

SWORD OF THE
BRIGHT LADY

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WORLD OF PRIME BOOK ONE



M.C. PLANCK



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For Mom, who never stopped hoping I would create.

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1.

WOODEN STICKS AND IRON MEN

He woke in front of a comfortable fire crackling in a stone hearth, in a narrow and uncomfortable bed, and not alone. Sleeping, the girl looked no more than sixteen. Black hair, and he knew it was not his wife. With relief he saw she was still dressed.

But he was naked except for underwear, and that was quite awkward. A dream, of course; any minute now would come the part where he was late for a math test.

Startlingly realistic for a dream, with the pungent smell of wood-smoke and dirt, and, yes, body odor. The girl needed a bath. Not terribly pretty, and no one he recognized. That struck him as quite unsatisfying for a dream. Indeed, the entire room had an unbearably rustic feel, a primitive cabin with the cluttered look of constant occupation. One wall was stone; the others rough-hewn wood, like the bench in front of the fire. Odd bits of a household lay about, and something about them disturbed him. In the firelight it was hard to tell, but though he saw clothes and wicker baskets, firewood and stoneware, something was missing.

Telephones. TVs. A stereo. A light, or even a lamp. These were the things that were absent. He could see nothing in the room that lived on electricity.

A remarkably subtle observation for a dream, he thought. He rubbed his face where the rough blanket had made it itch and waited for the dream to do something.

Then he remembered. He had been cold and lost. He remembered an impossible night sky reflecting off a blanket of untouched snow. He also remembered putting the dogs in the truck, driving out to the hot, dry riverbed for a walk. But the memories didn't connect. There was no bridge between them.

With some unease, he noted that the dream hadn't gone anywhere. The girl stirred in her sleep, the fire crackled, but nothing changed.

All in all, he didn't like this dream. Time to wake up.

He'd had nightmares before, the terror of sleep paralysis and the sensation of losing control. Voice was the one thing you kept; you could still scream, though it was always a struggle, and the sound would awaken you. He drew in a breath, and barely had time to wonder how easy it was before the bellowing shout flew out of him, unrestrained.

The girl shrieked and fell out of bed, and he almost went with her, tangled up in blankets and confusion. Why were his ears ringing? He should have produced no more than a choking cry and then the sensation of falling forward into wakefulness.

Instead, the girl on the floor burst into tears and the door across the room flew open, revealing an old white-haired man in a nightgown, fear and anger on his disheveled face.

Christopher was as surprised as any of them. He lay there trying to understand why he wasn't waking up.

"Helga," the old man said, and his face began to clear, a smile settling into the creases like it belonged there. "*Stanser skriking, du er skremmende gutten.*"

The girl sat up, sniffing. Looking at Christopher seemed to calm her. He knew he was nothing threatening to see, half naked and clutching the blankets to himself, trying to shake the sleep from his head.

Except there was no sleep there. In the welling of a strange and terrible fear, he reached out and slapped the coarse wooden paneling with the back of his hand. Hard, so hard the pain made him wince, and a spot of blood appeared where the skin had split. Instinctively he put his hand to his mouth, and the metallic tang of blood spread truth through him like a poison.

The old man offered the girl a hand, and she climbed to her feet. They exchanged words in their incomprehensible language.

She went to the fireplace, lifting an upturned wicker basket and setting it aside to let flickering light flood the room. Christopher's brain registered that she was wearing a nightshirt as she pulled a tattered dress over it; that she was older than she first appeared, perhaps eighteen; that she turned now to preparing breakfast with a clanking of pots and pans. His brain processed this automatically while the old man came to the bed, adjusted the blankets and made soothing noises. Christopher took it all in but could not make sense of it, could not progress past the brute fact that lay before him.

He was not dreaming.

"*Kan du forstå meg?*" asked the old man, gentle and concerned.

"Where am I?" Christopher demanded. "How long have I been here?" With no answer forthcoming, Christopher put his hand to his chin and found a hint of stubble. A day's worth, at most.

The recognition that he had been in his own bed twenty-four hours ago did not turn out to be comforting. How could he have gone from sand to snow without memory?

"Where are my pants?" he asked, searching for something concrete from his past, his semi-nakedness now terrifying.

The old man guessed his concern, and a laughing comment to the girl sent her to the rack that stood near the fireplace. From it she extracted his jeans and T-shirt. She gave them to him, failing to hide her curiosity over the copper rivets in the denim pockets.

Turning back to her fireplace was all the privacy she was going to give him. Under the blankets he slid into the clothes, grateful for the armor, however thin. Dressed, he felt like a man again.

"Do you speak English?" he demanded.

