

THE CHOSEN

by Ed Nordfors

The alley was deserted and quiet. The tall buildings on either side blocked the neon light that flickered from billboards throughout the city. Ahead, I could hear sirens and the voices of a crowd, noises common in a city of this size, as I walked on. The darkness of the alleyway suited my purpose, concealing my movements through the city. Over the years, I had become adept at moving silently through the night, a stalker. This darkness was my home, and its shadowy folds were more natural to me than sunshine and the open sky.

I stepped over a sprawled figure, one of the homeless drunks living in these streets. His glazed eyes saw nothing as they stared past me, and my mind darted back to another figure--one sprawled in an alleyway long ago. For a brief moment, I felt the kinship of circumstance. It flickered and then faded. Like that figure so long ago, this one was dying. This one, though, would pass away slowly, consumed by inner bitterness and disease. I left him alone to die.

Ahead, the darkness was broken by a blaze of light and sound. I could feel the blood and death from here and hurried, drawn by purpose to the scene before me, eager to continue my eternal work. I was Chosen--destined to haunt the darkness for the lives and sake of my once fellowman. Many call me a vampire.

It was not always this way. I was once alive, as mortal and sane as my friends now long turned to dust. My life now (if it could be called a life) was not one to which I was born, though fatalists and clergy would probably argue that point. I had been a simple man, a soldier like my father and his father before him. I lived a good life--not an easy thing in the midst of "The Crusades" and their damned hypocrisy. They allowed men in power to justify war on a highly civilized people in order to plunder their enormous wealth and knowledge.

I prayed, dutifully and honestly, as a god-worshipping man should. I never took a life needlessly, even in battle. I never wished harm on a soul that did not deserve it. And I never spoke ill of the Church or of God, even as I lay dying in a back alley of some forgotten village, sliced open for the price of my boots.

Somehow, I managed to prop myself up against the wall, my blood spilling into the dirt around me. My weak cries drew no response from the locals who passed the mouth of the alley. I knew some must have heard me. I could see an occasional face peer towards the shadows in which I lay. But then, recognizing my accent (and guessing my circumstances), they hurried off--letting the night claim yet another unwary Christian.

I had seen enough of battle to realize the futility of my cries. Nothing could save me from this terrible wound. Still, I cried out for help, perhaps for no other reason than a fear of dying alone, though I knew God would be watching over me even (or especially) in this accursed land.

It was there, alone and with my life slowly ebbing from me, that my faith was tested to the brink. A hatred of the Lord and His ways nagged at

my thoughts, sharpened by the pain. But my life had been full of love for the works and wonders of God and creation. I resolved not to fall victim to despair. I embraced Him, knowing that my life would soon be over and that I would in turn be embraced.

I still cursed the irony of my fate. I had traveled from my homeland to fight a holy war to purge this wretched land of its native heathens. I had expected death at the hands of a soldier of Islam with his frenzied cries to a foreign God ringing in my ears. There was nobility in fighting for God until death. Yet here I lay in an alleyway, killed for some cloth and my boots. I could have remained at home and met that fate! The absurdity of it amused me, and my brief chuckle brought frothing bubbles of blood to my lips. I ignored the pain and expected it to pass soon enough.

It was at that moment that I first met the Arab, Ali Ben Hasir. One moment I was alone in the darkness, and then he was there--a cloaked figure sitting silently across the alleyway, merging with the darkness. It may have been cold that night, but I was past feeling such minor inconveniences. He sat, staring silently at me.

At first, I thought he was my attacker, returned to finish me off or perhaps to take my cloak. But he was too finely dressed to be a local, and he had a direct yet quiet manner about him that they lacked.

He sat, staring silently at me.

"Help me," I moaned. The blood was pooling slick on the cobbled alleyway. I had seen men die with far less blood spilled.

"Who are you? Help me." I hoped that he would at least give me a mouthful of wine to ease the pain.

He sat, staring silently at me.

