A SHORT STORY BY ONATHAN MABERRY

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here are stories of him. Of Klath-Ulna, called the Golden One, though in every tale he is bathed in crimson, in the blood of any who stand against him.

I, Tejal, have seen him in dreams. To the Sharval Wilds, to a small town called Saint's Calling, he came.

If you have not heard of that place, then listen, for I will tell you why. Build the fire bright, lock the door, and lean in and listen, for even as I recall that story, I can hear the toll of a holy bell hung in a belfry that was the highest point in the town. That bell was brought from Kurast to that town, and the people rejoiced, for it was blessed by the Light.

That is what they said of it. But the very wise know that talismans are seldom shields. Rather, they are symbols of hope. And on the gulf between faith and fact hangs our tale. I will tell you the truth—the dark truth—of what happened when Klath-Ulna came in answer to its call . . .



"Is that the best you can do?"

The young man stood with his legs wide, weight shifted to the balls of his feet, knees bent and springy. He had a broad-bladed short sword in one hand and a small buckler strapped over his other hand and wrist. Sweat glistened on his naked chest and shoulders and ran in lines down his face.

"I thought warhogs were fierce," he taunted. "Come and get me if you can, and I'll fill hell with you and—"

"Really?" said the old man who leaned on the handle of the sparring wheel. "Every time, Jenks? Except this time, warhogs? What in the name of all that's holy are warhogs? Did you mean *wart*hogs? Because we don't have them anywhere near here."

"Come on, Bikleman. You're not doing this right." Jenks straightened. "Warhogs! Don't you listen to any of the old songs?"

"What's a warhog, then? A hog with a hatchet? Sow with a sword?"

"They were demons from—"

"No," interrupted Bikleman sharply. "We're not doing that. You're too old to be making things up. Besides, there are enough *real* monsters in the world to worry about without demons."

"But-"

"But nothing," growled Bikleman. "It was long ago that demons walked abroad. You risk conjuring them up from all your talk of them! You should focus on what you might *actually* need to fight one day."

"What? People? That's so boring."

"Boring? Boring, is it now?" cried the old man, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. "You tell everyone you want to be a paladin, a soldier of the Light, a champion of the Zakarum faith. You were too sickly as a child to enter training, and now that you're older and fit, I would have thought you could at least *try* to be serious. This is important training, Jenks. You are training to fight soldiers and brigands, thieves, and highwaymen. Those are the real threats, and if they come riding into town, then you need to be ready. Or is that too much to ask?"

Jenks, who was seventeen and had never been farther from town than Ferryman's Creek, felt his cheeks grow red. "I *am* serious."

"Then act it. Demons you make up or those you borrow from bedtime stories are nothing but distractions. If you'd take time to read the history scrolls, then you'd understand. A paladin needs to be practical. Realistic. The stuff you're supposed to be reading is in the books of holy learning, but I don't suppose you've even *read* them."

"I... read them," said Jenks defensively. Then he mumbled. "Mostly."

"Uh-huh." The old man gave the training wheel a sudden shove, and the many wooden arms swung around with shocking speed.

Jenks was caught flat-footed and had to drop into a squat to evade the big top arm, then leap like a frog over the ankle-sweeper. He hit the ground and rolled, coming up as the gut-punch arm tried to smash into his belly. But Jenks twisted away, bending backward like a dancer. The smaller whipsaw arm came around faster than all the others, and Jenks checked it with his buckler and stabbed out at the heart target—a canvas pad stuffed with straw. The blunt wooden sword hit solidly, and Jenks broke out into a fierce grin of triumph.

"Ha!" he cried. "And the warhog demon is slain."

Bikleman kicked one of the straight rods that transfixed the wheel, and the padded end hit Jenks squarely in the crotch. The lad uttered a high, whistling shriek and dropped to his knees, his sword falling into the dust. He cupped himself and, turning a shocking shade of purple, toppled sideways.

The old man limped around and stood over him, smiling down. "Them warhogs are tricky beasts, aren't they, lad?"

Jenks tried to yell at him. He tried to curse him to the deepest pits of the Hells. He tried to say that it didn't hurt at all. He tried to get to his feet to prove he wasn't wounded.

