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The Martyr's Curse

Written by Scott Mariani

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SCOTT MARIANI

The Martyr's Curse

AVON

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Prologue

France
January 1348

The crowd looked on in awed silence as the pall of smoke drifted densely upwards to meet the falling sleet.

Four attempts to light the pyre had finally resulted in a dismal, crackling flame that slowly caught a hold on the pile of damp hay and twigs stacked up around the wooden stake at its centre. So thick was the smoke, the people of the mountain village who'd huddled round in the cold to witness the burning could barely even make out the figure of the man lashed to the stake. But they could clearly hear his frantic cries of protest as he writhed and fought against his bonds.

His struggles were of no use. Iron chains, not ropes, held him tightly to the thick wooden post. Rope would only burn away, and the authorities overseeing the execution wanted to make sure the job was properly carried out – that the corrupted soul of this evil man was well and truly purified in the cleansing flames.

He was a man of indeterminate age, thin, gaunt and known locally as Salvator l'Aveugle – Blind Salvator – because he had only a right eye, the left a black, empty socket. The

robed and hooded traveller had first turned up in the village in late November. He'd declared himself to be a Franciscan priest on a lone pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where almost for the first time since its fall to the Muslim forces of Salah al-Din in 1187, Christianity was re-establishing a lasting foothold. Salvator's mission was to join his fellow Frenchman and Franciscan, Roger Guérin of Aquitaine, who had managed to purchase from the current Mamluk rulers parts of the ancient city, including the hallowed Cenacle on Mount Zion, and was in the process of building a monastery there.

But Salvator's long journey hadn't started well. He'd scarcely covered eighty miles from his home in Burgundy before a gang of brigands had beset him on the road, taking his nag and the purse containing what little money he had. Bruised and battered, he'd plodded on his way on foot for a month or more, totally dependent on the goodwill of his fellow men for shelter and sustenance. Finally, fatigue and hunger combined with the growing winter cold and the unrelenting rain had brought on a fever that had nearly ended his pilgrimage before it had properly begun. Some children had come across him lying half-dead by the side of the path that wound up through the mountain pass a mile or so from their village. Seeing from the dirty tatters of his humble robe that he was a holy man, they'd run to fetch help and Salvator had soon been rescued. Men from the village had carried him back on a wagon, he'd been fed and tended to, and fresh straw bedding had been laid down for him in an empty stable that he shared with some chickens.

During the weeks that followed, the priest's fever had passed and his strength had gradually returned. By then, though, winter was closing in, and he'd decided to delay resuming his journey until the spring. To begin with, most of the villagers hadn't objected to his remaining with them

two or three more months. It was an extra mouth to feed, true; but then, an extra pair of hands was always useful at this hard time of year. During his stay, Salvator had helped clear snow, repair storm damage to the protective wall that circled the village, and tend to the pigs. In his free time, he'd also begun to draw a crowd with his impromptu public sermons, which had grown in frequency and soon become more and more impassioned.

Needless to say, there were those who were unhappy with his presence, and this became more noticeable as time went on. It was a somewhat closed community, somewhat insular, easily given to suspicion and especially where strangers were concerned – even when those strangers were men of God. And most especially when those strangers frightened some people with their odd ways.

The first rumours had begun to circulate about a month after Salvator's recovery. Just a few passing whispers to begin with, quickly growing to a widespread consensus that the presence of this itinerant priest was cause for deep concern. Increasingly, villagers complained that the content of his sermons was scandalous. He railed against core doctrines of the Church, even attacked the views of the Pope, which he declared to be ignoble and ungodly. But that wasn't the worst of it. What really worried people were the seizures.

Once while feeding the pigs and again in the middle of delivering one of his sermons, Salvator had been seen suddenly to go rigid, then drop to the ground and begin to thrash about in a way that absolutely terrified those who witnessed it. During these inexplicable convulsions, his limbs would twitch violently and his face would contort in the most horrible way, foam drooling from the corners of his mouth and his one eye rolled up in its socket so that only the white showed. Most alarmingly of all, it was reported

that he would babble and croak in a strange, guttural language that none of the villagers had ever heard before.

As the rumours inevitably gathered momentum, so did the growing belief that Salvator was possessed by demons. They'd all heard of such things, though never before seen it with their own eyes. What else could explain these frightful episodes?

It was after the third seizure happened that the village elders convened to discuss the urgent situation. The assembly of greybeards unanimously decided that such evil could not be allowed to remain in their midst. Despite the risks posed by the weather, they all agreed that their best horseman, a young carpenter named Guy, should be dispatched at once to the nearby town to notify the higher church authorities. In the meantime, Salvator should be locked up in a stone barn outside the village walls and guarded day and night, so that whatever sinister forces had taken hold of him could do no further harm.

