

(This book is part of a new quest I made in *Oscuro's Oblivion Overhaul*. It is the main guide to the places that hold pieces of a unique paladin armor that must be re-joined and worn in order to retrieve Path of Iron—Melus Petilius' fabled claymore. This quest greatly expands the original game's lore of this paladin and sets itself against Melus' role for one of the Daedra Lord quests. That is, completing one of them forbids the completion of the other—thereby forcing players to choose between a rather quick task that yields a Daedra reward or a long journey that yields a much greater prize.

It also contrasts the “evil” nature of the Daedra quest with the “holy” role of Melus and Vena's savior in the eyes of The Nine (gods in *Elder Scrolls'* lore). The book also gives a plausible explanation for Melus' existence as a shy and reclusive hermit—one that otherwise could be seen of little interest to something as powerful as a Daedra.

Finally, it is found within a new, hidden mini-dungeon where Melus keeps an altar and custom portrait of Vena—alongside other mementos of their relationship).

Jorge Salgado “Oscuro”

### A Path of Iron

To Vena, from your eternal love, M.

Never did I think that my hand, so worn and callous from strife against evil, would hold a delicate quill for so long. You would laugh seeing me like this: hunched down and buried upon these pages, as uncomfortable as when we attended those dinners that your family hosted for their fellow noblemen. You laughed so freely at my harsh manners and my brutish etiquette, while I did my best to pretend being at ease around all of that elitist nonsense. Damn, woman--to be with you I would have sacrificed anything to be part of your life, even one among the superfluous nobility. Instead you chose to join mine. Why did they let you leave with me? Why not stop you from running into the wild with a humble and simple Paladin? I would not be alone, writing in hopes you will hear my heart, if you had not loved me so.

Perhaps it was that night, when your family's friends--thrilled to hear the tales of a man of war--pushed me into recounting my adventures and spoils, that you found something missing in your life. Something that called you to leave all that you knew. At least, this is what I tell myself when I weaken and cannot bear longer the thought of having failed you.

I remember how you looked at me then as vividly as if you were staring into my eyes right now. You were amazed, in awe, as if enchanted by an Illusionist's spell. You kept your eyes locked on mine, glowing by the firelight, and a thousand moments crossed them without a blink. Only the squinting and the smiles changed your face's surface that night. Do you remember? Even your uncle nudged you in disapproval, seeing how your attention was beginning to appear unseemly, when I told the audience about the raids between Minotaurs and Ogres in the mountains north of the Great Forest.

Remember? I was alone that day, escorting a group of pilgrims in their way to an Akatosh' Shrine just south of Bruma. I suggested heading east, towards the Imperial City, and once there we would take the Silver Road, heading North towards Bruma. I knew that the Orange Road would have been a quicker route, but I also knew that it had recently seen a lot of activity from Minotaurs and Ogres. The information came from Taragaer himself, a master ranger and woodsman the likes of which are not born any more. He had tracked raiding parties of the beasts, who fiercely fought each other for control of the territory. If he had given me a warning about the Orange Road then I was going to take it to heart.

But some of the pilgrims, specially Lord Etilius--a nobleman turned pious fanatic in his old age--and his erratic high-elf friend, Al-Kuhl, insisted like drunk men that we should waste no time in reaching the shrine. Not only that, but Al-Kuhl expected the party to take a small detour in order to inspect the waters south of Sancre Tor, believed to hold a magical healing essence that he was researching. The other pilgrims respected Etilius position in Chorrol and knew well of his irate character. Rather than begin the pilgrimage in discord they agreed with them to take the

northern road towards Bruma instead of the way I suggested. Grudgingly, the words of Taragaer still resonating in my mind, I conceded. If they were so foolish to ignore the warnings then the least I could do was to offer my arm in their defense.

It was mid-day when we reached the bend that turned the Orange Road eastward. Just over the steep hill a small path intersected with the road, leading north again, towards Sanctre Tor. The waters that Al-Kuhl searched ran beneath its hanging bridge.

I had visited the area before and remembered its forms. It was a dangerous place. The large pond created by the stream sat against steep mountain walls. Only its south-eastern edge provided an escape route from an otherwise indefensible position. Many mountain creatures sought the clear waters of the stream, its cascade, and the calm pond. At dusk I would not have approached that death-bowl without an army. But nightfall was still several hours away and the light of the day shone brightly all around us. We arrived at the pond without much worry.

