

PEOPLE OF
THE
SWORD

BY

Neil O'Donnell

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Mom and Dad, Maureen and Ed O'Donnell, for surrounding me with music and books; to my sister Sandi Slominski, for always looking out for me; to my brother Ned, for introducing me to Tolkien and encouraging me to be myself; to my sister Maureen Mosher, for helping me to be brave; and to my wife, Lenora, for helping me find my smile. I Love you all.

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Chapter One

“Algren,” Mattias said, as she rested on the cot in the large, one room infirmary. Her gravelly voice, no more than a whisper, barely rose above the crackling of the fire. A cloaked figure silently emerged from the room’s endless shadows in answer to the summons, circumnavigating the numerous other cots that littered the plank floor along the way.

“I’m here, Mattias,” Algren gently answered, as he walked to the prone woman’s bedside. A slim hand slid from the folds of Algren’s coverings and rested on Mattias’ unmoving arm while he took in the weathered form before him. Blemishes, indicative of the disease that now coursed through Mattias’ body, masked her once lovely features. The frail woman, though only thirty-seven, looked elderly. Mattias’ pale-blue eyes slowly opened and focused in on Algren for a moment before another coughing fit took hold of her and jarred Algren from his examination. He sat in the chair beside Mattias’ cot and gently rubbed her shoulder until the coughing stopped.

“I’m still here, Mattias,” Algren said, hoping to assuage the woman’s fears. She smiled at him, but said nothing more. Algren noticed her breathing was growing shallower, and her body continually shivered, even though multiple layers of fur covered her. He grabbed a cloth that lay soaking in a bucket of warm water near the foot of the bed. After wringing out the cloth, Algren gently wiped Mattias’ forehead, dampening her long, auburn hair.

Mattias soon fell back asleep and never regained consciousness.

Algren sat with Mattias in silence for a long time, recalling their time together as he looked around the hastily built infirmary where they had spent the last two weeks. The only other occupants now were several cords of firewood, eleven empty cots, an assortment of large pots, a few small stacks of unused linens and an eerie silence that now overwhelmed all else. After what seemed like several hours, Algren stood and walked to the main entrance. Opening the heavy oak door to the infirmary revealed a mountainside heavily laden with snow, a site that brought little solace to the aging druid. While no new snow had fallen in hours, the gathering gray clouds indicated the next storm would soon envelop the region. Algren walked out into the night, wrapping his cloak tighter around his body after feeling the frigid night's bitter grip. The snow crunched under Algren's feet as he walked along aimlessly until he finally stopped at a clearing amidst the predominately pine woodlands. The full moon appeared through a gap in the gathering clouds and cast a soft, pale light over him and the surrounding landscape. Algren closed his eyes and listened to the branches knocked about by the mounting wind while tears began to flow from his puffy and reddened eyes. Algren, exhausted from weeks of tending to plague-infected villagers, let the tears run down his cheeks so he could take in the peace of the woodlands. "Peace be theirs forever," Algren whispered as the scent of pine replaced the aroma of charcoal from the smoke filled infirmary, making it easier to release the memories of pain, sickness and death that nagged at him. The near silent approach of another hooded and cloaked figure, who suddenly emerged from the shadows, interrupted Algren's meditation.

"Mattias?" asked the man from the shadows, his deep voice hushed.

“She’s passed on, William,” Algren said sullenly without turning to face his new companion. The scent of Verroedian pipe tobacco, William’s favorite, left no doubt who stood behind Algren.

“I’ll see to her,” said William after which he began to melt back into the night only to freeze in his tracks. “She was the last,” William said softly. “What should we do with the infirmary?”

“Burn it,” Algren said after contemplating William’s inquiry. “Burn it all.”

Ω

The moon’s rays illuminated Doren’s Vale and outlined the druids preparing for the morning festivities. Clad in their traditional dark-dyed cloaks, the priests and acolytes resembled ants constructing a colony, both in their efficiency and absolute silence. Doren’s Vale itself, where the druids were currently preparing cooking fires for the coming feast, served as the ceremonial center for all major festivities. On this day, the druids would celebrate their most sacred celebration, the First of Spring. While much of the actual rites of spring would commence at the base of the mountain range, the sharing of food and drink at noon always occurred in the vale. Now, all was about ready for the ceremonies even though the snow nearly forced their cancellation.