When, after several worrying days, Guy returned from his trek, he was accompanied by an envoy of the bishop and a small party of officials and soldiers, who rapidly set up court in the village's tiny stone chapel and summoned the prisoner to be brought before them. Covered in chains, Salvator was forced to prostrate himself in front of the bishop's envoy, explain himself for preaching such scandalous and profane sermons, and provide evidence to all present that he was not in league with powers of Satan.

The evidence Salvator gave them was all they needed. Right before their eyes, and to their horror and satisfaction in equal measure, he succumbed to yet another bout of convulsions that proved beyond any doubt that some devilish entity had taken possession of this man's soul. There was no alternative but to purge it out, to banish

the demon and cleanse the corrupted fleshly vessel that had been its host.

Death by burning was the only way.

Bit by bit, the sluggish flames gained on the pyre, helped by a chill wind from the mountain that picked up and cleared the smoke. Salvator screamed in agony as the fire began to dance around his feet, then up his legs. Part of his robe burned away, exposing blackened and blistered skin.

'I curse you!' he screamed through the heat mist at the church envoy on his high seat, and at the lesser authorities and the soldiers gathered nearby to watch.

'And you!' Salvator bellowed at the crowd. 'Damn your souls, for what you have done today to an innocent man!'

The people shrank away, terrified in their belief that it was the voice of the tormented demon inside him that they were hearing. Children buried their faces in their mothers' robes; hands were pressed over their ears to protect them from evil.

The flames leaped higher around Salvator, and still he wouldn't succumb but kept on roaring at them.

'God sees the shameful sin that has united you all. May His eternal curse be on you all, and your children, and your children's children after them! May a thousand years of pestilence rot this unholy place and everyone in it!'

One of the soldiers glanced nervously at the bishop's envoy, ready to raise his bow and fire an arrow into the heart of the flames in order to silence the voice that was rattling the nerves of even the most hardened man present.

But the envoy shook his head. For purification to be effective, no mercy could be allowed. The heretic must burn to death.

And burn to death Salvator did, though it took an unbearably long time. To the villagers, it seemed as if the flaming

human torch went on railing at them even as the sizzling flesh peeled from its bones. Then, finally, his cries diminished and he hung limply, no longer resisting, from the blackened chains that held him to the stake. The remnants of his robe burst alight. Then his tonsured hair. By now he could barely be seen for the flames. His one rolling eyeball seemed to peer balefully at them from the scorched ruin of his face.

Long after the carbonised skeleton had fallen into the cinders leaving the chains hanging empty, Salvator's voice went on ringing inside the heads of the villagers. They would never forget the promise of everlasting pestilence that had been heaped on them and their line.

Within months, Salvator's words would come true.

The martyr's curse had begun.

Chapter One

Undisclosed location
North Korea
3 June 2011

Not long after his entry team had penetrated the inner core of the building, Udo Streicher knew it was over.

His information had been first-rate. The materials he'd been looking to acquire were exactly where his sources had said they would be, and he'd come within a hair's breadth of having them. Millions had been spent on intelligence and equipment. An entire year had been devoted to planning. Twelve-hour days. Sometimes sixteen. Checking every possible detail. Obsessing over the layout of the hidden complex. Analysing the security systems. Evaluating the risk. Assessing their chances of making it out alive.

And for all that meticulous planning, now the raid had gone badly wrong. The mission was blown. The ten-strong group was down to nine. The equipment was lost. They'd ditched everything they'd brought with them, except their weapons.

Behind them in the white-walled, starkly neon-lit corridor, three dead bodies lay sprawled in pools of blood. Two of them belonged to the armed Korean security personnel

who'd surprised the intruders just as they were about to make it through the final set of doors that separated them from their objective. The third belonged to an Austrian called Dieter Lenz, a follower of Streicher from the beginning. But Dieter wasn't important any more. What mattered was getting out of here. Streicher refused to consider the alternatives. He'd rather die by his own bullet than face a lifetime of incarceration in the roach-infested hellhole of a North Korean prison camp.

The nine remaining members of the team ran in tight formation, their clattering footsteps all but drowned out by the shriek and whoop of alarm sirens that were sounding off all through the facility. Hannah Gissel had her pistol drawn and her teeth bared in a kind of animal ferocity. Torben Roth was clutching the Uzi he'd gunned the guards down with. Bringing up the rear were the Canadian, Steve Evers, and Sandro Guidinetti. Guidinetti looked like he was losing it under the pressure.

'Which way did we come?' Wolf Schilling yelled as they reached a fork in the corridor. Every door and wall in the lab complex looked the same.

