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# THE VALKYRIES



PAULO COELHO

AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER  
THE ORIGINAL COPY ALCHEMIST

# **The Valkyries**

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The Valkyries Coelho, Paulo

Prologue

Something that is of great importance to me? J. thought for a few moments before responding. Magic.

No, something else, Paulo insisted.

Women, J. said. Magic and women.

Paulo laughed.

They're important to me, too, he said. Although marriage has slowed me down a bit.

It was J.'s turn to laugh.

A bit, he said. Just a bit.

Paulo filled his master's glass with wine. It had been four months since they had seen each other,

and this was a quite special night. Paulo wanted to talk for a while longer, build the suspense,

before giving J. the package he had brought.

I used to imagine the great masters as people who were far removed from the world, he said to J. If you had answered me that way a few years ago, I think I would have abandoned my apprenticeship.

You should have done that, J. said, sipping at his wine. And I would have found a beautiful woman disciple to take your place.

They drank the entire bottle of wine as they sat talking in the restaurant located on the top floor of J.'s hotel. They spoke of work, magic, and women. J. was euphoric about the huge contract he had just negotiated for the Dutch multinational for which he worked. And Paulo was excited about the package he had brought with him.

Let's have another bottle, Paulo said.

In honor of what?

Your coming to Rio de Janeiro.... The beautiful view from the window over there.... And the present I've brought you.

J. looked out the window to see Copacabana beach sparkling below. The view deserves a toast, he said, signaling to the waiter.

When they were halfway through the second bottle, Paulo placed the

package on the table.

Looking at J., he said, If you were to ask me what is important to me, I would say: my master.

It was he who taught me to understand that love is the only thing that never fails. He who had the patience to lead me along the intricate paths of magic. He who had the courage and dignity,

despite his powers, to present himself always as a person with some doubts and with certain weaknesses. He who helped me to understand the forces that can transform our lives.

We've had a lot of wine, J. said. I don't want to get serious.

I'm not talking about serious things. I'm talking about joyful things. I'm talking about love.

He pushed the package to J.'s side of the table. Open it.

What is his?

A way of saying thank you. And of passing on to others all the love you taught me.

J. opened the package. It contained almost two hundred typed pages, on the first of which was written *The Alchemist*.

Paulo's eyes were gleaming.

It's a new book, he said. Look at the next page.

There was an inscription written in longhand: For J., the alchemist who knows and uses the secrets of the Great Work.

Paulo had anxiously awaited this moment. He had been able to keep completely secret the fact that he was writing a new book, even though he knew that J. had really liked his previous book.

This is the original manuscript, Paulo continued. I'd like you to read it before I send it to the publisher.

He tried to read the expression in his master's eyes, but they were impenetrable.

I have meetings all day tomorrow, J. said, so I'll be able to read it only at night. Let's have lunch two days from now.

Paulo had been expecting a different reaction. He thought that J. would be happy, and moved by the inscription.

Let's do that, said Paulo, hiding his disappointment. I'll be back in two days.

J. called for the check. They walked silently to the elevator. J. pushed the button for the eleventh floor.

When the elevator stopped at his floor, J. pushed the Emergency button to hold the door open.

Then he approached Paulo and said, May the Lamb of God protect you, making a sign on the forehead of his disciple.

Paulo embraced his master and said good night. Resetting the button, J. stepped out of the elevator.

Why didn't you make copies of the original? he asked, as the door began to close.

In order to give God the chance to make it disappear, if that was his will.

Wise decision, Paulo heard J. say as the door closed. I hope that the literary critics never discover where it is.

They met two days later, at the same restaurant.

J. began, There are certain secrets of alchemy described in your book. Secrets I never discussed with you. And you presented them quite correctly.

Paulo was delighted. This was just what he wanted to hear.

Well, I've been studying, he explained.

No, you haven't been studying, J. said. Yet what you've written about is correct.

I can't fool him, Paulo thought. I'd like him to think I'm dedicated, but I can't fool him.

He looked outside. The sun was glaring, and the beach was crowded.

What do you see in that immense sky? J. asked.

Clouds.

No, J. said. You see the soul of the rivers. Rivers that have just been reborn in the sea. They will rise to the sky, and remain there until, for whatever reason, they once again become rain and fall to earth.

The rivers return to the mountains, but carry with them the wisdom of the sea.