Algren Longshadow, the druid Chieftain, prayed ceaselessly for the end of the winter. However, each day brought more snow upon the mountainsides, disheartening the Chieftain even further. The weather was a nagging reminder of the harsh winter that only recently abated some. Twenty-three villagers died during the season from an unknown plague, and he hoped that the coming festivities would bring some joy to replace the mourning that overwhelmed his people. Algren drifted from his

worries to gaze at the priest approaching him. It was Sparrow.

“Always an early riser,” Algren said with a smile, a jubilant tone masking his anguish.

“Yes, my Chieftain,” Sparrow replied as he stopped feet from Algren and removed his hood. Algren took in the youth’s appearance. At twenty-three, Sparrow stood nearly six feet tall, and his eyes were a blue hue akin to water in a clear lake or stream.

“To be young again,” Algren uttered as his eyes scanned Sparrow’s locks of curly, black hair that dropped down to his shoulders. The druid Chieftain absently ran his fingers under his hood and through his own thinning gray hair remembering the brown hair that once hung to his mid-back. “How are we doing?”

“Preparations are nearly complete. We’re about ready for the procession. Vlara thinks we’re taking too much time, but we should still be able to make it to the Downing Pool well before noon.”

“She means well, Sparrow,” Algren said as he envisioned the tongue-lashing that likely accompanied Vlara’s critique.

“I know, Chieftain. I just think sometimes she works hard to anger the very ones she loves most.”

“Why do you think she does?” Algren asked.

“I think Vlara believes she needs to prove herself. I don’t think she realizes how much we love and trust her.”

“Well said, and correct. Vlara’s rash, but her intentions are only the best.”

“I don’t think many care as much about the people as Vlara does,” added Sparrow, a thought Algren shared. Sparrow squinted as the sun’s rays pierced through the clouds that dominated the sky. “The rays are strong, Chieftain. The Mage-King’s power is waning.” Algren wished that were truly the case.

“Don’t celebrate yet, Sparrow,” Algren cautioned, as he pulled back his hood to reveal the gray hair that sparingly covered his head. “Even with his immense power, Crarnock could only delay the spring for so long. Eventually the natural cycles would overpower even him. Crarnock’s ultimate goals were achieved I imagine. The extended winter will delay the growth of our harvest. Our yield will be reduced considerably. Next winter will be difficult to outlast I’ll wager, and the next winter will likely be just as long. This was only the first such season of many to come.” Algren fixed his eyes at a lark in flight, while Sparrow dwelled on his mentor’s words.

“What will we do?” Sparrow asked.

“I don’t know, Sparrow.”

Ω

At mid-day, along with an escort of Sparrow and fourteen other druids, Algren led the twenty-two acolytes down the mountain to its base. The first day of spring was sacred to their lives. As it was the beginning of the year’s harvest cycle, so was it set as the beginning of an acolyte’s journey into the priesthood. They soon reached the Downing Pool, a small pond located along the eastern border of the Doren Mountains, which was fed by springs from under the mountains. It was one of the few areas bordering the mountains not densely covered with a mix of deciduous and coniferous trees. Here the acolytes would be considered cleansed of their old lives and renewed with the rank and ways of the priesthood. After each of the acolytes washed in the pool’s frigid water, they dried near a prepared fire. Once the last of the new priests was dry and warm, Algren climbed atop the Haern Stone, a large, flat slab of granite that served as a makeshift altar ever since the first Tropolian Chieftain mounted it and blessed the gathered acolytes. Haern meant truth in the ancient tongue

of Gaildehar, and it was truth that the druids tried to pass on to each generation, truth about the cycle of life, the constant change of all things and the beginning of their heritage.