My eyes had long since grown accustomed to the darkness, the moon cast a glimmer of light into the alleyway. He smiled softly, almost sadly, as he sat looking at me. His expression was one of sympathy and regret, but his eyes had a grim cast of determination about them. I grew afraid.

"I am Ali Ben Hasir. I can help you, but not the way you think."

He spoke English fluently, like so many of these "uneducated" Arabs we had come to kill. His voice was soft but had an edge, a weariness that seemed to flow through him.

"I am dying," I said.

"Yes," he nodded, "and that I can help you with."

He smiled again, just as a beam of moonlight rose above the high wall behind me. He was fully illuminated for the first time. His teeth were extraordinarily long, the canines extending over his lower lip, glinting in the light.

I feebly drew away as he stood. He loosened the cloak around his neck with long, crooked fingers, tipped with nails akin to claws.

I clutched my crucifix desperately, hoping that the power of God would give me the strength to resist this demon come to claim my soul. I anguished over the futility of living a pure life, only to be taken by darkness on my deathbed. I muttered hurried prayers as the creature moved softly towards me.

I froze in fear at his cold, lifeless touch.

"Do not be afraid," he said. "I am here to help, not to harm. You have so much work to do."

My fear made me reckless, the same recklessness that often overtook me on the battlefield when fear threatened to chill me to immobility.

"What do you mean?"

The creature, Ali, sat beside me and sighed softly.

"The story is long and we must be done here before daybreak." He paused, thinking quietly to himself. "But neither of us is going anywhere, so perhaps the story is better told."

Lying there, my blood flowing over the cobblestones in the chill night air, I listened.

"It began," Ali said, "timeless millennia ago . . ."

I was familiar with the study of the Bible, but Ali was more so. He spoke slowly, in a studied Latin, in which I was well versed.

"In the beginning, there was darkness. From the void, God spoke a single Word, and thus sprang forth the Heavens and Earth and all that was in them.

"Among his first creations were the Choirs of Angels that served Him directly. They were beautiful creatures, yet terrible in their awesome power and unflinching devotion to the Word of God. God decreed, and the Angels wielded the power to make it so.

"Chief amongst the Angels--the first created and the most touched by the hand of God--was Lucifer. Lucifer was powerful, vengeful and loyal, enforcing the will of God with a fury that no lesser being could comprehend. He saw the perfection of God's work and unleashed his fury to keep that perfection intact.

"Then, in a timeless heartbeat, God created Man.

"Lucifer saw Man for what he was: imperfect. Man was tainted--to be cleansed, lest God's perfection be ruined. He did what no other Angel dared. He questioned God's will. He pleaded to the Lord to remove the stain of humanity from His universe.

"God said nothing.

"Thinking that God Himself had become corrupted by His own servants, Lucifer declared war upon Heaven, drawing with him a host of powerful Angels to restore Creation to sublimity.

"Against Lucifer stood a host just as terrible. Angels, led by Michael, wielding divine wrath in his burning sword, warred to defend God.

"For eons, the war raged, Angel against Angel, while Adam sat safe and ignorant in Eden, protected by the hand of God.

"Angel after Angel fell. The heavenly Choirs of God's most beautiful creations were cut down over time.

"God said nothing.

"As both ranks dwindled, Lucifer hoped that God would recognize His mistake and cast Man from Eden, ending the war in Heaven. Unable to bring himself to war directly against God, Lucifer entered Eden and corrupted Eve, and through her, Adam. Man chose to defy God, tasting the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.

"Finally, God raised His hand and cast Man from Eden.

"Lucifer, believing the war now over, called upon his followers to lay aside their swords and return to heaven in peace.

"It was not to be.

"God saw the corruption of His most loved creations mirrored in the corruption of His most powerful. His wrath unbound by the expulsion of Man, He raised His hand and cast Lucifer and his followers from Heaven into the pits of Hell. There, Lucifer would rule as the Prince of Darkness, the Lord of Lies.

