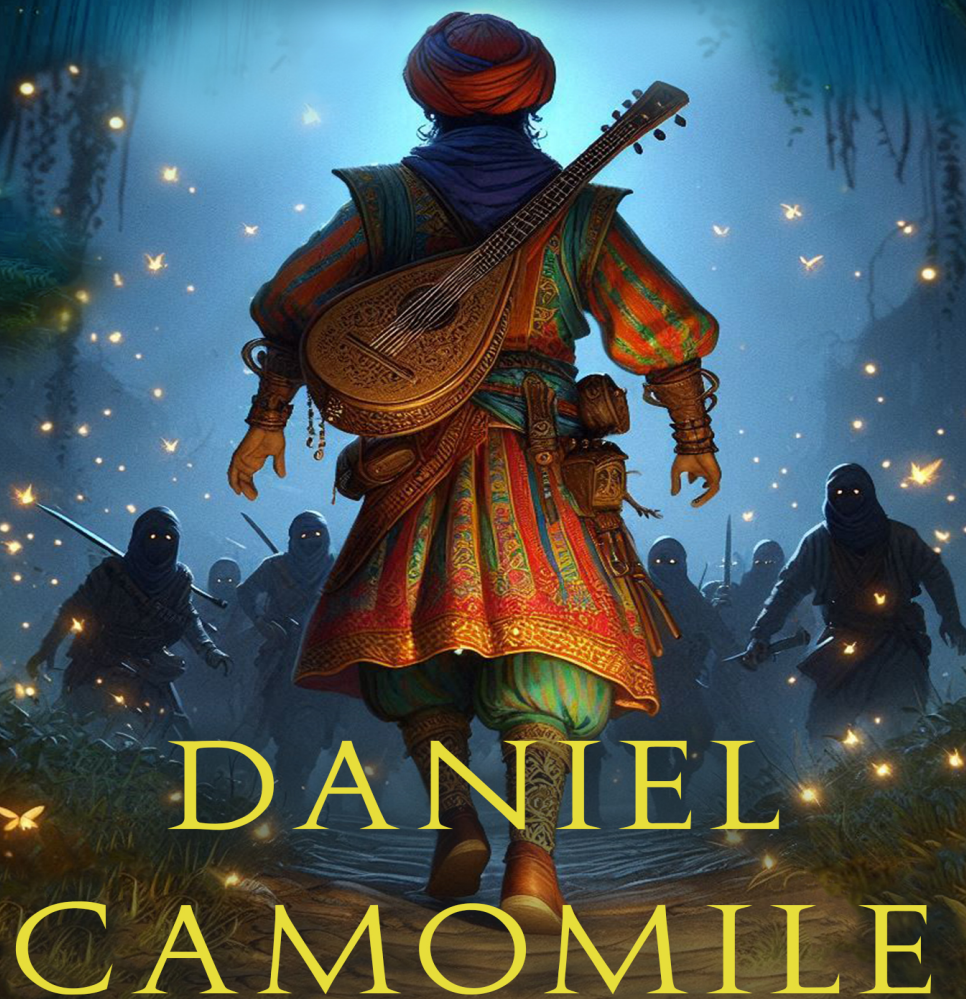


LEGENDS OF AYLORE:

The Madcap's Bargain

A FANTASY SHORT STORY



DANIEL
CAMOMILE

THE MADCAP'S BARGAIN

From the Legends of Aylore

By Daniel Camomile

To read more from Daniel, visit his website at:

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THE MADCAP'S BARGAIN

Fireflies glittered in the humid swamp air, signaling the waning of the day. Amid the chorus of crickets and the solemn songs of marsh-birds, a melodic sound wafted on the evening breeze. A lone figure crooned a whimsical tune, walking a mossy path under the drooping, melancholy trees. Like a Merigold in an ash heap, the traveler's attire was a flamboyant display of vibrant hues, gold accents, and glittering embellishments, standing in outrageous contrast with the dreary backdrop. In place of a ready sword in his hand and a bow across his back, the stranger carried a richly painted walking stick and toted a gilded lute upon his back.