J. poured himself some mineral water. He didn't usually drink during the day.

That is how you discovered those secrets we had never discussed, J. said. You are a river.

You have already run down to the sea, and you know its wisdom. You have died and been reborn many times. All you have to do is remember.

Paulo was happy. It was a kind of praise: His master said that he had discovered secrets. But he was unable to ask openly which secrets they were.

I have a new task for you, J. said. Silently, he thought, It has to do with

your book. Because I know it's very important to you, and it doesn't deserve to be destroyed. But Paulo didn't need to hear about that.

One week later, J. and Paulo walked together through the airport. Paulo wanted to know more about the task that his master had assigned him the week before, but J. carefully avoided conversation. They sat down at a table in the cafeteria.

We were able to have dinner together only twice during my stay here in Rio, J. began, and this is our third. It's in observance of the saying 'Anything that occurs once can never occur again. But, should it happen twice, it will surely happen a third time.'

J. was trying to avoid the subject, but Paulo persevered. He knew now that his master had liked the book's dedication, because he had overheard a conversation between J. and the receptionist at the hotel. And later, one of J.'s friends had referred to Paulo as the book's author.

He must have told a number of people about it there was, after all, only one copy of the original. Vanity of vanities, he said to himself. He thanked God for having given him a master so human.

I want to ask you about the task, Paulo said once again. I don't want to ask 'how' or 'where',

because I know you won't tell me.

Well, that's one thing you've learned in all this time, J. laughed.

In one of our conversations, Paulo continued, you told me about a man named Gene, who was able to do what you are now asking of me. I'm going to look for him.

Did I give you his address?

You mentioned that he lived in the United States, in the California desert. It shouldn't be too hard to get there.

No, it isn't.

As they spoke, Paulo became aware that the voice on the public address system was continually announcing flight departures. He began to feel tense, fearing there wouldn't be enough time to complete their conversation.

Even though I don't want to know 'how' or 'where,' you taught me that there is a question we should always ask as we undertake something. I'm asking you that question now: Why? Why must I do this?

Because people always kill the things they love, J. replied.

As Paulo pondered the mystery of this answer, once again he heard a departure announced.

That's my plane, J. said. I have to go.

But I don't understand your answer to my question.

Asking Paulo to pay the bill, J. quickly wrote something on a paper napkin.

Placing the napkin on the table in front of his disciple, J. said, During the last century, a man wrote about what I've just said to you. But it's been true for many generations.

Paulo picked up the napkin. For a fraction of a second, he thought it might contain a magic formula. But it was a verse from a poem.

And each man kills the thing he loves,  
By all let this be heard,  
Some do it with a bitter look,  
Some with a flattering word,  
The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword.

The waiter came with the change, but Paulo didn't notice. He couldn't stop looking at those terrible words.

And so, the task, J. said after a long silence. It's needed to break that curse.

One way or another, Paulo said slowly, I have wound up destroying what I've loved. I've seen my dreams fall apart just when I seemed about to achieve them. I always thought that was just the way life was. My life and everyone else's.

The curse can be broken, J. repeated, if you complete the task.

They walked through the noisy airport in silence. J. was thinking about the books that his disciple had written. He thought about Chris, Paulo's wife. He knew that Paulo was being drawn toward the magical initiation that appears at one time or another in everyone's life.

He knew that Paulo was on the brink of seeing one of his greatest dreams realized.

And this meant danger, because J.'s disciple was like all human beings: He was going to find that he did not necessarily deserve all that he had received.

But he didn't tell Paulo any of this.

The women of your country are beautiful, J. said with a smile, as they arrived at the passport control line. I hope I can come back.

But Paulo spoke seriously.

So that's what the task is for, he said, as his master handed over his passport for stamping.

To break the curse.

And J. answered, just as seriously. It's for love. For victory. And for the glory of God.

THEY HAD BEEN DRIVING FOR ALMOST SIX HOURS. FOR THE hundredth time, he asked the woman at his side if they were on the right road.

For the hundredth time, she looked at the map. Yes, they were going the right way, even though their surroundings were green, and a river ran nearby, and there were trees along the road.

I think we should stop at a gas station and check, she said.

They drove on without speaking, listening to old songs on the radio. Chris knew that it wasn't necessary to stop at a gas station, because they were on the right road even if the scenery around them was completely different from what they had expected. But she knew her husband well. Paulo was nervous and uncertain, thinking that she was misreading the map. He would feel better if they stopped and asked.