"To remind Lucifer of what he had lost, God turned him from the most beautiful of Angels into a thing of hideous visage--his once-Angelic followers now grotesque Devils.

"Lucifer, enraged by this further betrayal, resumed his war. Angels fell. Devils fell. And all the while, God and Lucifer fought for the soul of Man--one to protect because of His love, the other to corrupt because of his hate."

Ali paused, as I lay in silence.

I was torn between belief and disbelief. In the end, I decided it did not matter, as either way I would find out soon enough.

It was cooler now, the moon lowering over the alley wall. I suspected dawn was still a few hours away. I doubted I would live to see it. The sunrise in this accursed land was breathtaking, and I found myself anxious to see it once more before I died.

Ali waited, as if expecting something from me. I raised my hand feebly. I pointed at his teeth, sharp and glistening in the fading moon.

"What are you? Why are you here?"

Ali nodded slowly, as if this was the response he had anticipated.

"When God cast Man from Eden, He set the Angels to watch over them, to return their souls to Him for the day of Resurrection. The War continues,

and the Angels are now far too few in number to fight Lucifer and to collect souls. God has appointed the Chosen to collect souls on His behalf."

"I don't believe you. Why would God choose a Muslim to collect the soul of a Christian? You are not from God; you are from Lucifer. Go, let me die in peace."

He smiled.

"A Muslim? Yes, I am a Muslim, and you are a Christian." His smile was unkind now.

"God doesn't care about our religious beliefs," he snapped. "Do you think He would have ordained all of this, your Holy Crusade, in His name? This Crusade is not the hand of your Christian God against the face of Islam. It is the hand of your Christian rulers into the pocket of the Islamic people."

I was angered by this. I lay here dying for my beliefs. Yet, in my heart, I knew it to be true.

"You have been brought up to believe that the Islamic people are the Infidel, as I have been brought up to believe that the Christian people are blaspheming unbelievers. In death, the truth was driven into me like the arrow that took my life." He gently touched his forehead as he spoke, where a thin, white mark shone.

"We are all God's work, Christian and Muslim. We all have souls. God's souls. And at the end of our life He wants them returned to Him, keeping the promise He made to us.

"I have come for yours."

Certainly, I had known men of knowledge over the years--great men of wisdom, of compassion, of kindness. Not all were Christians. And in their passing I lamented that as Jews, as Muslims, as men without the true faith, they would be denied the place in Heaven that their lives had warranted.

Still, I could not believe that God would ordain that this creature come for my soul. I had seen Christian men die in battle, often with my sword through them. Their deaths had been quick, not lingering with creatures such as Ali Ben Hasir lurking to take their souls to God.

I said this to him.

"There are lesser Angels, not powerful enough to fight Lucifer and his minions, who gather the souls of the dead. Some souls, however, are special to God. They have been touched directly by His Holy Spirit and must be gathered by the Seraphim, His most wondrous servants."

I nodded, familiar with the ranks of Angels from my studies in the monastery.

"Alas, the War has destroyed so many, that there are now too few Seraphim to gather the souls of the Chosen. Instead, God has charged the Chosen to gather their own."

Well versed in war, I could see the toll would fall most heavily amongst those of power. Our knights, skilled at arms and heavily armored, were amongst the first to fall, as it was they who bore the brunt of battle. They too were the targets of our foe, which sought to reduce our strength as quickly as possible.

It occurred to me then that if Ali was here to claim my soul, and if all he said were true, I too must be Chosen. I looked up at him sharply. He nodded, understanding that the truth was upon me.

"Do you not wonder, my friend, why you lie here in a pool of your blood and your innards? Why you have not long since died from wounds that would have killed a normal man in moments? Why the blood flows as thin as sand through a clenched fist, when the wound in your belly should bring it gushing forth like water in an overflowing wadi?"

I nodded, the truth settling upon me slowly.

"You cannot die, my friend, until your soul has been claimed. The lesser Angels, the Cherubim, will not claim you. Such is God's decree."

