. He looked at this Wildman &ndash; the white knights &ndash; the golden knight &ndash; the black knight &ndash; the Baron&hellip;

He leapt to his feet and charged. As he got closer he started to scream&hellip;

&ldquo;Ahhh&hellip; aaahhhh&hellip; aaaahhhhhh!&rdquo;

He drove the knife deep into de Laurent&rsquo;s chest.

It was done. Baron Stephen de Laurent was dead &ndash; hanging lifeless and entangled in the vines.

The woman in the corner ceased her incantations and the vines gave way. The Baron&rsquo;s body crumbled to the ground as the vines slipped back into the blood soaked earth.

Simon Bantmeal stood there, looking at his dead master &ndash; whom he had just murdered. &lsquo;I&rsquo;ll hang,&rsquo; he thought to himself.

Kristian Barqvist de la Ra&rsquo;ede grasped Simon Bantmeal&rsquo;s forearm &ndash; pulled free the knife from his hand &ndash; and cut the farmer&rsquo;s palm. Simon fell to his knees.

Quietly Kristian spoke, "By this blade and through this blood mixed with your revenge, you now belong to the Ra'squede. Stephen de Laurent's is the first of one thousand unworthy lives that you must end before you will be released — or die trying."

The man's eyes went wide as he realized the pledge that had just been made. He watched the black knight walk away toward the woman in the shadows.

A hand came to rest upon his shoulder — turning he looked up into the face of the golden elf.

"Find peace," the elf said compassionately. "For through this act and by the hand of the Truthsayer — your child lives."

The man spun to look at where his daughter had laid. The tattooed man seemed to be going crazy. He was dancing and yelling and waving his arms around in circles. The man's wife was holding their daughter — and his daughter was — crying&hellip; "Alive!"

The Wildman turned and locked eyes with the girl's father. He ran directly at him — like an animal on the attack — and Simon could not move away. Once the tattooed man reached him, he stopped and pulled three fingers across the farmer's face — leaving three black, greasy marks upon him. Simon stood.

As the trance began to come over him, Simon Bantmeal watched as a spear was placed in one of his hands and the ends of three chains in the other. He turned to see three beastmen at the ends of those chains — cowering while watching him with eyes filled with hatred and fear.

The Wildman leaned over to Simon and whispered in his ear, "Run."

The farmer looked at the tattooed man who then raised his arms and screamed, "UUUUUNNN!!!"

All the beast handlers yelled in unison, "RAAAA&hellip; EEEEDE!" and began to run toward the front gate of the manor grounds — chasing the frenzied beastmen before them. Simon Bantmeal couldn't help but join them. As a horde they exited the manor with the apparently crazed Truthsayer leading the pack.

A moment later, two winged creatures and their riders rose from the shadows to join the small force.

Once all the beasts, handlers, bowmen and knights were gone — with eyes and hearts filled with pity, regret and purpose — Baranne, de Mainge and Litherine — three anointed Knights of the Grail — turned to follow. To follow and keep watch over Her Lady's Vengeance — the Ra'squede.

'As you command — my Lady&hellip;'

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