



THE RAVEN'S WARRIOR

A NOVEL



VINCENT PRATCHETT

If Death takes a man, it is called fate.
When Death leaves a man, it is called destiny.

*"I have heard the delirious ramblings of
countless dying minds and I am amused by yours.*

*Don't be afraid, I won't take you now.
Your life sentence has just begun."*

Wounded in battle, a near dead Celtic warrior is taken by Viking raiders. He is sold into a Mid-East slave market and then dragged east through the desert, into the 'Middle Kingdom.' Destiny brings him into the hands of a warrior priest and his daughter. Hazy images of silk, herbs, needles, potions, and steel can lead him to only one conclusion—he has been purchased by a wizard and his witch.

And Arkthar fears for his very soul.

Under Death's plotting eyes, a slave-warrior, a priest, and a healer go on a quest to save a kingdom.

A new root of Arthurian legend takes hold.



Vincent Pratchett hails from a family of Irish storytellers and English writers. Related by blood to renowned fantasy novelist Terry Pratchett, he is an accomplished martial artist and a professional firefighter. Vincent Pratchett resides in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

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WARRIOR



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Summary: Wounded in battle (900 A.D.), a near dead Celtic warrior is taken by Viken raiders and sold into a Baghdad slave market. He is dragged further East, through the desert, into the 'Middle Kingdom' where he is bought by a warrior priest and his beautiful daughter. Hazy images of silk, herbs, needles, potions and steel, can only lead to one thing, he has been purchased by a wizard and his witch. Arkthar fears for his soul.--Publisher.

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Editor's note: Viken is the historical name of a region in southeastern Norway, believed to derive from the Old Norse word *vík*, meaning cove or inlet. Etymologists have suggested that the modern word "viking" may be derived from this place name, simply meaning "a person from Viken".

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RAVEN'S WARRIOR

Dedicated to my ancestors with respect,
and to my descendants with love.

Every man's life story begins at first breath, but this is not my story alone, and so it begins much closer to my last.

THE BEGINNING

I soar in effortless circles around the plodding caravan far below me, gently riding the desert winds. It is not the glitter of sunlight on jewels that attracts me, for I do not covet the spoils of war, but crave only my humble share of war's terrible outcome. The hot rising air is cradled beneath the feathers of my outstretched wings, and carries with it the tantalizing odor of sand and blood. I fly on, driven by primordial hunger and beckoned by the smell of death. Drawn closer now, I am intrigued, for I have found its source.

I can see him clearly. He is chained behind the cart laden with plunder and pulled by great horned oxen. He jerks and stumbles forward at every tug of the cattle's methodical steps. Blood is the clothing that covers his body. Wounded and tortured, decay did not wait politely for death's cue, and the flies have already joined the feast.

My spirit knows that this cruelty is the work of men, nature is much more merciful. I can see that the dying captive is mad. He raves with agony and fever at every near fall. Nature mercifully has removed mind from body, so his mind knows nothing of its body's plight or pain, and by nature's mercy I sense his journey will soon be over.

But that time has not yet come, and I fly upwards towards the heavens to banish my gloom. As clouds part and early stars move slowly before my eyes, I bite and savor simple concepts, tasting the timeless comfort of universal truths. With pain and

blood they are born, they live, create life and take life, and then with blood and pain they leave through Death's cold gateway. It is Death's black finger that puts the final punctuation at the end of every man's life sentence.

It was then that I heard Death laughing, and when he had finished his chuckle he began to speak. "I have heard the delirious ramblings of countless dying minds. I am amused by yours. Heavy philosophy to hapless metaphor, '*my black finger puts the final punctuation at the end of every man's life sentence?*' That is very funny given your circumstance. Fly down with me to see the wretch again." As we flew lower Death continued to speak.

"Many times in many battles I came to take him, but he was elusive and agile. Even though I couldn't reach him, he did my work well and sent me many. Did you know I have whispered to him every step of his journey and still he will not come? Yet even if he does not die along the way, he knows I wait to embrace him at the executioner's block. Why does he resist?"

We angled closer to the man as he continued. "I know this unreasonable tenacity is testimony to the power of life and creation, and to feel life's pulsing strength is a new experience for me, an experience for which I will always be grateful." We flew closer still, and hovered. The stench was intoxicating. I saw the war prisoner's wild eyes, and in a heartbeat ravenous euphoria was replaced by terror.