"*Tålmodighet, min herre,*" the old man said with a grin. "*Piken arbeider så fort som hun kan.*"

That was clearly a "no," although a friendly one. With another smile, the old man ducked back into his room, returning dressed in a dingy white robe belted with rope. The girl handed the man a

steaming cup, and he sat on one end of the bench near the fireplace, sipping his drink. The girl offered Christopher a cup, too.

The sheer normalcy of it all required Christopher to accept the cup. The girl poured herself one and returned to overseeing a pot hung over the fire. The tea was tart and musty, a flavor he had never encountered before. The hot drink made him realize how hungry he was, and he stared at the pot. The girl noticed and blushed. She filled a wooden bowl and handed it to him.

He shoveled food into his mouth with a crude wooden spoon, downing three mouthfuls before he stopped to see what he was eating. Boiled oatmeal, flavored with peas. Unbidden, an ancient nursery rhyme sprang to mind.

*Peas porridge hot,
peas porridge cold,
peas porridge in the pot
nine days old.*

Monks and fireplaces, stoneware and serving girls, a flickering torch on the fireplace mantel. It looked like medieval Europe. Except medieval Europe didn't exist anymore. Even the smallest villages of the old Eastern Bloc countries had electricity now.

Or did they? Maybe he was in some remote Siberian village. Or a Scandinavian hippie commune. A plane crash, amnesia, wandering around in the dark. That was an explanation, or at least a possibility.

"My name is Christopher Sinclair," he told them, wiping the last of the porridge out of the bowl with his fingers.

"*Pater Svengusta,*" replied the old man with a bow of his head, an obvious introduction. "*Og dette er vår kjær Helga,*" he added, pointing at the girl.

"Nice to meet you," Christopher said, although all things considered, it wasn't. "The porridge was very good," he told Helga, although

it wasn't either. Lumpy, soggy, and without even a grain of sugar. Still, he smiled when he gave her back the bowl, and her face started to glow.

He thought about the kind of girl that would get into bed with him without even knowing his name but blushed when he complimented her porridge. Maybe it was a French commune.

"Thank you very much for the food and shelter," he said, looking around for his shoes. "But I really ought to be going now."

Helga was already busy with dishes, but Svengusta watched him with keen interest. Christopher found his sneakers next to the fireplace. They weren't completely dry yet. He put them on anyway.

"Where is my wife?" he asked, fingers fumbling with the lacings. If he had been on a plane, Maggie would have been on it with him. What if she were still out there? He had to go and look for her, now. The urgency rose like a fountain, drawing him to the door where he struggled with the wooden bar that held it closed.

Svengusta followed, concern on his face. The old man jabbered in his foreign tongue. Christopher brushed him aside, driven by panic. When the bar finally fell away, he pushed out into the snow and gulped down the open air of freedom.

The air of freedom was cold. Freezing cold, turning his breath to thick fog in the hard light. He ignored it and stumbled on. The snow was shallow, three or four inches, but the cold leached through his wet shoes like lightning.

After twenty feet, his arms wrapped tight, shaking in the chill, he could go no farther. A village lay around him, silent and dismal—peasant huts, hardly better than log cabins, with thatched roofs. Not a single antenna, power line, or satellite dish to be seen. He was closer to the middle of nowhere than he had ever imagined possible.

The old man stood in the doorway, bemused and sad. One wave of the hand, but in a universal language it said, *Come inside, you'll catch your death of cold.* The bitter truth stung at Christopher, blur-

ring his sight. If Maggie had not already found shelter, it was too late. He had almost died in the night; no one would have survived until morning.

He shouted at the doorway, rebuking the gentle concern. "Were there others? Did you find the crash site? Did you check?"

Of course Svengusta could not understand the words. But he understood the message, it seemed. Sadly he shook his head, spread his hands in emptiness and defeat.

Christopher shivered, paralyzed by despair and anger. His heart pounded with the need to run, to search, to find, but his head could not see past failure. The cold would kill him in a few hours, and he did not even know which direction to start in. Fresh snow covered the ground, obscuring everything.

There was only the hope that Maggie had not been with him on the plane. He would have never walked away from her, under any circumstance. Even if he couldn't remember the crash, he knew that.

Not that he remembered being on a plane. And he couldn't imagine walking away from an aviation disaster without a scratch.

What if he had escaped kidnappers and wandered to safety in this obscure town? Maybe he should be lying low, getting a feel for the lay of land. Drugged, kidnapped, escaped. It made more sense than a plane wreck.

None of it made any damn sense at all.