A piercing whistle shattered the still twilight, followed by the sudden appearance of six cloaked individuals dropping from the leafy canopy. The traveler halted, finding himself hemmed in by a menacing gang of knife-wielding thieves.

"No guard, no blade, no defense!" the tall and roguish leader of the thieves laughed, "You must be as crazy as your clothes, friend."

The bandits let out a roll of uncouth laughter. The traveler laughed as well, longer and heartier than them all, his clean-shaven face suggesting that he laughed often by the topography of his wrinkles. His bright eyes flashed as he replied in a full, warm voice,

"Forgive my imprudence, gentlemen! I didn't realize I had strayed so near to Del-Vinea to be robbed. For there are no thieves in the fair land of Nolvard."

Instantly, the smiles withered on the robbers' faces. Their tall chief's expression twisted into a scowl as he strode up to the traveler, resting the cool edge of his dagger against the harlequin stranger's throat.

“You have a bold wit, fool. You are in Nolvard. And we are the proud Nolvardi! Not those wine-sipping, sweet-smelling Del-Vinea pigs.”

The traveler raised an eyebrow, leaned in and sniffed, replying with repulsed surprise,

“Yes, you certainly don’t smell the part. But judging by that pendant, you are party to the Tourduox syndicate.” the traveler gestured to a copper “T” rune hanging from the thief’s neck. “So, my fine fellow, you may be a proud Nolvardi, but you work for a Del-Vinea crime lord! Pungent irony, don’t you agree?” he chortled. The thieves did not laugh this time.

“Do you want to die, friend?” the leader growled, bringing his mutton-chopped face close.

“Certainly not.” The traveler replied with subtle amusement. He lifted his hands in surrender, adding, “My coins are in the pouch on my belt, but I beg you not to take my lute.”

“It’s a marvel you’re not dead yet. Luckily for you, we’re thieves, not killers. Take his gold... and definitely take the lute.” the tall thief ordered the others.

Another thief reached out and seized the leather sack from the traveler’s belt. Drawing back the pouch, the man made a perplexed face as it revealed to be attached by a retractable chord. Suddenly, there was a mechanical whirr and a metallic click from the belt, followed by a spectacular explosion of multicolored powder filling the air. The disorienting miasma swirled and flashed in graceful designs, as if filled with a fey life of its own.

Amid a clamor of coughs and sputtered curses, the rapid footfalls of the traveler squelched away through the mud as he called over his shoulder,

“It was a pleasure chatting!”

“Don’t let him escape, you idiots!” the tall thief roared, darting after their escaped prey.

Bursting from the kaleidoscopic cloud, the brigands scanned the twilit marsh forest. Off the path and bumbling through the sullen terrain, the dazzling traveler was plain to see. Indignant, the robbers roared and flew toward the stranger, nimbly springing from root to rock, expertly maneuvering the bog as only the Nolvardi river-folk can do. Within moments, they were at the man's heels.

Crossing over a dry, mossy patch in the wetland, the traveler glanced back, saying with a twinkle in his eye,

“You mustn't leave the path, friends.”

Heedless, the thieves closed the distance. But as they came to the dry place, their feet fell out from under them, the ground evaporating into a deep, slime-coated sinkhole. With shouts of rage and surprise, the thieves tumbled headlong over each other, squelching as they struck the muddy bottom.

“Well, I did warn you. You mustn't trust what lies off the road. There are bandits in these woods, I'm told.” the traveler scolded, stooping over the ledge of the sinkhole.

Shoving one of his floundering comrades aside into the mud, the tall thief stumbled to his feet, covered head to heel in muck. With a terrified expression, he blubbered out,

“Please! We didn't know you were a sorcerer! Just let us go and we'll leave you alone.”