In all of that, he failed.

Bikleman turned and spit downwind with great accuracy and velocity, hitting the heart target in the exact center.

"Good session, Jenks," he said dryly. "Maybe tomorrow you can show me how to fight an undead hedgehog or some such rot."

Jenks rolled over and vomited.

The old man looked down at him for a moment. "You're a good lad, Jenks. But you need to be a better *man*. You look at me and see an old coot, but I was a paladin once, as you well know. Long before you were born, but not so long ago that I can't remember what it feels like—in muscle and bone, in heart and mind—to cross blades with an enemy soldier. Not a monster, but a warrior trained in all the arts of killing. There is nothing more dreadful, I can assure you, than a warrior who has skill and armor, weapons and heart, and wants your blood on his or her blade. *I* remember that from when the Rakkis Crusades began. Not a night goes by that I don't dream of the clash of steel and the cries of the dying. Standing ankle-deep in the blood of my sisters and brothers. Of my friends." He shook his head. "People are monsters enough when the battle lust is upon then. We don't need to make up more."

Despite his words, his smile was kindly. "I'll see you at dinner."

The old man turned and limped back to town, whistling a battle hymn he and his lost companions had once sung as they'd marched off to war.



Jenks got up eventually, but then sat down again, his back to the central column of the training wheel. Once the enormity of the pain had diminished, he focused his mind on it, allowing it to be what it was. Pain. Agony. He forced himself to accept it as part of the price of growing into a warrior.

Bikleman limped because he had taken a spear through his hip. Old Redharn, the blacksmith, had half a dozen scars from blade and arrow. And there were plenty of others. Half the old men and women, many of whom had been soldiers gone to war filled with holy purpose. Like Redharn, they wore the scars they had earned in one battle or another, and on winter eves they would regale their friends with tales of valor and combat.

And as for the younger fighters from town ...

Well, there was a whole generation that had never come home from the Crusades. Jenks conjured stories in his mind of how they went down bravely, fighting through their pain, battling on, even as their lifeblood drained away. Heroes all, he was sure of it.

HE WAS QUICK, NIMBLE, ADEPT WITH SWORD AND LANCE AND BOW.

But it was speculation. There was a huge gap in the ages of the people in town, an entire generation that had joined up to fight in the Crusades. From those only a few years younger than Bikleman to those barely a year older than Jenks. All of them, gone. None had returned. Not even the very young—the other lads and lasses who'd left school and town to go off as squires or junior pikemen or apprentice archers.

All gone.

All dead.

Their stories, alas, were unknown and untold. There were songs about them, some of which were even sung in church, but Jenks knew they were fake tales. As false as his imagined warhogs and goblins. The congregation sang ballads written by family or friends of the lost. Songs of courage and valor to gladden the heart and make the losses bearable.

Jenks knew that he would have been one of that company, but as a boy he had been sickly and weak. By the time he'd gotten through his own war with frailty and disease, the battles were over.

Now, at seventeen, Jenks ached for war. He no longer got sick, and endless hours of training, week upon week and month upon month, had made him strong. He was quick, nimble, adept with sword and lance and bow.

Only there was no one left to fight.

Sitting there, he wept for the chance to be a true warrior, to stand between some brutal harm and those he loved. It was his greatest dream, but even though he trained night and day, he knew that it was for naught.

"The war is over," he said to no one. "Maybe there will be another . . ." Which was when the screams started.



He stood there at the edge of town. Jenks crouched behind the corner of a barn and stared at him.

Him.

It was a man, though unlike any Jenks had seen. Taller even than Big Gorf and more heavily muscled than Redharn the blacksmith. It was like seeing something from one of the old legends come to life. The stranger had massive shoulders, a deep chest, huge gauntlets, and dark eyes that seemed to exude a wintery coldness. He looked like a statue from a museum of death. Fully armored in a mix of metals both familiar and strange. Much of it was painted with real gold, though that shining metal was scored and dented from a thousand battles. His shoulder plates were broader than his already powerful shoulders, and from each rose a forest of spikes. There were likewise spikes on his elbows and along his buckler and greaves and even rising from his heavy boots. Worked into the pattern of that armor were symbols of death—skulls and bones. And was that a Zakarum symbol plated across his chest? On the few parts of his skin that were visible, namely his thick neck and bald head, Jenks saw tattoos—crude and ugly and ominous.