'This way,' Streicher said, pointing left. He gripped Hannah's arm and they raced on. The sirens seemed even louder, a wall of sound that permeated everything. Another door. Another bend in the corridor.

A side entrance swung open, and suddenly the way ahead was blocked off. A four-man security patrol, dressed in khaki paramilitary uniform and wielding Chinese-made assault rifles. Screaming at them in Korean. Streicher knew little of the language but the message was clear: DROP YOUR WEAPONS! SURRENDER OR WE WILL SHOOT!

The stand-off lasted less than two seconds. Torben Roth was the first to open fire, shooting from the hip and hosing

nine-millimetre rounds up the corridor. Hannah snapped off three, four, five shots from her Glock. The guards crumpled up and fell. Streicher shot the last one with his own Heckler & Koch. He did it without hesitation or compassion. It wasn't the first time he'd shot a man.

'Come on!' Hannah yelled. Her eyes were flashing with a mixture of aggression and terror and pure adrenalin. She leaped over the heap of dead men. The other eight followed.

Streicher felt a strange surge of pride in his woman. Weeks earlier, he'd decided that in the event of the mission going bad, he would kill her before he took his own life. A wild, untamed spirit like hers didn't belong in captivity.

They ran faster. The alarms drowned out everything. Every door they passed, Streicher kept expecting to see fly open and hordes of guards swarming through. But so far there was nothing like the level of resistance he'd feared. The North Korean economy was dismal to the point that even a hard-core military dictatorship could be forced to make serious defence cuts. That might be the reason. After all, nobody knew about this facility. Security could have been pared down to the bone, with nobody any the wiser. Maybe the remaining few guards were locked down elsewhere in the building, unwilling to face the armed intruders' superior numbers. Maybe there were no more guards at all.

All of which was making him begin to wonder if they'd been premature in beating a retreat.

Before he could decide what to do, they'd reached the main entrance. The jungle air enveloped them like a hot, wet cloak as they burst outside. The alarm sirens were even louder out here, their echo bouncing off the buildings, distortion crackling in the team's ears. The compound was grey concrete, as vast and forbidding as a high-security prison yard, and ringed with a mesh fence supported on

steel posts fifteen feet high and topped all the way around with coils of razor wire. The main building was far larger than the rest, white, squat, windowless, like a giant bunker. The smaller buildings clustered around it, mainly storage units and maintenance sheds, were painted in military drab green. The main gate was directly opposite the white building, eighty yards away. From there, a concrete road spanned the patchy open ground surrounding the facility, where the jungle had been roughly cut back to clear room for it.

Officially, this place had never been built. The North Korean rulers firmly denied its existence. US Intelligence had long suspected otherwise, but their satellites had never been able to distinguish the facility from hundreds of others across the country that looked outwardly identical.

The American spies were clever, thorough people. But Udo Streicher was cleverer, and took thoroughness to a level that verged on the pathological. If anyone could find out what was really in there, he could. And he had, though it had cost him a fortune and a lot of hard work.

Needless to say, Streicher and his people hadn't used the main gate to get inside. The hole they'd cut in the wire was a hundred yards along the perimeter fence, on the east side of the compound where the bushes grew closer and the no-man's-land was at its narrowest. Beyond, a thicket of trees hid the clearing where the team's two choppers waited on standby to whisk them and their precious spoils back over the border to the RV point on the coast, from where a motor launch would carry them eastwards to the safety of Japan. A chartered jet from Tokyo back home and dry to Europe, and the mission would have been accomplished.

A successful outcome would then have become the start

of the next phase in the plan, one that Streicher had dreamed about for a long, long time.

'We're clear,' Roth said, glancing around them. He seemed to be right. The compound was deserted and empty apart from a parked row of Jeeps in Korean People's Army colours.

'We've taken them all out, that's why,' said Hannah. 'There's hardly anyone guarding this place. Which means we need to turn around and go back inside and get the stuff. Right now. Before it's too late.'

Streicher said nothing. He stood still, his head cocked a little to one side as if he was smelling the air.

'She's right, Udo,' Schilling said. 'We have time. We can still do this.'

'It's what we came here for,' Hannah said. 'It's why we chose this place, remember? That's what you told us. Our best chance. Our only chance.'

Streicher said nothing.

'I'm up for it. Or else we came all this way for nothing,' Roth said.

'And Dieter died for nothing,' Schilling said.

Streicher said, 'There's no time. It will have to wait.'

'Wait how long? Months? Years?'

'As long as it takes.'

'No. I want to do this,' Hannah said.

So did Streicher. He wanted it more than anything in the world. But he shook his head. 'Listen.'