I saw and understood that this smell of what was once a man was me, and in panic I began falling from the sky.

Death steadied me, "Do not be afraid," he said as I plummeted towards myself. "I came once more to take you, but I am in your debt. You have challenged me, aided me, helped me hear life's song, and finally you have even made me laugh.

'My black finger puts the final punctuation at the end of every man's life sentence,'" and his laughter began all over again.

We had begun the final dive of a bird of prey. There was no turning back. We were very close and flew very fast, faster than the speed of reflex. For me there could and would be no stopping. A wing tip away from impact, he flashed his final words. "No punctuation, Vincent, your life sentence has just begun."

Instantly my world blazed white. Like the coals of a forge it cooled, sinking steadily through a sea of red and orange. Finally it settled into the black cold depths of the night, from where I emerged and moved as a man once more.

The fever had broken. The heat and redness around the wound still remained, but my arm no longer ached at every passing heartbeat. The blood that had seemed unstoppable had slowed to a trickle and had cleaned the wound as best it could. Dead flesh was gone, and the children of the flies had also vanished. A mind forced away by the body's anguish has returned to its temple to worship at its altar of bearable suffering once again.

I had survived, I had begun to heal, and I had forgotten everything that Death had said to me.

THE ARRIVAL

My downcast eyes had measured both my journey and my life, but not in length or duration, for me time and distance no longer existed. No, they measured simply by what they had seen. They saw my body, wounded, starved, and ill, wither to the bone. They saw rivers turn to ocean, fields turn into forest, and forest turn to sea. They saw seas become mountains, and the mountains turn to desert.

In the desert they saw the sun paint my body with a color it had never worn, the color of the shifting sands. When they had seen my mummification process complete, they saw more. They saw desert become dusty road, and dust become cobblestone. They told me we had entered the kingdom of my enemy. When they saw the ground before me stop moving, they stopped measuring and told me I had arrived at a far flung outpost. It was here that they struggled to finally look up. I saw the multitude of strange people that surrounded me stretch to the horizon, and I felt only pain.

This was not an ocean of blue and green water, but a sea of brown, and shades of brown like an ocean of sand. It was a vast sea of human waves. It was a desert of the drifting dunes of humanity, and it made my eyes thirst. My eyes did not thirst for water like the flesh does, the endless shades of desert brown made them thirst for color. They had not seen bright colors since the blood had ceased its flow, and now they craved them.

On the distant horizon they saw sunlight split to rainbow, the answer to their prayer. It was like the sparkle of the setting sun on water or a shaft of light shining through jewels. My thirst was quenched, and my pain had faded. My eyes once again saw the people around me, and I felt something stronger than pain. I could feel their fear, their wonder, and their pity, and I wept.

The once distant flash of rainbow drew closer now. The desert of humanity parted before it, and it passed unimpeded. I saw that it was not a cruel mirage of deprivation, but a rider wearing the dazzling cloth colors of red, blue, green, and gold on a background of silver white, and they shimmered magically with his every movement. He was real, and followed closely by a horse-drawn wagon led by a female servant clad in the ordinary brown colors of the desert's caress. My eyes followed their progress.

As they entered the square the servant and cart hovered back, while the man of color approached. His strong graceful movement told me that this one was skilled in the arts of war, and the long straight blade sheathed on his back hinted that my execution was at hand. Beside me now, he spoke in my language but in a tone and rhythm all his own. I had to listen carefully and closely as he asked only my name. Then I had to fight hard to remember it; it had been so long since I had answered to it. "Vincent," I replied as strongly as my voice would allow.

He began to laugh. "Latin, meaning one who conquers," he said. "That is funny given your circumstance." My blood ran cold, for in my world, the one from which I had been so violently taken, being questioned by those that know Latin is almost always followed by a slow and agonizing death. The reality of my present situation flooded in, and I began drowning once again in a dark and paralyzing emptiness.