I guided Al-Kuhl to the waters he sought, right above the waterfall and beneath the hanging bridge, while the party rested and ate some provisions between the pond and the Orange Road. Al-Kuhl stepped into the stream and started unpacking his magical instruments to investigate its water. I decided to reach a higher ground from where to gain a good view of our surroundings. The hanging bridge was a perfect sentinel spot.

I climbed the rocks above us. As soon as I stood above the river's chasm I noticed that the ground around Sanctre Tor's path and the entrance to Shadow's Rest cavern was well-trodden. Plants were flattened, stomped, and their shoots torn. The cave used to be a contested lair to all sorts of wilderness dwellers because of its elevated position and proximity to both water and a road. Imperial Guards had cleared it several times in the past, usually dispatching bands of marauders and cutthroats. I quickly ascertained that their last excursion into it was far in the past. A deep sense of urgency clutched my gut. I had to take everyone away from the area.

No sooner than I realized the risk, I felt the ground under my feet shake. I heard voices yelling my name, screaming. They were suddenly drowned by deep and potent bellowings--Minotaurs! I turned around and saw our party scrambling in all directions as a horde of the beasts charged forth. They came running down the Orange Road, surprising the pilgrims against the mountain's slopes. A fortunate pair managed to run west following the road, back to Chorrol. The rest were trapped between the minotaurs and the pond's deep bowl.

I leaped over the edge and landed at the top of the cascade. I drew my claymore, raised it over my head and let out a furious roar. Path of Iron shone, reflecting bright sunlight between the minotaurs and their preys. The beasts stopped, confused, and looked above them--almost too late.

I had already jumped down, aiming between the horns of a great minotaur, and cleaved Path of Iron in its skull before I even touched the water. The monster fell instantly, its head split in twain, on the shore of the pond. It took the rest of the horde a moment to regain their confidence and charge against me. I moved around them, keeping them away from the pilgrims, and forcing them to stumble upon each other. I had to keep them in a frontal line. Getting surrounded would have meant the death of the pilgrims, and my own.

I swung my sword to the left, against their unarmed flanks, and sidestepped to the right to avoid their attacking hands. Then I feinted to the right again, but ducked under their over-extended blows, moving left to their right flanks while deeply cutting their flesh. Two minotaurs fell quickly with this old trick. Two more, small and agile, fanned out and sought to stop my circling steps. Another stood tall in front of me. They would be too quick for me to avoid them. I retreated, slowly, into the waters of the pond, with my back against its steep walls. The water and mud would slow them down. I brought them into the pond as far as I could. They readied for the kill.

The minotaur on my left hesitated. He would be the first to attack. He charged forward, a split second before its companions. I turned around, stepped above the water on the surface of a rock and pushed against it as strongly as I could. I jumped over the attacking minotaur, and lunged my sword against the throat of their leader. Surprised by my quick leap, the leader could not avoid my blade. It sunk into its larynx, letting blood spurts up its mouth. It fell with a loud splash. I quickly pointed my sword to the astonished minotaurs, whose backs were now against the wall--the tables turned.

But I had delayed their death for too long. I heard behind me the stomping of more minotaurs. Another three had arrived to reinforce their interrupted raid. I was about to start cursing their meddling when a horrific scream came from above us. Suddenly, a body flew over the cascade like a leaf in a storm. It landed behind me--Al-Kuhl was dead, his skull completely shattered by a powerful blow. I looked again to the cascade. A huge mass of gray flesh and bulging muscles stood above it. That was the largest ogre I had ever seen.

Before the minotaurs could react, half a dozen ogres jumped from the rocks into their midst. Their mutual hatred paled in comparison to their dislike for a handful of pilgrims and their lone defender. They engaged in a brutal fight. I ran towards my surviving companions and commanded them to follow me out of the pond. I led them out, dragging with me Al-Kuhl's remains and holding by the waist a gravely injured pilgrim. The confusion of their all out war made it possible for us to escape them.

We hurried down the Orange Road, towards Chorrol. But as soon as we cleared the hill we stopped dead on our tracks. The ogre leader stood in front of us, blocking our escape route. It calmly caressed a large stone club, dented from heavy use and stained with Al-Kuhl's blood. The foul monster squinted, betraying its glee in having surprised us, and no doubt anticipating what seemed like an easy slaughter.