He'd heard it the moment they stepped outside. It had been barely audible over the sirens, but now the sound was growing. It was the growling rumble of vehicles approaching. Hard to tell how many. Enough to be a serious problem. Enough to have made him absolutely right about getting out of here, this minute.

'Oh, shit,' Hannah said, as she heard it too.

Then they saw where the sound was coming from, and suddenly things were very much worse.

The line of military vehicles emerged at speed from the jungle, roaring along the road right for the main gate. Six of them, ex-Russian GAZ Vodnik troop carriers, each carrying up to nine men. The column made no attempt to slow for the gate. The first vehicle crashed straight through, steel frame and galvanised wire mesh crumpling and folding underneath its wheels as it stormed inside the compound followed by the rest of the convoy. The vehicles fanned out and skidded to a halt. Their hatches flew open and a mass of men spilled out. More than fifty fully armed troops. Against nine.

'Fuck them,' Torben Roth said. He snapped another magazine into his Uzi. Hannah raised her pistol. Gröning and Hinreiner looked at each other, then at Guidinetti.

The clatter of small-arms fire filled the compound. Roth held his ground. A burst to the left; a burst to the right. Then he staggered and dropped his Uzi and blood flew and hit the wall behind him. Streicher ducked down low and ran to the fallen man and saw that his face had been ripped open by a rifle bullet. Streicher grasped him by the arms and began dragging him behind cover, helped by Gröning. Hannah kept on firing. Several of the soldiers were down, but now the Russian GAZ Vodniks were advancing and bringing their on-board heavy machine guns into play. The roar shattered the air; 14.5mm bullets ploughed through the parked Jeeps, gouged craters in the buildings, chewed up the concrete.

Streicher now knew beyond any doubt that he'd been right. Things were bad enough already. If they'd stayed inside the building a minute longer, none of them would have made it this far alive.

'Help me,' he yelled, dragging the bleeding, disfigured Roth. Between them, he and Wolf Schilling and Miki Donath managed to manhandle the injured man out of the field of fire and between the buildings while the others did what they could to hold back the soldiers.

The firepower coming at them was overwhelming. Hannah fell back when her pistol was empty. Guidinetti was hit in the shoulder and Evers was supporting him as they made their retreat. How so many of them made it back to the hole in the wire without getting shot to pieces, Streicher would never know. Staggering through the undergrowth towards the trees with Roth's weight slippery and bloody in his arms, he was praying that the soldiers hadn't already intercepted the waiting helicopters.

Sixty seconds later and the choppers would have been gone anyway. The pilots had heard the gunfire and were quickly powering up their turbines in desperation to get the hell away from here. Their skids were dancing off the ground and the vegetation was being flattened by the downdraught as the surviving team members clambered on board. Streicher, Hannah, Donath and Schilling and the injured Roth on one; Evers and Guidinetti and Hinreiner and Gröning aboard the other.

The soldiers were coming. Flitting shapes among the trees. Muzzle flashes lighting up the shadows of the thick green forest. Bullets cracked off the Perspex screen of Streicher's chopper.

'Take it up! Get us out of here!' he yelled to the pilot.

As the choppers lifted off, the thicket suddenly crashed aside. Like a great scarred green armour-plated dinosaur scouring the jungle for its prey, a Korean People's Army VTT-323 armoured personnel carrier lurched through the trees, flattening bushes and saplings and anything else in its

path. Its twin machine guns swivelled up towards the escaping aircraft. But those weren't what Streicher was gaping down at from the cockpit of the rising helicopter. It was the turret-mounted multiple rocket launcher that was angling up at them, tracking its targets and ready to fire at any moment.

'Higher!' he bawled over the din of the rotors, thumping the pilot on the shoulder. 'Higher!'

Two rockets launched simultaneously in a twin jet of flame. They streaked through the trees and hit the second chopper and blew it apart in a blinding flash that gave way to an expanding fireball.

'NO!' Streicher howled as he saw it go down.

The burning wreck dropped from the air and crashed down on top of the armoured personnel carrier. A secondary explosion rocked the jungle, and then Streicher saw no more as his pilot spun up and away at full thrust, nose up, tail down.

They flew in numb silence over the forest. The green canopy zipped by below. Wolf and Miki were trying to hold down the bleeding, squirming Torben Roth and pump morphine into him from the first-aid kit. Hannah was lost in a world of her own, her face drawn and grim and spattered with someone else's blood. She made no attempt to wipe it away.

And Udo Streicher was just beginning to contemplate the scale of the disaster. It would be a long time before he was fully able to calculate his losses, both human and financial.

But he'd be back. This wasn't over. It would never be over. Not until he'd attained his goal. One way or another, the world would know his name before he was done.

It was, after all, his destiny.