His first words had plunged me under but his next seemed to grab my head and hold me up, allowing me to breathe again. “Do not despair,” he said calmly. “Some believe that the one that endures has conquered.” And then a movement faster than an arrow’s flight, his hand was drawing up the bladed edge. I could hear it gather speed out of the sheath, and then silence as it cleared and swooped down. I stretched my skinny neck to give a clean target, but instead felt a jerk at my wrists, as his blade’s arc bit the chain that had held my hands together for so long. The links fell at my feet like the pruned branches of an olive tree.

Since boyhood I had heard the warriors tell stories of reverence about a sword that could cut through iron like a cleaver through meat, but these were just stories. I had been a soldier my whole life and had never seen one. Now looking at the metal bonds that lay coldly at my feet, I felt strangely complete.

I braced for the next cut, but the sword had returned to sheath, and its wielder had turned to address the throng. Although I didn’t understand his words, I clearly understood their meaning. “This man now belongs to me.” He directed their attention towards the cart of plunder. He studied the horde and asked, “Are there any objections?” There was only silence as the crowd’s interest had now shifted towards the rest of the spoils. His eyes met mine and in a low voice he said, “From today I am your owner. Vincent, your life sentence has just begun.” His servant helped me to the wagon as the crowd pushed closer to the treasure-laden cart.

My eyes caught the flash of shadow moving across the ground where a high-flying carrion bird had come between us and the sun, and I knew then that Death would wait.

REBIRTH

The wagon that I fell into was lined with pillows and overlaid with a beautifully patterned carpet. I lay on my side, unmoving, like an egg in its nest, or an unborn baby in a wondrously colored womb. I heard the one who had claimed ownership of me say, “the road home is long and arduous; whether my daughter tends or buries, is not for me to say.” I felt the wagon begin to move, and I felt the one who I thought a servant climb in beside me. Clouds above and road below, my eyes closed, and I hovered between two worlds.

The first leg of the journey was difficult. She began her work immediately. I felt the skill of healer in her hands. She massaged me firmly but gently, leaving no damaged areas neglected. Her fingers dug deep enough to draw moans from my broken frame, and then her palms smoothly reassured its bone and tissue. I could feel both strength and confidence in her attention, and I marveled at her dexterity.

This went on day after day, but at week’s end I felt I could take no more, and I fell into the fearless sleep of the nearly dead. Through the depths of my slumber I smelled the fire, and as night descended she brought me a soup of bitter herb and beast unknown. After the meal I remember nothing until morning came, and I awoke to the sound and motion of wheel on road once again.

The next week’s travel brought more of the same, but was less strenuous. Now I grew used to the pungent aroma of plant

and potion. I could feel the infused oils rubbed into my skin surface and beyond. I didn't know if this was to cover my smell or to heal my wounds, and I didn't care. We pulled on, and slowly I began to come back to myself.

My limbs were drawn and stretched, and joints almost immobile began to loosen. Some treatments brought heat, some cold, others I could taste when applied. My body drank this attention like a sponge, and paused occasionally to sip strange teas from the cup she held for me. With each new nightfall I was happy to hear the fire built again, and ate ravenously the stew she served.

Our last full week upon the grinding road began routinely with the rising sun, and her work continued. I watched her slip needles from a pouch and insert them deeply into my arm, chest, and shoulder. I braced for pain, but I felt none, even as she rotated them one after another. The feeling of having nothing and being nothing was beginning to lift, I was no longer burdened by this emptiness, but liberated by it. The insipid smell of desert sand had been replaced by the lush aroma of plant and blossom. My world was turning green, as if spring had come to me at last.

I ate well that evening, and I left the confines of my traveling nest. By firelight I saw their faces, and for the first time I saw how beautiful she really was. I was a man well starved, but I did not hunger openly. I watched her from the cool darkness and was nourished by her presence. The moonlight played on her thick black hair. Its rich luster was like the coat of a wild fresh-run stallion. Her skin was soft even to the touch of my eyes. It had the color of amber spring honey, and the echoed fragrance of jasmine. Honey and jasmine, like the mead of my homeland, I felt strangely light headed as I drank her in.

Their eyes were different than any I had ever seen, black like the richest and darkest wood and shaped like the knots that give it character. Hers picked up the reflection of the bright flames, and banished any trace of the night's chill from my bones. I listened without understanding as they spoke in the language of their world. As I lay down, it washed over me like a wandering brook, and for the first time in a long time I began to dream again. There were the sounds of sword biting metal, the lightness of my arms, the flashing of silver edge, and the feeling of flight. I was both weapon and wielder in an ethereal battle that raged far beyond my waking senses.