I let go of the wounded Pilgrim and Al-Kuhl's body. The ogre grinned, its mouth

twisting into a grotesque mass of deformed flesh. It knew that its size countered my advantage in having the higher-ground. I walked towards the ogre, who made no movement in response to mine. I never stopped walking forward, as if it did not exist, and I noticed that the ogre was suddenly surprised by my temerity. My only sign of acknowledgment was my locked stare against its vile form. The ogre narrowed its eyes, thinking about what I would do next. That's how I wanted it--to keep it guessing--a fraction of time more and it would be too late.

I lunged forward and ran with Path of Iron firmly grasped back-handed on my right side. The ogre was taken aback by my sudden speed. It lifted the stone club, ready to swing it sideways against my body. It knew that any place would be deadly; it did not care about finesse. As its blow started arching, I let my legs slip into the air and leaned back, using my momentum to slide right under the ogre's powerful strike. It touched the tip of my helmet, thrusting it out of my head. The ogre, seeing the golden helmet fly, grinned for a moment thinking that my head was still lodged inside it. I quickly dug my heels on the ground and crouched, placing my sword's edge against the beast's open flank. I yelled and pushed downhill. Path of Iron slid across the ogre's torso with all my strength. The blade cut so deeply that its tip broke several ribs before exiting through the ogre's back. The beast fell backwards and let out a scream of agony. The sound drowned in blood. I stood up besides my fallen foe. It looked at me with disbelief, trying to hold its severed torso together, for a moment, before exhaling its last breath.

I glanced behind me. The frightened pilgrims were as still as the dead ogre leader. I urged them to move, knowing that the winners of the fight behind us would soon make chase. Lord Etilius asked me to leave Al-Kuhl's body behind when he saw me lifting it over my shoulder. I ignored him. No one under my protection would remain to be defiled by the armies of evil. We ran down the Orange Road, only feeling safe once we found a patrol of Imperial Legionnaires. They had been alerted by the members of our party that earlier had managed to escape, before the chaos and madness truly fell on us.

We were escorted to Chorrol. Despite our best efforts, the wounded pilgrim did not

survive the trip, dying before priests could come to our aid. To this day, what is most vivid of that memory is his look before death. He was resigned to his fate, to the fear that took over him in those last moments, but he nevertheless revealed his gratitude in our help. As I knelt beside him, he held my hand firmly, his eyes telling of a bond that would survive even the cold sleep. The man barely knew me but our experience was worth half a century of friendship. A hope was forged then that perhaps despite all the ruinous shame, despite all the failed efforts and the pain of life, its fragility was its strongest defense.

Bah, listen to this old man! I never thought it would come to this, telling tales of my youth as if entertaining impressionable children in a town's plaza. Perhaps it is easier for me to speak of those moments than it is to speak about you. That was my purpose in writing these pages. I feel weak. I need to hear your voice, even if it is in my own mind. But it hurts so much, Vena, so much. Excuse my faults. No, I am not getting grumpy, not now that I can remember that silvery laughter that so much comfort brings me. I know what you would do now--tease my seriousness and my stubbornness. You are right. But understand that I could not bear it any longer. I am stubborn and will not retake my sword ever again.

After your death, after, yes, I won't speak of it as a failure. I know this, but please hear me with a clear heart, my love. After you died in my absence I became angry, deranged with sorrow and fury. At first I blamed them. The evil in this world had taken me away from you during the time that you needed me most. They had stolen what was dearest to me. I would bring vengeance upon them. I left our house, with nothing else but my armor and my swords, hoping that I would soon meet my end and so be rejoined with you.

But that was not to be my fate. I traveled throughout Cyrodiil foolishly charging against any creature of darkness, against any den of corruption, against anything that could kill me. But nothing stood alive or undead once I was done. I despaired. The gods played a cruel game with my fate. They denied my wishes, instead giving me more strength and power to destroy that I had ever possessed. Blind to their true intentions, I started challenging them, taunting death even closer at every step. In

every lair I vanquished I left a piece of my armor, denuding myself before the sharp and twisted weapons of my foes.