“Sorcerer? Is that what you think of me?” The traveler furrowed his brows with mild offence. Standing upright, he rubbed his chin contemplatively with his velvet-gloved hand, then said,

“You make a reasonable demand. But of course, I am in no position to bargain with armed men. Please, allow me to make you an offer.” The traveler swiftly unslung his lute from his shoulder and struck a resonant chord, “I'll relieve you from your miry prison... for the cost of a tale!”

The six thieves exchanged perplexed glances. The smallest of them reluctantly removed his leather cap, squaring his feet in the muck as he spoke in school-room fashion,

“Er... well, I’m not much good, but here goes. Eh hem... there once was an Elven barmaid, who lived in a sunny seaside glade. When the sailors would disembark...”

“Let me stop you there, friend!” the traveler interjected with a chuckle, “I’m sure that would be a limerick for the ages, but you misunderstand. My offer is your freedom for a tale... from me!” the travel struck another theatrical chord.

The thieves stared dumbfounded before their chief said, with a shrug,

“Well... I suppose that’s fair. Go on.”

Immediately, the traveler began plucking the strings of his lute in a haunting ostinato.

“I think you will enjoy this. Perhaps it was the sight of such distinguished Nolvardi at the bottom of a pit that brought this legend to mind. It is the tale of Nolfo, son of Sivius.”

With a hum and a beat, the traveler began to speak in a chanting rhythm, his lute erupting into layers of melody as though a dozen or more musicians were present.

“Gather you all, near and far, and hear a story of treachery and magic, death and rebirth, and the ennobling of the Nolvardi heart. Yes, the Nolvardi were not always scavengers in marshy woodland. They were once a brave folk, albeit from cruel and deadly beginnings.

In the days of peace, in the far northern wildlands, there lay a kingdom of stone and iron. In the treacherous mountains of Kestel-Awn there lived a lord with a thirst for knowledge and a hunger for power. King Scion the Knowing, lord and master of the Amon people—ascended from stone and strange fire.

He built a fortress in the arms of Kestel-Awn's crags, and in the gloom of his book-thronged palace, a dark obsession carried him on reveries of forbidden knowledge.

Knowledge he twisted into diabolical weapons to conquer the realms. Scion fashioned for himself unnatural longevity, corrupting his mortal flesh into a husk of undying death. With fear and unholy reverence, the folk of Amon bestowed upon their sovereign the formidable name, "Marwoleath", the lord of death. He raised a vast, fiendish army from the bones of his enemies and kin, and with the loyal people of Amon, he reached out to ravage the cities and villages of the south."

"That's horrible!" one thief interjected from down in the pit, "Is this a true story? I mean, was there really an army of the undead in our lands?"

"Shut up! Just let him tell the story." another thief snapped back, slinging a wad of mud at his friend.

"I would never lie of something so grave." The traveling minstrel replied, playing a suspenseful tune on his lute. "But, you may wonder, who could stand against such a supernatural force. Shall I tell you?"

"Yes!" Another thief outburst.

"Very well, my lads. The seven Priests of Athair looked down on the ravages of Marwoleath with wrath and pity. Forbidden to intervene, they held council in the margins of the realms and deemed the only hope for the land lay with three brothers. Three of the legendary sons of Sivius. There was Pyrieth of the woodland of Paralae, Torvial of the far eastern mountains, and Nolvo of the wind-swept plains by the sea.

Of the sons of Sivius, Nolvo was the most free-hearted and careless. A lover of song, wind, and vast open country, and fond of every beast that soars or runs. While Nolvo's many brothers governed over peoples within cities and fortress walls, Nolvo had let the lands of his stewardship run wild. When great Pyrieth and wise Torvial raised armies to meet Marwoleath in battle, Nolvo sought the aid of those cities under his charge. With petition on his

lips, he came to Del-Vinea in the south to muster them to battle. But the folk of that city had grown cunning and lawless in their solitude. The folk of Del-Vinea had formed an alliance with Marwoleath to ensure the safety of their city.

They lulled Nolfo into a deep sleep through wine and song. In his slumber, they sunk an onyx needle into his back—seeping Marwoleath’s deathly magic into Nolfo’s blood. Pleased, Marwoleath took Nolfo to the conquered city of Del-Lenark, awaiting Nolfo’s transformation into an undead servant of darkness.