By mid-morning well into the fourth week, I was sitting in the wagon. Light still played on the clothing of the rider, and his darkly clad daughter rode with him on the back of his powerful mount. There was life all around us; songbirds were in full form, small creatures scrambled from our approach. Tall trees waved young leaves that caught the soft winds. A movement of his arm spoke that this land was his. We climbed higher and could soon see all around us. Almost hidden in the center of this view, I saw a dwelling.

As we came closer, the grazing animals stopped and looked up at us. Birds swooped closer as if to spy, a raven cried from a branch overhead, and wild deer and game stepped out from foliage just to show themselves to him. We entered the walled courtyard protected by a huge wooden door that closed behind us. We stopped first at the barns, and I was shocked by how well I felt as I stepped onto the ground.

The horses were fed and tended, and the young girl took the sword from her father as if he were himself a horse being stripped of brass, blanket, and bridle. As we walked towards the large house, we passed a deep pond of lilies. I could see

fish thrash and surge to hold orange heads above the surface. Their wagging tails reminded me of my wolfhounds, which once jostled happily to greet their returning master.

We entered the house through a great hall. Weapons and armor from all over the world lay scattered from far wall to near. I recognized some, but most looked foreign, from a different place or a different time perhaps. Many pieces were just strewn and dust covered, others seemed waiting to be picked up and handled again. There were spears, clubs, short swords, scimitars, slings, projectiles, helmets, shields, and breastplates.

It brought from my memories tales about the dragon's lair, dark and cavernous, littered with the weapons, armor, and bones of brave souls previously dispatched.

I thought once more of the mythical serpent, childhood dreams and adult nightmares, of journeys ended and journeys begun.

MY MIND'S CONCLUSION

My body's passage over, my mind raced onward to catch and hold the truth. Days before, lying within the moving wagon, it had fought to grasp reality. It had moved in vision from event to event, and weighed each one heavily against the possible and the probable. It saw the one beneath the shimmering robes that could not hide the strength and power of the man who wore them. It fixed itself upon his flashing steel—a sword described in legend.

My mind saw again the creatures of his land, wild animals that at a glance were tamed by his authority. It seemed that every living thing knew its place, and that he was the keeper of this garden. From lofty sky to waters deep, all awaited and respected his command.

It turned from man to girl, and remembered her skillful touch and unworldly beauty. It reviewed the passing of recent events with care and accuracy to avoid all room for error. It saw again the mixing of the plants and potions and remembered the strength giving magic of her bitter teas. It remembered their pungent but not unpleasant smells, it wandered further and held experience up to reason's light.

The needles had been sunk deep beneath my mangled skin, and then rotated one by one, but as if by magic no pain did come. Surely this was not possible in any realm of man. Emotion screamed through my careful logic. This was powerful sorcery bound to witchcraft bold and unrepentant.

I arrived at the certainty that I was to be the object of their ungodly rituals, and sweat ran down my middle back. I thought about how to escape, but I knew I was still far too weak. I felt my blood drain instantly from my face, and as if by curse my limbs hung useless. I have never feared death, but now in every corner of my being I trembled, frail and pathetic. It was not my flesh I dreaded losing, it was my eternal soul.

As if on cue they entered the room and stared at me with concern, alarmed I think by my pallor. “Stand away from me,” I shouted. “My enemies have delivered me into the hands of a wizard and his witch. In another time and another place, I would be the one lighting the fires of purification under your feet.” I tried to run but tripped over some canes piled near the door. As I struggled to rise she was beside me helping me to my feet, laughing freely like a child. Then in a solemn tone, “I have heard about the burnings,” she said.

Her father, too, had finished smiling. “Be at peace,” he said, “this is not your time or your place, it is ours. My name is Mah Lin. I am a warrior monk, and the last of my Order. This is my daughter Selah, and in our time and our place she is a respected and skilled practitioner of Traditional Medicine.”

“Merlin, Sea Lass,” I repeated carefully, while they laughed at my butchered pronunciation. “Rest now and grow strong, and know that my sword has called your name,” said the wizard. In my language but with the richness of her tone and meter, “I will show him where he sleeps,” said the witch.