“As you begin this day renewed in spirit, I remind you all to remember the past,” Algren said, beginning a long rehearsed speech he hoped would strengthen his people’s resolve. “It will guide you with its memories of achievement and failure. It will strengthen you with thoughts of hope and remind you that all things will be renewed in time. As we celebrate the beginning of the new cycle, also remember those who have left us and what they have taught us through the years. Remember that they will continue to guide us as long as their memories remain. I implore you all to cast aside your doubts about the future and recall that all...”

An arrow struck Algren in the chest, forcing him to the ground and cutting short his sermon. An instant later, goblins, clad in leather breeches and fur parkas and armed with an assortment of clubs, axes and broadswords, charged the druids from the surrounding woodlands. More arrows rained down upon the assembled druids as the nearly twenty tall, lean, grayish-brown skinned goblins tried to separate and disperse their prey.

“Fall back to the woods!” Sparrow cried out, in an attempt to direct the new priests and priestesses as he and the elder druids formed a line behind the retreating youths and slowly backed toward the forest’s edge as they held back the goblins. The goblins soon charged their line, and it broke as the unintelligible war cries of the goblins drowned out the screams of the druids. Almost immediately, the repetitive clash of metal and wood weapons joined with the cries of war and pain, creating an ensemble of disparate voices. The voices played well against the mounting bodies of goblins and druids, all of

which became further lacerated by stray sword swipes and bludgeoned by stampeding prey and invaders alike.

Ω

“So goes the future,” the goblin Grier said, as he watched his squad from the forest even as they engaged the druids, restating words often spoken by his master, Carnock. His squad was effortlessly cutting through the druid ranks and leaving none alive. Grier vomited upon seeing one of the priestesses cut open, while the blood-drenched goblin that killed the woman cried out in victory and eagerly attacked the next druid. Once he composed himself, Grier tearfully watched the remainder of the battle. ‘The Chieftain’s power is all that stands in our way now,’ Carnock told Grier before the squad set out for the druids’ territory, and Grier was ever mindful of his master’s words. If not for those words, Grier doubted he could have led the operation.

“It’s humanity or us,” Grier uttered in his native goblin tongue, trying to reckon with their actions. As for the goblins in his command, Grier selected goblins guilty of murder and other sadistic acts knowing most of his kind would not commit to such an operation. “Monsters,” Grier said between clenched teeth as he watched the carnage continue to mount. “May Death find you all.”

Ω

“Stand your ground!” Sparrow called out to the elder priests and priestesses. He and several other priests held back the goblins while the remaining acolytes withdrew, but the effort cost them dearly. Three priests fell during the effort, adding to Sparrow’s torment. His Chieftain was down, four acolytes and two priests were shot dead from arrows, and three more priests now lay dead before him

because he ordered them to defend the fleeing acolytes. Sparrow forced the thoughts from his mind and returned to his objective. "Forward! To the Chieftain!" he cried out to the remaining priests, and together they confronted the fifteen goblins that remained. Sparrow turned, moved in the direction of the small rise where the Haern Stone lay and met a large goblin head on.

Sparrow acted swiftly. With little vegetation to ensnare the creature, Sparrow looked towards his oak staff. He leveled it and caught the advancing goblin in the gut. Once the goblin doubled over, Sparrow rotated his staff and sent his enemy flying several feet away. Taking advantage of the goblin's daze, Sparrow brought the staff down hard on its head, rendering the goblin unconscious and venting his rage at the same time.

Two more goblins were upon him instantly. The goblins stood nearly six feet tall and were clothed in fur wrappings that covered most of their grayish brown skin. The gaunt faced marauders growled in defiance at the young druid who thought their slightly pointed ears and short, black hair made them look like demons. Without waiting for the druid to respond, they charged.

Parrying one sword, Sparrow swung his staff in a wide arc, trying to keep the other from getting a clear swing. At a quick glance, his people were completely outmatched. It was only a matter of time. Sparrow readied himself for the next attack when the cry came.

"ALMIGHTY FATHER!" cried out a steel-plate clad knight as he rode his steed into the gathered combatants.