And his weapons.

Knives with plain handles—weapons not made for court or show. And slung over one brawny shoulder was the handle of a mace that looked too large, too heavy, for anyone to wield in a real fight. The body of the thing was shaped like a holy bell, except where the mouth of the bell should have been there was a cluster of daggersharp spikes, with two curved talon-like spikes thrusting outward from the canons and the iron ball at the end of the long handle. The very fact that this man carried a weapon of that size was frightening. It promised awful things.

The stranger—this warrior—looked down the main street of town. His gaze lingered for but a moment on the faces of people concealed behind wagons or parted curtains or half-opened doorways. Some whispered that this was a barbarian from the wastelands; others insisted it was a druid come to practice some dark magic. In either case, the people made signs of protection in the air and murmured sacred prayers.

Then his dark gaze moved up to the tall belfry of the only church in Saint's Calling. A Zakarum church bell older than the town itself, smithed and blessed in the east, and brought west during the crusade. The story was that bells like this had been left behind in many camps in the hopes that towns of the faithful would rise up around it. As Saint's Calling had. The bell in the tower was the old treasure in that poor town, but by its presence they were all rich in faith. The shadow of its tower, with the afternoon sun behind it, now fell along the center of the street so that it reached to within inches of the stranger's steel-capped boots.

He knelt slowly, touched his fingers to the shadow, and closed his eyes for a long moment. Jenks saw him take a deep breath and exhale before nodding to himself. Then the warrior rose to his full height and looked around.

"People of Saint's Calling," he said in a voice that was deep as thunder. "I am Klath-Ulna of the Bear Tribe, my people are the Children of Bul-Kathos, and I am called the Golden One."

His words echoed back and forth from one building to the next, rattling windows and scaring the birds from the trees.

"I seek a thing of great importance," he continued. "An iron bell in yon tower. Bring it to me and I will leave, and no harm will come to any here. Refuse me or stand in my way, and I will lay waste to all who live here. Every man and woman, down to the last infant. This I swear."

With that he reached up, took the handle of his battle-mace, and swung it over and down so that the spiked head bit deep into the shadow of the steeple. The impact seemed to shake the very ground. Fissures whipsawed away from it, cracking the hardpan. Jenks heard the gasps and even stifled screams from the watchful crowd. The gasps faded into silence. No one moved. Not one person offered to fetch the bell for this barbarian. That heartened Jenks, because it made him think the whole town might band together and overwhelm this man.

The silence stretched as the barbarian looked from face to face. He grunted with mingled anger and disgust.

"Then I will take it myself," he said and took a single threatening step into the belfry's shadow. He glanced around. "Is there no champion who would stand against me? Is there not a single fighter in this town who will at least prove that there is honor here?"

He stood there, the mace held loosely in one hand.

Silence was the only answer.

Jenks saw the man's mouth first turn down in disappointment and then curl slowly upward with dark delight.

"I thought as much," he said, hefting his battle-mace. "It saddens me that there is no honor left in this land. No champions. What a pity. What stories will you tell when I have left? What lies will give you back your pride? What tall tales will you spin for travelers?"

No one came out of their home or store; none offered a challenge. None offered to fetch the bell yet, either. The moment stretched on and on.

Klath-Ulna spat into the dust.

Jenks gave a cry—sharp as a startled crow's—stumbled backward, whirled, and ran away.



Klath-Ulna did not look from side to side, even though he could feel the eyes on him. He could imagine the whispered words, the curses, the prayers. They would be the same here as in other towns.

How many were there now? He could not recall. Some were left intact, but so many were left in ashes, the ground soaked with blood, the bodies unburied and left for the scavengers. The names of those towns had long since faded. He never knew the names of the dead. They were nothing to him. Nothing at all.

"ARE YOU THE BEST THIS TOWN CAN OFFER?" KLATH-ULNA DEMANDED.

This town would be no different.

The church loomed above him, and he could *feel* the bell calling to him. Wanting him to find it. Needing that.