Reluctantly, angrily, he slogged back into the little wooden room and slumped by the fire. Helga gave him another cup of tea, her lips trembling with his contagious grief.

Svengusta did not let him sit for long. Throwing the last log into the fire, the old man pointed at a hallway next to the fireplace.

"Er en god unggutt og benter noen mere for en gammel mann og en pike, vil De?" he asked with wink.

The universal price of enjoying a fire: fetching more wood. At least it was something useful he could do. The door at the end of the

short passageway was not barred, so he shuffled through it, expecting a storage closet. Instead he found a chapel.

Wooden pews were scattered throughout a large stone hall, the walls thinly dressed with tapestries where they were not broken by narrow windows. At the far end were double doors, and at the near end a huge, unused fireplace and a half-cord of stacked wood.

The windows were too narrow for a man to crawl through, with thick but ill-fitting shutters. The double doors were made from solid planks and bound with iron fittings. It was as fine a reconstruction of a medieval church as he had ever seen, until he looked up to see where all the light was coming from.

A plain wooden chandelier held a dozen gas flames sprouting from little stone cups, wholly out of character for a Dark Age atmosphere.

The open gas flames struck him as an incredible fire hazard. The walls were stone, but the roof was timber, and there was raw wood everywhere. The tapestries were gray and dusty, not fresh and restored. The rough-hewn benches looked suitably handmade, mostly stacked against the walls instead of laid out in display. If this was a museum, it was a very badly run one.

Above the mantel of the fireplace was a wooden frieze, a bas-relief carving. A hard-faced man stared back at him from the wood, a handsome woman standing behind him, etched in astounding detail. He tapped the frieze to make sure it was real wood, not a plastic molding.

The wooden man did not respond, of course, facing outward with serene determination. He stood between the woman and any possible danger, any imaginable threat. His features were solidly European, with a trimmed beard and mustache, but his stance was Oriental, with a katana held in a classic two-hand grip.

The sword had the correct curve, the round *suba* hand-guard, the distinctively wrapped hilt. Christopher could even see the *hamon*—the characteristic wavy pattern from the hand-folding process along the blade. But the man was wearing unmistakably Occidental armor: steel plates

molded like clothing instead of the knotted cords and bamboo of samurai armor.

On the left, a tapestry displayed four men in a defensive semicircle around the same woman. The costumes and the people were solidly medieval Europe. The woman had a halo and was the center of attention. She looked regal, like a queen, or even revered, like some kind of Catholic Marian icon. She was unarmed, but each of the men around her bore a different weapon. One of them was the katana, wielded by the same man in the wooden carving. The others bore a staff, a sickle and a mace, and wore varying kinds of armor, all variations on Western plate or chain.

The tapestry on the right had only the swordsman and the lady. They stood in a delicate embrace, but their status as lovers was unequivocal. So much for Catholicism.

Spurred by the cold, he picked out an armload of wood to replenish the stock in the kitchen. Being productive made him feel better, and the firewood was comfortingly familiar. Not very well cut, however. Most of it still needed splitting.

When he got back to the kitchen, he made chopping motions with his hands. Svengusta produced an ax from the closet at the foot of the bed. Suitably armed, Christopher went back into the chapel to earn his keep.

The ax was ancient, the haft hand-carved and untreated. But the edge was sharp, and it occurred to him that it would make a formidable weapon. Not really his style, however. His university had had a PE requirement, and on a whim he had fulfilled it with kendo, the art of the Japanese sword. The whim had grown into a passion, a love of the pure simplicity, the comradeship of men and women who studied a useless art for the effect it had on their own inner selves. The kata were dances, half stylized and half practical, a silk painting of death and destruction.

Swinging the ax at inert logs was not the same, although it was

exercise. As warmth and blood flowed through his limbs, he began to come alive again. Wherever he was, he was safe for now. If it was a plane crash, then sooner or later someone would come looking for him. If he'd escaped from kidnappers, then the later they found him, the better, and besides, he had an ax.

His mind drifting, the next swing missed the log and almost took off his leg. Maybe the unwieldy ax wasn't such a good idea.

But then he saw a branch, three feet long and gently curved. Plucking it out of the woodpile, he handled it experimentally. A little trimming, and it would make a fine bokken, which was what he used in most of his training and practice anyway. Besides, hadn't Musashi, the greatest duelist in all history, won half his duels with a wooden sword?

Scraping at the stick with the ax blade, he whittled away the hours until Helga called him in to lunch.

Again the food was plain: more porridge, with a yellowish bread that was spongy and slightly stale. But the ambiance was friendly, the old man keeping up a steady stream of wisecracks that had the girl giggling and blushing. Despite the language barrier, he included Christopher in the conversation, holding up both ends by himself and apparently doing a fine job of it.