My fine golden armor, my Paladin's pride, was then imbued with the fury of the heavens. I interpreted that as a sign that the Nine had taken me up on my challenge, binding my armor to the resting places of my slaughters. To prove my will, the first thing I left were my boots--deep inside far east caverns known as the Lost Boy Caves. I walked thereafter with nothing to protect my steps in the long journey.

The northern minotaurs of Fort Horunn fell under my blades, where I left my helmet, hoping that the next blow to my head would be the last. But the undead of the centric Ruins of Bawn were not strong enough to do their task. Almost in disbelief, I defied them by dropping my shield before their last stand.

I was not surprised anymore when the evil in Fingerbowl Caves, even so strong after centuries of fending off Imperial City patrols, could not but find their long-avoided final death. Leaving my gauntlets there was almost an afterthought.

Waist deep in the mud of the remote marshlands, I defeated the bog ogres of Shattered Scales caves. I barely remember what happened there, in the darkness of its damp caverns. My greaves were gone by the time I left that lair of pure evil. I was tired, finally, and probably dropped them without ceremony or care, as I would have discarded a piece of stale bread.

The gods had betrayed me at every step. Only my chest still held their insignia, and I chose the vilest of creatures to finish off my arrogant and shameful existence. The powerful vampires of Lipsand Tarn, the fabled lair of blood-thirsty monsters to which the citizens of Chorrol appeal to scare children from the dark, would find their mightiest foe. In return I would find my well-deserved death.

Exhausted, after weeks of fighting and traveling, I arrived at the steps leading up to Lipsand Tarn. I charged into its halls like a rabid dog, using the last drops of my strength to slay my terrible enemies. Wave after wave, the hordes of evil fell before me. I swam in blood and stepped over severed limbs. Clouded by fury and pain I cleaved my way to the very bottom of the ruins.

There, alone, I stood with my head lowered, cursing the Nine for their cruelty and hate. I took off the cuirass, my last bastion of righteousness, and cast it into the air. I yelled at them in despair and vowed to end my own life.

At that moment, a sense of utter peace overcame me. It had been so long since last I had felt it that I could barely remember it. I started to weep. I knelt on the ground and prayed to the Nine to give me the strength to understand. Suddenly, a flash of golden light cleared my mind, dispelling my fears and my doubts. The gods had spoken to me.

It was not mischief, nor disdain or ignorance, what prompted them to carry me through my suicidal quest. They cared for their chosen one and wanted to wash my deep wounds in the thick of the battle. They wanted me to realize that I was the ruler of my destiny and that no amount of anger or bloodshed would undo my past. They wanted me to regain my love for the living just as they loved their Paladin. I realized then that you would have wanted the same for me, dear Vena.

You would want me to live in peace, to find what we sought, to care for the world as you once did. Our bond, our fate, would not end with your death but would live on through my deeds and my hope. I understand now just as I did then, in the depths of Lipsand Tarn.

Yet, forgive my stubbornness and my faulty spirit. I could no longer continue with all that violence and death around me. I could never again raise my arm against a foe, I

would not give destiny the chance of failing on what it could have been. Perhaps you should add another vice to my list. Even if I could continue alone, the responsibility of a wasted chance was much to bear. Not because it meant defeat, but because it meant having lost you, forever. And that is my final, most terrible, and most sweet weakness in my heart--my love for you. I love you more than myself, more than any other being in this world.

I returned to our home set on this path. I would remember you and offer nothing else but my words and counsel, never again my fury, to those that may be in need. An eternity by your side, with your smile, your eyes, your warmth on my mind, is more worthy to me than any victory against evil and any life that I may save through it. Path of Iron now rests by your side, joining what once was with what now is, never to be lifted by my hand again. The powers of the Nine have blessed my choice. They now guard your grave, my life and the blade that binds us. Only if I were to prove to them that war runs again in my veins, to prove to them that I am worthy of wearing my Paladin's armor, would they release my weapon, along with my soul and your own into the realms of the unknown.

Even if I long for that moment, I cannot carry it forth. My love is so strong that defies even the gods. Any moment by your side now carries more meaning to me than any promise of the otherworld. For that, for my unyielding devotion to you, Vena, my wife, my friend and my love, I ask forgiveness. It will not be long, I promise, before we have a chance to test together what it means to dwell outside this life. Until then, I will remain by your side, the only one I know and feel in my old heart.