And then a figure stepped out of the dense shadows by the big oak doors, and a splinter of sunlight struck fire from the bright steel in his hand.

Klath-Ulna slowed to a stop at the foot of the church stairs.

He had expected no one or everyone. It was like that sometimes. A town devoid of a great champion armed themselves with rusted swords, pitchforks, and scythes. This was neither of those things. Instead, a boy stood at the top of the stairs. Maybe sixteen or seventeen. Not a grown man. He wore a dented antique helmet, a shirt of rusted chain mail, mismatched greaves, and a very small buckler.

And a sword.

Klath-Ulna was amused. The sword looked like a good one. A real battle sword. Unlike the rest of his gear, the sword was clearly well cared for, sharp and oiled, but the blade showed no marks of use—no dents or notches. A new sword, then. Untested and unsullied, and in the hands of a boy.

"Are you the best this town can offer?" Klath-Ulna demanded.



As Jenks had hastily pulled on the armor, he had rehearsed what he would say. He now spoke out loud and clear, but his throat choked the words into meaningless mumbles. He swallowed hard and tried again.

"I am Jenks Grindelson," he said. "I am the protector of Saint's Calling, and you may not enter this church. You may not have our sacred bell. Go now and no harm will come to you."

Klath-Ulna stared at him for three full seconds before he threw back his head

and laughed. It seemed to shake the whole world.

Sweat—cold and greasy with fear—popped out on Jenks's forehead. He could feel it run in icy lines down his back under his shirt. His hands were so slick with it that he had to keep readjusting his grip. He prayed that the terror he felt in his heart did not show on his face.

"Boy," said Klath-Ulna, pointing to the tattoos on his neck, "do you know what these are?"

Jenks did not trust himself to reply.

"They are the story of my search for other treasures like this bell. Each one tells the tale of towns like this. Zakarum towns filled with the faithful. Filled with people who believed that their *faith* would save them." He took a small step forward. "Those towns are ashes now. Those believers who sought shelter from the dark are nothing but blackened bones to be found in the ruins. The Light could not shield them."

The stone step on which he stood seemed to tilt under Jenks's feet.

"Some were towns five times as large as Saint's Calling. Some towns had a dozen or more warriors—seasoned fighters from the Crusades. I let them don their armor and receive blessings from their priests. With saint-blessed spears and swords etched with prayers and blessings did they confront me. And I tell you, boy, that it availed them not, for I am Klath-Ulna the Golden One. I slew them all, and they were true warriors."

He came closer and put one foot on the bottom step.

"And what are you? A stripling with bad armor and an unbloodied sword and not enough years to have learned to wipe your own ass, let alone stand in the line of battle." He shook his head. "No one else in this town has the stomach or the nerve to show their faces, never mind stand against me. But... boy... you have no chance. I have walked a thousand battlefields. I have waded through rivers of blood. Even with these tattoos to remind me, I can barely count the *towns* I've destroyed, or the number of people I have killed. Yet... I admire your spirit. I do. So I will do this to honor the courage that is striving to be born in you, lad."

Instead of explaining, the barbarian stood his mace against the wall. Then, with his eyes fixed on Jenks, he unbuckled the straps of his heavy chest plate. The armor fell, but he darted a hand with reptilian quickness and caught it, then lowered it to the ground. He unbuckled the spiked vambraces from his forearms and the greaves from his shins. He pulled off the cotton undershirt so that he stood wearing only leather trousers, shoes, and the wild and scattered tattoos.

"Now the fight is a fair one," he said. "Now you have a chance, boy. Though ... I will still give you one last chance to simply let me take the bell and live." He picked up his mace, which somehow looked even more threatening without the armor. "Step aside."

"I... can't," said Jenks weakly. "The bell binds our Light. Its toll staves off the dark. It is the heart of this town."

In his mind, Jenks saw the faces of his parents, his uncles and aunts, his cousins each member of the family who had ridden off to war. It was as if, in that moment, they were with him, conjured by his need and the threat of this barbarian. Jenks felt his father's hand on his shoulder; he felt his mother's kiss on his cheek. And if that hand and those lips were cold, then it was no colder than the ice in Jenks's veins.