After lunch, Svengusta prepared to go out, indicating with large hand motions that Christopher should stay inside. Christopher was happy enough to comply, since he was working on the laying-low theory and his impromptu weapon. The bokken was as polished as he could make it; now it needed practice.

In the empty, cold hall of the chapel, he found it easy to escape into the kata. Doing the traditional forms took his mind to familiar, comfortable places.

Pausing to catch his breath, he was interrupted by the double doors creaking open and two visitors slipping inside. The disarray of the room had led him to believe the chapel was not used, and he was as surprised to see them as they obviously were to see him.

They were both young, perhaps eighteen. The girl was pretty, the boy was handsome, and though their clothes were poor and plain medieval peasant costumes, the outfits gave the distinct impression of being their “Sunday best.”

He belatedly realized they weren’t dressed for church, but for each other.

They were polite and respectful, the girl curtsying and the boy bowing his head. Christopher decided he was the interloper here and was about to leave them to their privacy when a third person swaggered through the double doors.

He was not dressed like a peasant. He was richly cloaked in garish colors and fur trim, thirtyish, slightly overweight, and utterly full of himself. Christopher hated him instantly.

The man was as subtle as a foghorn. In one glance he dismissed both Christopher and the boy, and began to address the girl in unctuous tones.

Christopher knew he should walk away, knew he did not understand the subtleties of this affair or even the culture in which it occurred, but the raw emotion of the drama locked him in.

The boy objected; the girl hushed him, and though it was obvious that the girl loathed the richly garbed man, she seemed to be agreeing with him. Maybe he had some authority over her? But from the way he was looking at her, he couldn’t possibly be her father. There was too much naked desire for that.

She pleaded with the boy, passion quavering under her hushed tones. Christopher understood that part as plain as day: *If you love me, leave now. Don’t make a scene.* The boy’s face twisted in anger and pain, while the man smirked.

Suddenly the boy broke and ran, the double doors banging behind him, a swirl of cold snow whisking in his wake. The man laughed and took the girl by the arm. When she shuddered, Christopher snapped.

“No.” Though he spoke English, the intent could not fail to be understood.

The man looked at him, his face aflame, and snarled. Christopher shook his head in denial and pointed to the double doors.

The interloper huffed, but he started to go. He stepped toward the doors, pulling the girl with him. She resisted passively, unwilling to fight but unable to surrender.

“No,” Christopher said again.

Immediately the man spun and advanced on him in a fury, barking like a savage dog. The girl stood rooted, visibly terrified, and Christopher felt a cold queasiness growing in his belly.

The man was wearing a sword, a long, straight piece of metal that was both elegant and utterly practical. This was no hippie commune, no museum reenactment. The anger that poured out was not an act.

Christopher was trapped. Behind him was a rustic cottage and a serving girl. Behind that the quiet village, snowy miles from any kind of authority or civilization or reasonableness.

Or hospital.

Christopher did not want to provoke violence. He wanted to flee. But he had nowhere to go, so he stood, paralyzed by impossibility.

The man took his silence as opposition. His barking reached a crescendo, filling the stone chapel with sound and fury. Christopher tried not to be threatening, but the pressure of the man’s advance made him shift his stance and his hold on the bokken.

Sudden silence, as the man stopped talking and glared with mortal offense. Christopher was under no illusions. Twenty years of smacking people with bamboo sticks, of katas and cutting bundles of paper, did not make him a real swordsman. He had never killed anyone. He had never even tried to hurt someone. This man walked like a professional, the sword hanging from his hip as naturally as the cloak on his back. One mistake, and Christopher would not be allowed to restart the fight, recover from his error, learn from the experience. If the man went for his sword, Christopher would have to—

The man went for his sword.

He was impressively smooth, if not particularly fast. He had the blade almost out of the sheath before Christopher's bokken cracked down on his skull. Christopher knew he had held back some; still, it was a solid blow, and the man should have gone down, cried out, or at least been stunned. Instead, he snarled and stabbed at Christopher with his sword.

Christopher's training saved him and he instinctively parried. After all, hitting people in the head in bamboo-armed sparring matches had never stopped them from attacking him before, why should he expect it to now? His body carried on, even while his mind grappled with the stunning ineffectiveness of his first strike.

He snapped his bokken up into the man's face, smashing the nose. A blow that should have blinded, staggered, distracted, at least gushed blood, only elicited a growl. The man lunged, stabbed again as Christopher stepped back but not far enough. The thick steel blade caressed his left side, opening a six-inch-long gash that spat a fan of red into the air.