Ω

"All right Dillon, quit your whining," Sir Harrison said to his foul-tempered horse. Dillon, for an instant, stopped his uneasy canter, turned his head back and seemed to want to

take a bite out of his armor-clad rider. Dillon hated reprimands, but, as always, he calmed down and moved on. Harrison gently rubbed the large, brown steed's neck as they continued onward. "Just a little further, and then we'll head back," Harrison said apologetically. Dillon knew better than to believe that. The two continued to meander through the woodlands at the base of the Doren Mountains, sustaining a southern direction as the knight's orders demanded. Dillon started snorting and moving erratically after a few hundred feet as the snow covered ground grew rough.

"Whoa," Harrison said gently, attempting to calm Dillon before they both toppled over. Dillon calmed after a few moments and came to a complete stop. Harrison dismounted and walked out in front of his steed. "Come on, just a little further," Harrison said as he pulled Dillon's reins taut and walked the disgruntled steed for a few minutes until the ground leveled off. Harrison spent a few moments more rubbing Dillon's neck and looking around at the woodlands that surrounded them while letting his steed rest. "At least it's better than the keep's stalls," Harrison said as he looked Dillon in the eyes. Dillon shook his head, snorted and bent forward to eat some exposed grass. Harrison just smiled and returned his gaze to the woodlands taking in the sounds of the returning birds and creaking of tree limbs in the wind. Gone were the sounds of the keep he called home; these treks were the only peace the knight ever knew living in this region.

A series of screams diverted Harrison's attention south. "Dill! Let's move," Harrison commanded. His steed snapped into readiness, and after vaulting back into the saddle, Harrison and Dillon were off. The knight encountered the source of the screams within minutes of maneuvering through the terrain and reaching the edge of a clearing. Harrison arrived in time to witness a young priestess get cut down by a goblin a hundred feet away.

The woman's death cry resonated through Harrison's mind and brought forth a rage that overwhelmed him. Without thinking his actions through, Harrison ripped his sword from its scabbard and slapped down his helm's face guard. The armored knight's spurs dug into his mount, forcing Dillon to perch on his hind legs, after which Harrison's war cry, "ALMIGHTY FATHER," electrified the air.

"KNIGHT!" a druid priestess exclaimed, as goblins and druids all turned and watched with terror as Harrison charged from the North. The gathered combatants stood transfixed on the knight for moments, unable to move or look away from the advancing warrior. It finally took another war cry from Sir Harrison to break the trance that befell them all, and by then, the knight was fully upon them.

"FALL!" Harrison cried out as he rode down the goblin that slew the priestess. The goblin, still locked in a trance, made no move to prevent its own demise making Dillon's progression virtually undisturbed. For Harrison's part, the sound of the goblin's bones crackling under his steed's hooves satiated his desire to avenge the dead woman and allowed him to regain some composure. Harrison's self-control lasted only seconds as he took in the multitude of blood-drenched goblin warriors surrounding him.

Even completely outnumbered, Harrison's rage overwhelmed every survival instinct and propelled him forward to the next goblin. His sword bit into goblin flesh once the creature was within range, showering both the knight and his steed with blood. The knight's actions caused the other goblins to rally towards the interloper and allowed the druids to regroup and plan a counterattack.

One goblin charged up to Harrison with a pike as other goblins ran towards the knight to assist. He quickly parried the thrust with a downward slice of his sword, and,

driving his sword forward, Harrison impaled the goblin. Harrison stared into the eyes of his victim for an instant, watching the life fade from the creature. The knight became conflicted for a moment as the goblin slid off his sword. Guilt for killing a sentient being fought Harrison's anguish over the murder of the priestess for control of his heart and mind. The war cry of an advancing goblin prevented further inner turmoil; Harrison was instantly fighting for his life.

The knight's next foe wielded a double-bladed axe with ease and looked to be a challenge. For several moments the two exchanged blows, parrying each other's attempts to break through. It seemed like the battle between them could last forever, but a mounted knight maintains too much of an advantage. Harrison adjusted his attack as his training dictated. Giving up his defensive posture, the knight drove forward with a ceaseless flurry of swings. It was all the goblin could do to block each hit. Soon the goblin reacted in time with the knight's rhythm, which Harrison anticipated. Holding back for a mere second, Harrison caused the goblin to hesitate, giving the knight an opening. Harrison drove his blade into the goblin's upper torso, retracting the blade as quickly as he had delivered it. A pike sliced into Harrison's left shoulder not a second later, forcing him from his horse.