Help me, he begged in his thoughts. Akarat, guide my sword hand. Give me speed and wisdom.

The barbarian filled the space in front of him, as real and as deadly as all the hate and horror in the world.

Jenks shook his head. "I can't let you take that from us. I can't."

"You must," said Klath-Ulna. "There is nothing you can do that will stop me. No, let me say it this way—there is nothing you can do that will matter. Nothing that happens here will be remembered. There will be no ballads, no poems. Nothing. Only dust blown in time's indifferent winds."

Jenks wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted to run away and hide.

Instead, with what strength he could summon, he raised the sword that had never before seen battle, the blade that had never tasted blood.

"I will not let you," he said. "If you try to take the bell, I, Jenks Grindelson of Saint's Calling, will strike you down. This I swear."



Klath-Ulna sighed.

He actually did not want to kill the lad. Not from pity, for he had little of that, but

AND THEN HE RAISED THE BATTLE-MACE AND SWUNG IT AT JENKS'S HEAD.

because it was a pointless fight. This boy was nothing to him. There was no glory in slaughtering a beardless youth in a town full of cowards.

He raised his battle-mace and let Jenks see it. The heavy weapon was covered in runes, each of which was stamped with gold from another bell that he had taken from a tower in another Zakarum town.

"I offered you life, boy," he said. "But you crave death, and that you shall have." But it was Jenks who struck first.



Jenks knew he had one chance, and that was surprise. He swung the sword in a circle over his head, and as he dropped to the lower step, he brought it down, using all of his weight, the weight of the sword, and all of his fear to power that strike.

Klath-Ulna moved with shocking speed, pulling his naked chest back away from the slashing blade. Even so, the tip of Jenks's sword drew a hot red line from collarbone to ribs. Blood welled, dark red in the shadows of the church.

Jenks did not stand and gape but instead rushed forward, slashing again and again, hoping to end this quickly, knowing that he could not risk letting the barbarian regain his balance.

Klath-Ulna dodged the second blow and used the bottom of his balled fist to smash the third stroke away.

"You're fast, boy." He laughed, clearly impressed. "And you have heart. You can die knowing that you drew blood when many of your betters never could."

And then he raised the battle-mace and swung it at Jenks's head.

The weapon had to weigh a hundred pounds, but Klath-Ulna swung it like it was a willow wand. Jenks screamed and ducked as the massive battle-mace tore through the air inches from his head. The weapon struck the front door of the church and smashed it to kindling. Splinters flew like arrows. Jenks felt a dozen points of pain and then the hot flow of blood.

Klath-Ulna whipped the mace again, this time at waist height. Jenks dropped into a frog crouch, then sprang up, driving the point of his sword forward.

He never saw the punch that struck his chest. All he knew was that he was flying backward through the ruin of the doors. He hit the floor inside and slid a dozen yards. Somehow, the sword was still in his hand, but his entire chest felt like it was crushed. He rolled onto hands and knees, coughing, shocked that he was still alive.

Behind him, the remains of the door blew apart as the battle-mace struck once more. And then Klath-Ulna was inside, stalking toward him as he raised his weapon.

Jenks launched himself forward, tucking into a roll as the battle-mace crashed down onto the floor. The impact once more picked Jenks up and hurled him sideways. He hit a row of pews and knocked them over, one after another as if tiles in a game.

"Akarat save me," cried Jenks as he fought to rise. He saw Klath-Ulna striding down the aisle, and Jenks spun and ran.

The door to the tower was a stout one, heavy oak banded in iron. Jenks slammed it behind him and shot the bolt. There was a bookstand with hymnals inside, and he shoved it against the door.

Then he ran up the winding staircase, pausing at each landing to shove furniture down the stairs. There was a half-cask of lamp oils, and he poured this down the steps to make them slick.

The door below shuddered as it was struck. Once. Twice. And then it crashed inward, the wood shattered and the iron bands twisted. Popped rivets pinged and banged off the walls.

Klath-Ulna pushed through and looked up. For a moment, he and Jenks beheld each other. The killer still wore his smile, but there was something different about it. Was he impressed by this level of resistance? Jenks thought so, though it would offer scant comfort when he was dead.