I fell asleep that first night thinking about the life that I had lost, and the life that I had found, and the dreams came back to me strongly.

THE NOVICE GATE

From first breath life had not been easy, for he had arrived at a difficult time. Natural disasters had become the norm rather than the exception. If there was no drought, there was flooding, if there was growth, there were locusts. The last two seasons had been the worst that the living could remember. The land was not forgiving. Seeds perished where they were sown. The heavens were not pleased, and for this the earth now suffered.

In the world of men the rich were now poor and the poor were now dead. Animals starved in fields and people starved in hovels. Human flesh was sold in markets, and this two-legged mutton was cheaper than the meat of dog. This was the world into which he was born.

He was a good child and toiled hard beside his parents, but in these times hard work was not enough to build a life or keep a family together. Side by side father and son scaled the mountain and spoke little. The sadness within his heart overpowered any joy that conversation might have brought. Abject poverty had dictated the decision made. When a young mouth can no longer be fed, an alternative must be found. They had told him about the monastery, and he had seen the orange clad monks on many occasions, but he had never wanted to become one.

Although he was only twelve years of age, he had already found his life's love, and it was her that he would miss the most. Her family had lived here in the shadow of the mountain temple, they had been neighbors all of his short life, and now he

would see her no more. As the climb leveled and the temple loomed before him, so did fate. The tears that streamed down the haggard face of his father fed the hollow feeling in his gut. A hard embrace would be a son's last memory of the father that loved him but could not keep him. Pushed gently toward the temple's novice gate, the boy stared down to hide his pain.

He sat alone and empty before the massive wooden doors, and thought about his love. He gathered every detail of her within his mind. The night fell like the cold relentless rain, and as the boy shivered, he vowed in heart to hold her memory.

His solitude was shattered with the arrival of the dawn, for with it came another youth. This one had traveled far and was equipped with a comfortable bed roll and a generous supply of food. The new arrival was not pleased to find another, but with an arrogant look he surmised quickly that his predecessor would offer no competition. Both boys were the same age but very different in both appearance and demeanor.

The first to arrive was undernourished and filthy. His unkempt hair lay matted to his forehead, and the rags that draped his skinny body held the odor of the fields. He looked more a beggar's child than an aspiring monk. He stared blankly at his surroundings, downcast. Many in this time shared his look, much work and little food had taken their toll. Yet there was something different about him. Something intangible spoke that while everything about him was broken and weak, something within him was not. The boy was glad that although he had nothing, at least he was no longer alone.

The other was well fed and much bigger. Although he had traveled far from the capital, he still had the look of polish. Dirt did not stick to him. In manner he was confident and focused. He had prepared well for this moment. He had

rehearsed answers for any questions, and knew what qualities these monks were looking for. Now all he had to do was wait quietly for the doors to open for him. He would not fidget or look impatient, but within the hour he did both. He thought perhaps he could intimidate his nemesis and saw quickly that any looks in that direction went unnoticed.

For five full days and nights the boys had sat and slept. One cold and hungry, one warm and well fed, one anxious to begin his life within the temple, and one who no longer cared for his life at all. The rains had lashed down until, late into the fifth night, the clouds cleared and the stars appeared. In the darkness that precedes the coming day, a meteor tore a bright swath across the glittering night sky and crashed far off in the distance. As if on cue, the gates opened and the abbot emerged to see what offerings the harsh seasons had brought his temple.

To the eyes of one, the abbot did not look like what he was expecting. For a temple that was supposed to have a vigorous training regime, this monk seemed small and unimposing. Where he had expected to see muscle he saw little definition at all. This abbot's appearance resembled more the beggar boy than any soldier he had ever seen. He tried hard to hide his disappointment. The eyes of the other saw something else, and this one, who had seemed so broken, now gazed boldly and directly into the eyes of the old priest.

Rice and tea were brought, and neither lad moved until the abbot took first bite. The youth that sat on the thick bedroll was now politely eating, but the other urchin did not move at all. The abbot pointed invitingly but realized immediately that this small boy cared no longer whether he lived or died.