Ω

"Forget the knight! Move to the stone!" Sparrow exclaimed in a commanding tone that snapped everyone to attention. The knight provided the distraction Sparrow needed. Four elder druids now surrounded Sparrow, and together they moved to repel the remaining goblins. As one, they engaged the invaders wielding sickle, club and staff. While overwhelmed by the death of their friends, each held a resolve to defend their Chieftain until the end.

Sparrow outran his comrades and engaged one of the smaller goblins. The young priest delivered a downward swing with his staff as he also let out a cry akin to that of the goblins and knight. Sparrow followed that hit to the creature's head with a blow to its feet, sending the goblin down the hill without any chance of counterattacking. Two other druids met a larger goblin, one using a staff to trip up their adversary while the other brought down her sickle with a sweep that sent the goblin's head rolling. The two elders worked in an eerie silence that made their actions seem cold to Sparrow, but he knew each druid held the same disdain for the destruction of life he held.

Two goblins overwhelmed a younger priest with large broadswords equipped with deep serrations along one edge. The blades ripped open the druid's side, causing his entrails to spill forth. Sparrow and the other priests moved to the fallen priest, and while the others fought the goblins, Sparrow went to the priest's side. The younger priest, Dale, was already dead. The remaining goblins in their vicinity started to realize their precarious position and began a haphazard retreat towards the northern woods.

"Stop! Forget them!" Sparrow called out to the others, who were pursuing the goblins. "Get to the Chieftain!"

Ω

Harrison's momentary incapacitation encouraged the goblin that brought the knight down to move in for the kill. The goblin, driven by adrenaline, stepped to the knight's side and raised his weapon, at which time the goblin noticed an encroaching shadow; the goblin forgot about the knight's horse. A knight's second line of defense was his horse, an animal that would stand by its knight to the end. By the time the goblin remembered that, Dillon's front

hooves crashed down on the goblin's head; the marauder's bones and life broke away under the pressure.

Harrison's shoulder bled from where the pike blade slashed him, while pain flowed through his entire left side. The knight slowly stood, moaned and looked around as his focus returned. Around him lay a large stone located upon a small rise. A goblin, nearly as tall as Harrison, stood by the far side of the stone with his back to the knight and a spear positioned over a still form. Harrison ran as fast as he could onto the monolith and shoulder-rushed the goblin as it raised the spear higher and readied its descent. Both combatants crashed to the ground. Harrison's efforts weakened him, making it difficult to recover. The goblin also took some time to come around having had the wind knocked out of him. Eventually, the goblin steadied itself, drew a broad-bladed sword and lunged at the knight. Harrison readied himself, parried the goblin's thrust with his own and pushed the creature away with his left shoulder.

"FATHER!" Harrison screamed, as pain ran through his body. The goblin came at him again this time with a powerful downward swing, growling in anger as he did. Harrison swung his sword up to meet the blade; his sword shattered when the weapons met. Quickly, Harrison released his grip on his own sword and grabbed the hilt of his opponent's. The two warriors stood transfixed by the other's glare. Harrison's shoulder brought excruciating pain to his whole body now, and it was just a matter of time before his arm would give out. He needed to act fast.

Looking for any advantage, the knight caught a glimpse of his breastplate and remembered the two spikes that adorned each side of his chest. The exhausted knight released his right hand from the goblin's sword hilt, reached behind the creature's head, grabbed it by its hair and pulled its face into the left spike. The spike penetrated the goblin's right eye, and the goblin stumbled backwards

to the ground. After twitching on the ground for a moment, the goblin laid still while Harrison fell against the stone.

After a few moments, Harrison steadied himself again, using the rock as a brace. He looked at the still form that the goblin had intended on dismembering. An elder druid looked back into the eyes of the knight with a gaze that spoke more of disbelief than fear. Harrison thought to assuage the fallen priest.

“I have not come to hurt you, but to hel...”

Sparrow’s staff hit Harrison in the back of the head, knocking the unaware knight unconscious.