I looked up into his face and noticed kindness there. I felt cold, yet warmth was beginning to grow within me, perhaps the realization that the embrace of God was but a moment away. I nodded, ready to accept my fate.

"Before I die, tell me of Heaven."

His smile hardened, and with his teeth extended in the fading moonlight, he looked more enemy than savior. Then his face saddened as he spoke, softly.

"I have never seen it," he said, "I chose not to go." He paused again, seemingly lost in his own thoughts and regrets.

I have no way of knowing what memories flashed through him, but I had seen the same look on the face of veterans as they recalled past battlefields and lost comrades. I had seen myself in the mirror once with that same cold, steely-eyed gaze, after my son had asked me about my brother, lost long ago in battle.

Ali had clearly seen the same darkness. I felt warmth for him, one soldier to another, and placed my hand on his arm. He looked down at me, brought back to the moment by the touch.

"I had been a soldier all my life," he said softly, "proud and eager to fight for Islam. I died in battle, in the darkness, and one came to collect my soul, as I come to collect yours."

He squatted down beside me, moving slowly yet gracefully in the manner of his people.

"I did not believe him at first, when he told me the tale I have told you. I asked him, 'If you were once a man such as I, who are you to claim my soul in God's name?' He answered, 'I am Chosen by God to bear your soul to Him'.

"I asked 'Why did God choose you above all other men to do this thing?', and he simply replied 'because I asked.'"

Ali paused, looking down the alleyway towards the sounds of the small town market. Dawn was not far away. He looked back to me.

"God needs the Chosen to collect the souls of the Chosen. He does not ask, but any who wish to continue his life's work is granted the right to do so. I had been a soldier of Islam all my life and did not want my work for God to stop. I asked."

I had been a soldier of God all my life, little knowing the truth. Now, with death and truth upon me, I felt the need to continue my service. Now was not the time to falter in God's work.

I looked up at Ali. He was waiting. He knew I would ask him. I opened my mouth to speak, but he silenced me with a gentle hand.

"There is no turning back from this. You will forever walk the world, gathering the souls of the Chosen for the Lord. You will be unable to enter Heaven until the Day of Resurrection."

I considered: an eternity of God's service against eternity in Heaven--a Heaven under siege by the servants of Lucifer. I was proud to have lived as a soldier of God; now, I could be a soldier for God.

"Let me serve Him," I said.

Ali nodded and lowered his face to mine. At first, I thought he meant to kiss me (an Islamic custom that still disturbed me). I made a feeble gesture to ward him off, uncomfortable with the affection, then gasped as I felt his sharp teeth pierce my throat, drawing the remaining blood from my body. I struggled in vain, feeling my strength fade as life fled me.

Then warmth began to course through my body. At first, it was gentle, spreading from deep within me, gaining strength, until it was a raging fire within me. The pain eased and strength returned to me.

Still, Ali drew blood from me. My strength seemed to grow as each drop trickled through his teeth. I stopped struggling, allowing the power build. When I felt as if I was about to burst into flames from the heat, I pushed him firmly away. My strength was now a match for his.

I was strong and alive.

I was filled with divine purpose.

I turned to Ali, joy upon my lips--lips parted by sharp, savage teeth .

. . .

Ali still crouched over my body, wiping my blood from his lips. My body now bore terrible punctures on the neck as well as the belly wound.

Blood was everywhere.

I stood back, confused. Ali straightened, turning towards me.

"Your body must remain here. Otherwise, your friends will look for you. They must not know of this, of the War in heaven, of the Chosen." He looked down at my body, as if in apology.

I had expected my body to be healed, to be as full of life as his.

"Why? Why can I not be whole, like you?"

"You are as I. Your soul forms a new body for itself."

He pointed at my corpse, and I felt repulsed by death, as I had never been as a soldier.

"You must journey to places and do things that this body cannot do. You do the work of God now and must bear the form God has chosen for you."

I touched my face, the long, clawed fingers tentatively feeling the points of my teeth. I was a monster, the type of creature with which parents scare children into obedience.