What are we doing here?

I have a task to perform, he answered.

Strange task, she said.

Very strange, he thought. To speak to his guardian angel.

Okay, she said after a while, you're here to speak to your guardian angel. Meanwhile, how about talking a bit with me?

But he said nothing, concentrating on the road, thinking again that she had made a mistake about the route. No point in insisting, she thought. She was hoping they would come upon a gas station soon.

They had headed out on their journey straight from Los Angeles International Airport. She was afraid that Paulo was tired, and might fall asleep at the wheel. They didn't seem to be anywhere near their destination.

I should have married an engineer, she said to herself.

She had never gotten used to his lifetaking off suddenly, looking for sacred pathways, swords,

conversing with angels, doing everything possible to move further along the path to magic.

He has always wanted to leave everything behind.

She remembered their first date. They had slept together, and within a week she had moved her art work table into his apartment. Their friends said

that Paulo was a sorcerer, and one night Chris had telephoned the minister of the Protestant church she attended, asking him to say a prayer.

But during that first year, he had said not one word about magic. He was working at a recording studio, and that seemed to be all he was concerned about.

The following year, life was the same. He quit his job and went to work at another studio.

During their third year together, he quit his job again (a mania for leaving everything behind!)

and decided to write scripts for TV. She found it strange, the way he changed jobs every year but he was writing, earning money, and they were living well.

Then, at the end of their third year together, he decided once again to quit his job. He gave no explanation, saying only that he was fed up with what he was doing, that it didn't make sense to keep quitting his jobs, changing one for another. He needed to discover what it was that he wanted. They had put some money aside, and had decided to do some traveling.

In a car, Chris thought, just like we're doing now.

Chris had met J. for the first time in Amsterdam, when they were having coffee at a cafe in the Brower Hotel, looking out at the Singel canal. Paulo had turned pale when he saw the tall,

white-haired man dressed in a business suit. Despite his anxiety, he finally worked up the courage to approach the older man's table.

That night, when Paulo and Chris were alone again, he drank an entire bottle of wine. He wasn't good drinker, and became drunk. Only then did he reveal what she already knew: that for seven years he had dedicated himself to learning magic. Then, for some reason which he never explained, although she asked about it a number of times he had given it all up.

I had a vision of J. two months ago, when we visited Dachau, Paulo said.

Chris remembered that day. Paulo had wept. He said that he was being called but didn't know how to respond.

Should I go back to magic? he had asked.

Yes, you should, she had answered, but she wasn't sure.

Since Amsterdam, everything had changed. There were rituals, exercises, practices. There were long trips with J., with no defined date of return. There were long meetings with strange women, and men who had an aura of sensuality about them. There were challenges and tests,

long nights when he didn't sleep, and long weekends when he never left the house. But Paulo was much happier, and he no longer thought about quitting his job. Together they had founded a small publishing house, and he was doing something he'd dreamed of for a long time: writing books.

Finally, a gas station. As a young Native American woman filled the tank, Paulo and Chris took a stroll.

Paulo looked at the map and confirmed the route. Yes, they were on the right road.

Now he can relax. Now he'll talk a bit, Chris thought.

Did J. say you were to meet with your angel here? she asked hesitantly.

No, he replied.

Great, he gave me an answer, she thought, as she looked out at the brilliant green vegetation, lit by the setting sun. If she hadn't checked the map so often, she too would have doubted this was the right road. The map said that they should be at their destination in another six miles or so,

but the scenery seemed to be telling them they had a long way to go.

I didn't have to come here, Paulo continued. Any place would do. But I have a contact here.

Of course. Paulo always had contacts. He referred to such people as members of the Tradition;

but when Chris described them in her diary, she referred to them as the Conspiracy. Among them were sorcerers and witch doctors the kind of people one has nightmares about.

Someone who speaks with angels?

I'm not sure. One time, J. referred just in passing to a master of the Tradition who lives here,

and who knows how to communicate with the angels. But that might just be a rumor.

He might have been speaking seriously, but Chris knew that he might also have just selected a place at random, one of the many places where he had contacts. A place that was far from their daily life, and where he could concentrate better on the Extraordinary.

How are you going to speak to your angel?

I don't know, he replied.

What a strange way to live, thought Chris. She looked at her husband as he walked over to pay the bill. All she knew was that he felt he had to speak with the angels, and that was that! Drop everything, jump on a plane, fly for