The barbarian climbed the stairs, smashing the frail defenses without haste. Jenks ran up and up and finally could run no farther. The bell was there. Iron. Pure, Holy.

Jenks placed one hand on it, his mind filling with desperate prayers.

May the Light grant me strength. Akarat, be with me now. I need you. I'm trying my best, but I can't do this alone. Help me!

Outside, clouds parted and a beam of pure, clean sunlight slanted down through the belfry. It painted his face and body with gold and filled his heart with renewed courage. He adjusted his grip on the sword and raised it so that the sunlight—the precious Light—would touch the steel and lend its gift of grace. Jenks felt fresh power in his arms.

He looked at the bell, and through tears he cried, "I swear I will not let him take you. On my life I swear."

Then he heard the footfall behind him.

He turned as Klath-Ulna stepped onto the belfry platform.

"Why are you willing to die to defend this bell?"

"It isn't just the bell," protested Jenks. "This is my church, my faith. I have the Light on my side."

Klath-Ulna lowered his weapon and shook his head. "You have no idea how the world works, do you, boy? You *think* you do, but faith is not the same as understanding. That's what is wrong with this world. Innocents like you willing to die pointless deaths. You think that because you stand in the Light it is your armor. You believe that protecting this bell is what you were born for—*destined* for. You are blind to the truth, Jenks of Saint's Calling. You cannot see past what you have been taught, and that is the chink in your armor. I know this, for I have fought many—*many*—who believed as you believe. The Light did not save them then, and it will not save you now."

"You lie! I know the truth. You are the agent of evil, and I stand with Akarat. This church, this bell—this is holy, and your lies can't change that."

"I like your spirit, boy," said Klath-Ulna. "Truly. I have fought champions and kings with less heart. You remind me of someone—a friend, a brother—with whom I first went to war. He was like you—the courage of ten men. But alas ... courage isn't enough. Purity of soul is not enough. None of that saved my friend. I wept for him and slew his slayer. And I learned the cruelty of this world and its false beliefs firsthand."

He paused. "I don't want to kill you. I *should*, but I make the same offer. Give me the bell, and I will spare you and this town. Your *heart* can save your friends and family, lad, but I must have the bell. Now . . . step aside."

Jenks was weeping now, and he did not care. He hefted his sword once more.

"I have sworn my life to protect Saint's Calling. This bell *is* the town. If you take it, then what does my life matter? I will always be the one who failed the town and failed my church." He gave a slow, stubborn shake of his head. "You will have to kill me to take it, and I will not make that easy."

Klath-Ulna stared at him. "You even sound like my friend."

There was such deep sadness in his eyes that for one shining moment, Jenks thought that the killer would yield, would turn and leave.

However, in his heart, doubt had been sown, and he could feel it take root in the soil of his soul.

"No," Jenks said. "The Light is pure. It is true."

The Light was warm against his cheek; it made everything so clear. He raised the sword above his head and shouted a prayer.

No one appeared to save him.

With a heavy sigh, Klath-Ulna raised his weapon too.



Klath-Ulna went down to the street. For the first time in more years than he could count, the battle-mace felt heavy. Or maybe it was his heart, weighed down by memories of his lost friend. And by what he had just done.

The spikes of his mace glistened with hot crimson. The belfry was painted with splashes of blood. The boy had died hard. He'd fought all the way to the end, even past the point where he knew he was dying. With a shattered chest and one broken arm, with the bones of his cheek grinding together, one eye blind and the other seeing through a red veil, Jenks fought. With a mouth full of broken teeth, he shouted prayers to the Light and curses to Klath-Ulna. Mauled and maimed and dying, he tried to stand fast between the barbarian and the bell.

He died, still holding his sword. Even then, even as he fell and with a broken blade, the boy tried to stab Klath-Ulna.

The last paladin of Saint's Calling was dead. Klath-Ulna stood above him, watching the broken chest rise and fall, rise and fall . . . and rise no more. His

IN EVERY SHADOW, HE COULD SEE THE BOY'S EYES, COULD FEEL HIS WEIGHT OF BELIEF, OF PURPOSE.

frustration for this pointless combat almost made him kick the sword from the boy's hand.