Ali nodded.

"God has given you this form to remind you that there is still a price to pay for the salvation of Man. We are more than Man but less than Angel, and we bear this form so we do not cloak ourselves in power and perfection, as did Lucifer and those who follow him."

I paused. I struggled with this again, but my devotion to God's Will was strengthened by my experience, and I would not falter now.

I was Chosen.

I picked my way carefully through the rubble of the ruined building, stepping cautiously to avoid upsetting the fallen concrete and steel any further. Many were still trapped within. Most would soon be dead. The Cherubim had gathered for this, and it was with dismay that I saw them in their numbers--rank upon rank of them, gathered in their terrible beauty to claim the souls of Man for God. I knew the toll of the battle must have been horrendous, that thousands lay dying.

I also knew that such a rich bounty would draw the servants of Lucifer, and I was rewarded by the sight of one of the Seraphim, powerful and beautiful beyond my imaginings, its sword in hand, come to protect the souls of the slain and the Cherubim alike. The War in Heaven continued, and God would give up none of his creations, neither Man nor Angel.

I also knew that there were several within the ruins that the Cherubim could not fetch. The Seraphim could have taken them, but it stood watching for the agents of Lucifer to continue the work they had begun with the destruction of these buildings. It was left to the Chosen to claim them.

I saw Ali, moving slowly through the ruins--a sword of fire in his hand.

Plentiful were the agents of Lucifer, and many had begun to contest for the souls of Man. Cherubim and Chosen battled Lucifer's minions. I could see now the wisdom of God in choosing soldiers for this work.

My hands were empty, the sword of holy fire not summoned. I had drawn it rarely over the centuries and was in no rush to do so now. Often, my teeth and claws were enough, and I had learned to fight furiously with these weapons. Bestial perhaps, but my form was the physical shape of my soul,

blessed by the Holy Spirit. Few of Lucifer's minions could stand before it in battle. Such was the power of the Blessing of God.

Lucifer's agents, weak men corrupted by the lure of power on Earth, felt no Holiness in my savagery. My strength was more than a match for them, and my claws and teeth ripped out their life as surely as a jungle animal.

Over the centuries, the Chosen had littered the cities with the corpses of Lucifer's agents. I was already dead, and their weapons could do little harm to me, though some had been armed with Lucifer's bale-fire, which could harm my Blessed form.

Over the centuries, I had been forced to battle Lucifer's agents more frequently, and the toll of death behind me mounted. I was a soldier, fighting for Man's soul.

It was darker now, and I proceeded slowly. The police lines were no obstacle to one who comes and goes as the mist. I saw several Chosen moving towards the other building, the twin of the one I approached, and knew that the toll had been great indeed.

The mound of rubble was enormous. This was a greater devastation than I had ever seen before.

I found the body of the fallen soldier, crushed beneath a pile of concrete and steel. He was young--younger than the soldiers of my day. His blue uniform was torn, discolored by blood and the debris around him. His badge was untarnished, however, and I noted that he was from an adjoining precinct.

I thought briefly of my own fate, of how, like him, I had traveled to other lands to die in the service of my fellow man. How, like me, followers of Islam had killed him.

I could have envied him that servants of God had killed him, while I had been killed for the price my boots would bring. I knew, however, that his death was not in God's name, but by the hands of Lucifer, who had corrupted the weak and turned them into his agents of death.

He looked up at the sound of my approach, reaching up from the shattered ruins, his hand outstretched.

"Help me," he cried.

I nodded, crouching down beside him, as I laid a hand on his shattered body. Truly, he was one blessed by the Holy Spirit, to be claimed by the holiest of God's creations. His injuries were horrific, his body pulped beneath the concrete. A lesser body would have been killed instantly, the soul released for the Cherubim to gather--or for Lucifer's devils, if the Cherubim were too slow.

I smiled down at him.

"Do not be afraid," he said. "I am here to help, not to harm. You have so much work to do."

THE END

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