The abbot focused on the bigger boy, the one that had purposely made the long journey to join the temple. This one

answered all questions asked with studied precision. He made it abundantly clear that all his life he had worked toward joining this temple. When the conversation ended, he sat confidently waiting for the outcome he felt was inevitable.

The old one turned his attention to the other and asked only one question, "Why do you want to join our order?" The mind of the youth formed no thoughtful reply. Instead the boy's entire life flashed before his eyes. In less time than the beating of two hearts, it measured all he had suffered and all he had loved, and ended at the image of his only vow. He answered immediately and honestly, "I do not."

The abbot's laughter pealed out like bells upon the mountain top, and his decision was as easy as it was immediate. This boy was probably trouble, but brought the gift of truth. The other youth watched in disbelief as the doors he had waited so long to enter were shut and bolted. Through the heavy oak he heard the abbot ask, "Your name, son?" and heard the soft reply, "Mah Lin." He clenched his fists, gathered his rage, and spat upon the closed entrance with all his might.

Without food the homeward journey became a long and bitter march, and with this pain came new direction.

WEAPONS AND WORDS

Four years would pass with only minor incidents, but this time the abbot had heard troubling rumors, and as he studied the face of the novice summoned before him, he knew that they were true. Discipline is the backbone of any sacred order, and the breaking of its trust could not go unnoticed. Mah Lin was still young and held much promise, but his surreptitious night foray must be addressed. The abbot was a kind man, and the monk before him had always reminded him very much of his younger self, headstrong and impetuous, and indeed a bit amorous. He smiled without explanation and thought carefully about the punishment that he would hand out.

“Mah Lin,” the abbot began as the young monk moved uncomfortably from side to side, “it has been told that you left these grounds at night and sought the arms of a woman.” Mah Lin looked at the floor, a look that was both an answer and a confession. He felt the silk tunic beneath his priestly robes and hoped the abbot did not know of this souvenir. The abbot continued, “This behavior is a bad example to those that look up to you. What could bring you to this reckless course of action?”

Without hesitation the young monk replied, “Love.”

Mah Lin was startled by the laughter bursting suddenly from the venerable one. When the abbot had finally collected himself he spoke in serious tone. “Yes, Mah Lin, love is by nature a very strong force, a force that helps to shape and bind the universe, and it is a force that heals and transforms both

the body and the soul.” The old monk’s eyes reflected a journey far back into his own past, and that memory seemed to bring him joy. The eyes of the abbot caught Mah Lin and held him motionless with their intensity.

“From now you will concentrate on your physical training, perhaps if you are tired enough, desire and temptation will be lessened.” The abbot seemed satisfied with his own decision, and then said to Mah Lin, “Report back to me in one month. I need time to consider your permanent reprimand, and I do not want to seem headstrong and impetuous.” Once again the old one’s eyes seemed bright with laughter, and Mah Lin bowing, took his leave.

Mah Lin was confused as he walked down the corridor; the punishment dealt out was no punishment at all, for it was well known that he had taken to the martial disciplines like a bird takes to the air. He would, of course, comply and worry what his permanent castigation would be. For the next month the young monk trained like one possessed, and although his mind still wandered outside the temple walls and to the home of the beautiful woman, he knew that his life’s purpose remained within them.

Under the youthful eyes of the old abbot, Mah Lin set to task. The venerable one had seen potential beneath the outer rebellion of the young monk. Sometimes as it was now, a challenge can be a gift and a punishment merely a test.

For the young monk, the day began much sooner than the dawn. His regime now started well before the sounding of the rooster. Nourished only by a hasty breakfast of rice-gruel and vegetables, the vigorous training of mind and body began with stretching and stance. When the other monks were given time for rest and contemplation, the young Mah Lin was made to

learn new and more demanding forms. Sweat rolled from his shaved head and over wiry shoulders, where it channeled down like a river guided by the muscles of his sturdy chest.

If this reprimand was designed to break body or spirit, it did neither, for as much as was thrown on the shoulders of the young monk, he took more. When all his brothers were settled for the night, Mah Lin was still practicing the physical lessons of his day. At its end he would descend to the temple library and sweep the dust from floor and shelf, from here he would move on to the polishing of the weapons within the armory and the shoveling of the coal dust from the temple forge. Only then, filthy and exhausted, would he close his eyes long enough to begin another day.