Almost.

Instead, the barbarian stood for a long moment in a kind of vigil. He had not done such a thing since his friend had perished long ago. He saw the shadow of his old companion in the death mask of Jenks Grindelson.

"Damn you, boy," he breathed.

Then he left and took the bell with him.

When he stepped out into the street, his armor once more buckled on, there were a dozen townsfolk in the square, each of them clutching some kind of weapon. They saw the bell and they did not see Jenks, and Klath-Ulna watched how that changed their faces. Rage and hurt, fear and defeat.

He walked toward them. When they began to close around him, he merely said, "No."

Just that.

They turned away, weeping, and he walked out of Saint's Calling.

In the mountains a half-day's walk, he stopped where his horse was tethered. He removed a cauldron that was hung from the saddle, built a fire, and as night fell, he used a file to cut eyeholes and a mouth slit into the armor. Then he tried it on. What had been a bell to the townsfolk fitted perfectly as a helmet to him. As it should have. It completed the entire suit of armor he wore, and that was well. He stood for a long time in the moonlight, eyes closed, arms wide, fists clenched.

He removed his full set of armor from the packhorse and put it on. He fitted the helmet and stood ready to feel complete, to feel the roaring pride that had driven him for so long. This was the final act of a journey that had consumed so many years of his life.

But the helmet sat heavy upon him. His pride melted into melancholy as he

thought about the boy. Jenks.

Despite being so badly misled by his belief in the Light, the boy had been pure. True. Brave.

Klath-Ulna felt that purity burning on his skin like flame. In every shadow, he could see the boy's eyes, could feel his weight of belief, of purpose.

He turned away toward his horse, and in those few steps, the pieces of armor clanged strangely. It was as if each separate item sought to haunt him with an echo of each bell that he had gathered to forge them. It made him stop and even sent a shiver through his flesh.

He took the reins of his horse, but before he mounted, Klath-Ulna looked back the way he'd come. Back to Saint's Calling.

There were other boys in that town. Other young ones growing in strength and in the purity of their belief. He wondered if the echoes of his clanking armor would be like bells that would call them to war. Had taking the bell given a new sense of purpose and strength to the next generation of paladins? Would they come looking for him, or others like him?

Without doubt.

It saddened him to know that this was not mere thought. It was prophecy.

He closed his eyes for a long moment, and then he mounted the horse, turned its head, and rode off into the east.



I was not there, but I have seen these things. I, Tejal, am cursed with such knowledge, such insights.

There was no true victor of that battle. Anyone who says differently does not understand how history unfolds or how the human heart works.

Klath-Ulna did not win that fight. The boy, Jenks, did not lose it.

Jenks became a legend among his own people. Because of how he made his stand, even though he died, so many other young people in Saint's Calling put down their cards and dice and picked up swords. Jenks taught them that so much is worth fighting for. Even dying for. Those swords rise even now, mirror-bright in the fires of war, the sword arms given strength by hope.

As for Klath-Ulna . . . his tale goes on and on. Rivers of gold—and of blood wait for him. Even after so long a quest to construct a suit of armor from the bells of the churches of a faith that had turned its back on him. With the helmet completing that armor, he believed that he would once more feel whole. That he would be, in some way that even he could not articulate, home.

But there is no home for such as he. There can never be. War calls his name. Blood sings to his soul. Conquest demands his loyalty. He will spill and shed much, but after Saint's Calling . . . those who know him whisper that he was never thereafter the same.



About the Author

JONATHAN MABERRY is a New York Times bestselling author, five-time Bram Stoker Award winner, three-time Scribe Award winner, Inkpot Award winner, anthology editor, writing teacher, comic book writer, and editor of Weird Tales. His works include the Joe Ledger thrillers Rot & Ruin, Kagen the Damned, Ink, X-Files, V-Wars, Glimpse, Black Panther, Captain America, Wolverine, Punisher, Bad Blood, The Wolfman, Mars One, and many others. He is the president of the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers. He lives in San Diego with his wife, Sara, and their fierce little dog, Rosie.



TEJAL HAS MANY TALES TO TELL.

FROM THE HEDAJI

ARE COMING SOON