At tremendous cost, Pyrieth and Torvial rose against that great city, with what weapons of siege they could gather, but to no avail. Del-Lenark was impenetrable, and the bitterest days of winter were drawing nigh. Through those bleak and icy days, Nolfo lay captive within the heart of the captured city.

Marwoleath kept Nolfo at the bottom of an empty cistern, and night by night the sirens of Marwoleath would come to the cistern’s mouth and sing to Nolfo in his agony. They would serenade with tempting tales of who Nolfo could be—a great general of dark forces, a captain of the undead, a champion of Marwoleath with lavish reward—if only he would give in to the deathly influence of the onyx needle.

Nevertheless, Nolfo was a champion of the Priests—one granted the grace to resist temptation if he chose to confront it. Many champions have come, and many have fallen to the lure of power, but Nolfo possessed a wild and strong heart. He shut his ears to the nightly siren songs, and by day, Nolfo would sing his own songs.

In the tongue of the Amon people, he would let his voice resound in the streets and alleys of the city for all to hear. The folk of Amon dwelled among Marwoleath’s reanimated legions, having settled into annexed Del-Lenark. Through the bitter days, they would hear the pleading ballads of Nolfo from his prison, and many stopped to listen.

Nolvo would sing of the noble ancestry of the Amon, of their honor and valor in brighter, ancient days, before the rise of the lord of death. The songs went to the hearts of the people, summoning them from the stupor of their fearful allegiance to Marwoleath. With one voice, they resolved to throw off the yoke of Marwoleath, or fall courageously in the act.

In the freeze of winter, Marwoleath's undead soldiers became sluggish and dull, and the Amon took this as their chance. A revolt arose in Del-Lenark, and the animated-corpses of Marwoleath were handily cut down and put to flames. The sons of Sivius were welcomed into the fair city. Brave Nolfo was raised from the pit by his brothers, the needle withdrawn. With healing from the Vei, the wound mended in time, but Nolfo would not outlive his brothers.

From that day of revolution against certain death, the folk of Amon ceased to answer to their former title. Instead, they adopted the name of Nolfo, becoming the brave and just Nolvardi—a folk free of fear and cruelty, lest they take the title of Nolfo in vain.”

The traveler let the last note of his lute linger harmoniously in the air, like a long and fragrant breeze. There was a moment of thoughtful silence, in which the tunes of frogs and crickets became audible.

“Is that all true?” the tall thief uttered at last, “I mean... is that the origin of our people?”

“Who you are is a matter of seeking, not asking.” The traveler replied, situating his instrument on his back again. “Go east to the woods of Paralae. Seek the tree of Valacross. You will learn what you seek there—if you have the heart for it.”

“Who are you?” the thief asked in bewildered wonderment.

The traveler beamed a wily grin on the men in the pit. Like an actor on a stage, he offered them a low bow. As he did, there came a sudden burst of violet smoke and yellow sparks. The hearty laughter of the traveler trailed off into nothing as the vapour cleared, with the minstrel nowhere to be seen.

The band of men stood gaping, finding themselves no longer in a pit, but standing on level ground in the swamp again, as if the sinkhole had never existed. In stupefied bewilderment, the tall thief looked down at his hand. In his palm he held a small white card, rimmed with gold and ruby filigree. On it were inscribed words, in a lavish curling script,

“The Madcap Rover A Fool of the Vei Traveler”

“Thaleran, what does it mean?” one of the younger thieves said, leaning in to look at the remarkable card.