But Christopher's bokken was already in motion, wheeling around his head in a great arc, smashing down on the right side of the man's jaw. He did not hold back this time—there was nothing left to hold him, as he passed completely into the moment of the fight, surrendering to the reflex of training. He distinctly heard bone snap and the pitter-patter of drops of blood on the hardwood floor.

The man fell like a stone, Christopher crumpling after him. The double doors creaked, the chapel empty now save for the two bodies.

He came back to real time, and ordinary mind. He held his bleeding flesh together and tried not to panic. The brutal pain helped; the mere thought of moving was petrifying. He tried to cry out, but he could not draw the breath for it. A stomach wound, the worst kind. If he survived the hemorrhage, infection would almost certainly get him. Hopefully the girl had gone for help, although he wasn't sure

what kind of help these people could offer. He needed doctors and emergency surgery, not hippies and herbal tea. He needed an American Embassy. He needed his wife.

He did not want to die among strangers.

Time passed, immeasurably. His mind could not focus on anything but the steady pump of blood. One fact finally penetrated: his opponent was still breathing. He was not dead. Christopher idly wondered if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

The doors burst open, and Svengusta and Helga rushed into the room. The old man knelt to Christopher, examined the wound with professional authority. He reached out to trace the bloody gash with one gentle finger while chanting.

The line of fire went out, the pain suddenly just a memory. Christopher looked down in wonder at his whole flesh. Only the drying blood said it had ever been otherwise.

Svengusta was already kneeling over the other man. He examined him briefly, then stood and began removing his own wool cloak.

"*Løp*," he said to Christopher. "Knockford. *Løp!*"

Christopher did not need to speak the language to understand. Knockford was obviously somewhere, anywhere other than here. And "Run!" was utterly self-evident.

But the same lack of direction that had paralyzed him all morning nullified him. He stood up but did not know which way to turn. Helga was struggling into her own cloak as Svengusta struggled out of his, and when it was free, the old man threw it into Christopher's arms.

The impetus released him. He hurried after Helga, out of the doors into the village, down the road, carrying the cloak uselessly in his hands. After two hundred yards he fell to his knees, gasping for air.

Helga tugged at him, also spent, but fear drove her like a whip. He climbed to his feet and into the cloak. Even though it was too small, hanging barely below his waist, the warmth it gave was the

difference between life and death. Helga hugged her own threadbare cloak tight around her shoulders, and they hustled on. She kept looking over her shoulder in terror until he made her quit. They did not have the energy to waste. Already he was dizzy and nauseous.

He began to notice the cold as the adrenaline in his system faded. Though his body burned with latent energy, a deep psychic weariness threatened to overwhelm him every time the wind reached under his cloak and through the rent in his T-shirt to prod him with icy fingers. He had been seriously wounded, more injured than he had ever been before in his life. It had not been a scratch that could be dismissed with conjuring tricks or ignored by the power of suggestion. But the wound was completely gone, his belly not even sore.

Eventually it occurred to him that his opponent might also be healed. In a panic he looked around for a place to hide, but the snow was unbroken on the roadside and would give away their trail. Nor could he last through the night without shelter. And in his confusion he had left his wooden stick behind.

His only option was to follow Helga, who determinedly marched along a wagon-rut cut through the snow. As the sun slipped to the horizon he began to hope that the cover of darkness would protect them. But nightfall brought its own fears—and the return of memory.

At first it was only the glitter of the country sky unobscured by city lights. But as the sun faded, the stars kept coming, until the wrongness of the night sky blazed out at him, a black velvet canopy crowded with diamonds. He could not find Orion's trusty belt; he could not even imagine constellations in that sparkling ocean.

His pretenses collapsed under the weight of twinkling stars. No one could kidnap the constellations; no plane could fly him to any part of the globe that would look like this. He remembered the confusion now, one moment desert heat and the next winter's cold. He had called for his dogs, but the jingle of their collars was gone. He had looked back for the way he had come, only to find his tracks began abruptly

in the snow as if he had stepped through an invisible doorway. A doorway that was already closed when he'd rushed back, leaving him freezing and alone in a silent forest. With nothing for company but the trees and the impossible, innumerable stars.

He stopped, gaping at the sky, reading the pitiless message spelled out in brilliant points in the night: *lost*, beyond all hope and understanding, beyond all ordinary meaning of the word. Everything he had built, everything he had struggled for and fought for and won, was gone, stolen away in an instant.

And with it went the only treasure that really mattered: Maggie. He would never see her again. Robbed of purpose, he stood rooted by despair.

Helga pulled him into motion, leading him forward like a dumb beast.