Time flew by; a month seemed like a week. Lately he had taken to looking openly at the sacred texts and brandishing the temple's finest swords. It was here in the lamp lit darkness of the temple cellar that both blade and imagination flew. The day arrived when that flight was cut short by the abbot's stern voice. Mah Lin jumped like a child with a hand caught in the honey jar.

The abbot's words boomed out, "It seems you are drawn to both weapon and word, but as novice you must drink milk before you eat meat, as child you must crawl before you can run. Sword and literature lie at the foundation of our order, but their proper study requires both time and guidance. Report tomorrow and accept your full and permanent retribution, your month has passed."

By morning the stark confines of the abbot's chamber were washed by the soft light of the new day. Mah Lin saw the scrolls hung upon its walls and the gathering of senior monks that sat cross legged where floor met wall. An ancient but exquisite

blade had been brought from the temple vault and now lay prominently upon the patriarch's simple desk.

Mah Lin had never seen this sword, but knew by instinct what it was. Often in the quietness of the nights he had heard of its existence, whispered conversations always wrapped in tones of awe and reverence. As Mah Lin wondered if its purpose was to cut him swiftly from the Order, the abbot got straight to the matter at hand.

"Mah Lin, you have violated your sacred trust, and your position within these cloistered walls has been assessed. It has been decided that you are to continue your routine of punishment. Your seniors say that you learn well, but there is still much they have to offer. They will break you or they will build you—time will tell.

In addition, you are now the keeper of the forge and the protector of our sacred library. You will be taught the secrets of transforming earth into metal and study with the most venerable the sacred documents which you are now, with your life, sworn to protect." The abbot lifted the sword from the desk and walked towards the novice, passing it respectfully to the young monk he continued. "This weapon is named The Sword of Five Elements and is the soul of our dwelling. It is your blessing and perhaps your curse. May wisdom guide you in its purpose. Mah Lin, you are dismissed."

And so, as quickly as it began, it was over. Mah Lin walked from the old priest's chambers, still not sure what had just transpired. The abbot for his part smiled and conversed with the senior monks, feeling much younger than his many years. He had known all along that this punishment fit the talented offender well, and that Mah Lin was the only one with the

qualities needed for the honor bestowed.

Still reeling from the morning's event, the young monk moved lightly along the hallway and down the stairs. Alone once more, he examined every detail of the sword within his hands, and with the eyes of his soul peered into its depth.

Steel and parchment were now his life's one purpose, and his spirit sailed upon the winds of destiny.

THE SACKING OF THE TEMPLE

Selah had spent her first six years fatherless, but with no regrets. By age seven she was both strong and resilient, and the taunts of older children were quickly silenced with a small but well aimed fist. In the quiet shadows of night she had often seen her mother lovingly caress the orange robe by her bedside. Instinctively she knew it held a memory and therefore a bond. She did not know, however, that it brought her mother back to that night long ago when a young monk had climbed over the temple walls.

For her mother there would never be anyone else. From conception's first night she would dedicate herself completely to the study of traditional medicine. As she treated her steady stream of patients, Selah would be there helping prepare tonic, antidote, and cure, for ailments of all description. Mother and child would often forage like free animals for the rare and potent healing herbs that grew in the surrounding area. They would speak often of the time when as an adult she would meet the father she had never known, and he would meet the daughter he never knew existed.

She was surprised when the dark and distant plume from the temple summit had brought forth from her mother tears of sorrow. She did not understand the grief with which her mother prepared the cart and said, "We go now to meet your

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vincent Pratchett was born to an Irish mother and English father. The Irish tradition of storytellers on one side, and accomplished writers on the other. He is related by blood to renowned fantasy novelist Terry Pratchett. Vincent's writing includes novels, screenplays, children's storybooks, and numerous magazine articles.

He began training in the martial arts at age ten. He has taught martial arts at the University of Guelph, and Qigong at the Ontario College of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

As a young man Vincent traveled across Asia, walking in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, Marco Polo, and Genghis Khan. He settled eventually in Hong Kong where he worked as a bouncer for a prominent nightclub until breaking into the Hong Kong film industry as an actor and stuntman.

Returning to Canada, Vincent became a professional firefighter and continues to teach and train in martial arts. He resides in Toronto, with his two children.