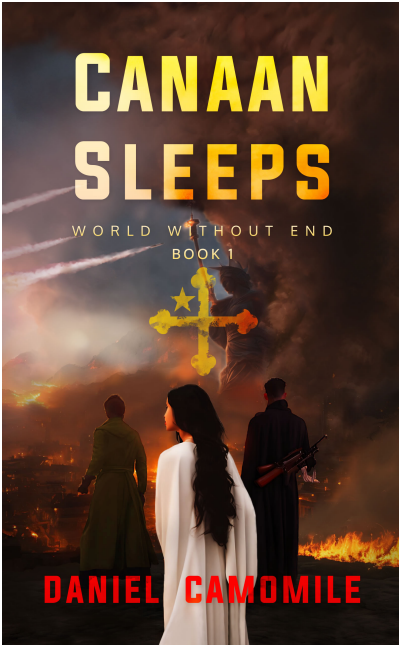
“I don’t know.” Thaleran replied in a hushed tone.

“Well... what do we do now?”

Thaleran looked up from the card and took a deep, thoughtful breath,

“You can go where you will. I’m headed east.”

Other Books by Daniel

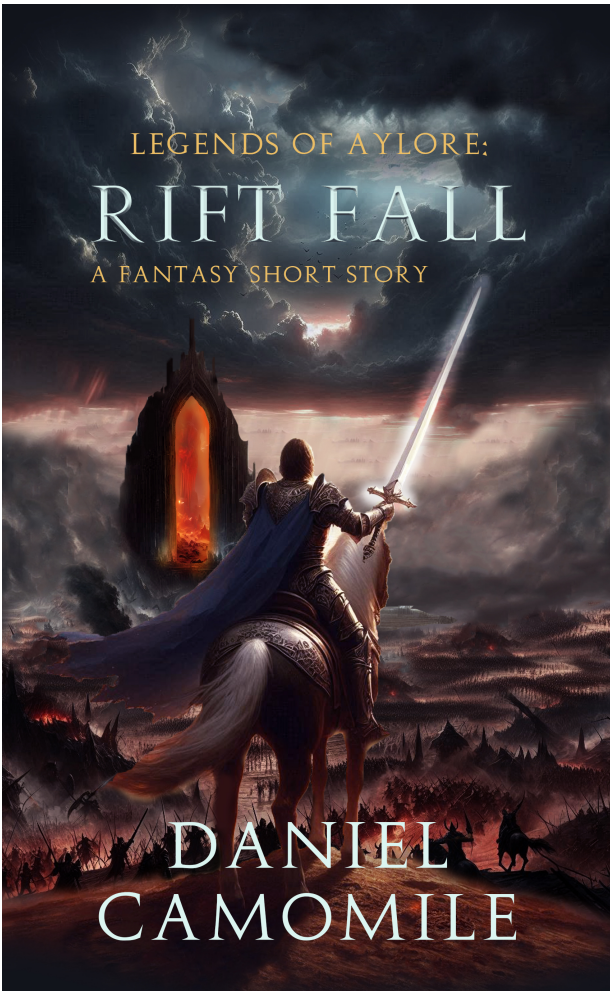


Canaan Sleeps

Christian YA Dystopia Novel

Centuries after a global apocalypse restarted civilization, the perfect Christian city of Shiloh emerges as a beacon of power and prosperity to the onlooking world. But, as dreams about Jesus and fears of a coming disaster spread throughout the slums of the city, complacent believers are urged to action. When a letter pried from the hands of an enemy spy tells of Shiloh's coming doom, who can be believed? Thomas, Ruth, and Adam must decide. The lives of thousands rest in their hands, and time is running out.

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Rift Fall

An Epic, Dimension-Jumping Fantasy Short Story

The core-realm may lose its two surviving heroes in one last attempt to close the portal. But Torvial and Morrowick, the last sons of Sivius, know if it ends this hellish war, it will be worth it.

No mortal weapon has availed against the infernal hordes of Malaccadia for almost ten years of ceaseless bloodshed. But Apotheosis is no mortal sword. If Morrowick can journey to the surface-world of Malaccadia, there might be an opportunity to persuade the natives to battle the infernal kingdoms there.

Should he fail, the portal will keep unleashing its dark armies, and Torvial will be walking into a massacre. However, in all possible endings, as the creed says, “œdeath is never the end.

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