

ODIN

ISSUE 18



ANDY REMIC | PETER MCLEAN
CAMERON JOHNSTON | ALAN BAXTER
DEVIN MADSON | MIKE MYERS

WETA DIGITAL

ISSN: 2204-4655

Contents

From the Editor

Adrian Collins

Hunger and the Lady

Peter McLean

An Interview with Devin Madson

Tom Smith

Building a Career with Small Presses

Alan Baxter

Review: The Ingenious

Author: Darius Hinks

Review by malrubius

Hatred for Heroes

Cameron Johnston

An interview with Cameron Johnston

Tom Smith

Scene and Summary: An Indispensable Internal Structure of Showing and Telling

Mike Myers

Rage Wolf

Andy Remic

Artwork

The cover art for *Grimdark Magazine issue #18* was created by Jason Deem based on Andy Remic's story *Rage Wolf*.

Jason Deem is an artist and designer residing in Dallas, Texas. More of his work can be found at: jdillustration.wordpress.com, on Twitter (@jason_deem) and on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/JasonDeemIllustration>).

Language

Grimdark Magazine has chosen to maintain the authors' original language (eg. Australian English, American English, UK English) for each story.

Legal

Copyright © 2019 by Grimdark Magazine. All rights reserved.

All stories, worlds, characters, and non-fiction pieces within are copyright © of their respective authors.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious or fictitious recreations of actual historical persons. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and unintended by the authors unless otherwise specified.

From the Editor

ADRIAN COLLINS

Welcome back Andy Remic! I'm absolutely stoked to see the illustrious author of the brilliant series *A Song for No Man's Land* (Tor.com), *The Rage of Kings* (Angry Robot), and *The Blood Dragon Empire* (Angry Robot) has come back from a two-year publishing hiatus with a barnstorming short story in GdM#18.

We also have stories from *Priest of Bones* author Peter McLean and *The Traitor God* author Cameron Johnston for you to get your teeth into. Interviews and articles are also here in spades—importantly an article on scene and summary by our favourite editor Mike Myers that is an absolute must for budding authors.

This quarter, as with every quarter, the GdM team have done their upmost best to bring you a heady mix of fiction, articles, reviews, and interviews. Enjoy.

Adrian Collins
Founder

Subscribe to Grimdark Magazine:
<https://patreon.com/user?u=177000>

Connect with the *Grimdark Magazine* team at:

facebook.com/grimdarkmagazine
twitter.com/AdrianGdMag
grimdarkmagazine.com
plus.google.com/+AdrianCollinsGdM/
pinterest.com/AdrianGdM/

Hunger and the Lady

PETER MCLEAN

They were eating corpses in Messia by the end.

Nine months of brutal siege and the city was on its knees; even Billy could see that, young as he was. He only had eleven years to him, as he reckoned it anyway, but that was almost a man grown and he'd had to grow up fast after Da was killed on the wall. Faster still, when Ma took sick.

He caught rats for them to eat, him and Ma and little Joan who was just six. He was good with his sling, and he could drop a nice plump rat at twenty yards or more. There wasn't much meat on them, perhaps, but they were a lot better than nothing. He could bag two or three of them in a good day's hunting. Three was a good day indeed; that meant they got a rat each. He'd seen little Ellian from the houses down by the river eating a tallow candle the other day, trying to fill the gnawing hole in his belly. Both his folks were dead, Billy knew, and he didn't think Ellian would be far behind them on his journey to the gardens of the gods.

Not that the gods of Messia were still watching what went on in their holy city.

Not anymore they weren't.

"I saw the Great Temple on fire today," Billy said to his ma, when he came back that night. "There was soldiers everywhere, and all the priests was hanged by the neck from lamp poles."

"Enemy soldiers," Ma said, huddled on her pallet bed of louse-ridden straw.

Billy could hear the sickness thick in her voice, like there was too much snot built up in her throat.

Joan just looked at him from the bundle of grey rags by the cold hearth where she slept. She was grey too, the dirt on her face so ground in it was hard to tell where rags ended and sister began.

“Did you get anything, Billy?” she whispered.

“I did,” Billy said, and he couldn’t keep the pride from his voice as he held three rats up by their tails. “I got three.”

Today had been a good day, as such things were measured now, but he had to admit the rats were nothing like as plump as they had been a few weeks ago. Even they went hungry now.

“You’re a good lad,” Ma said, but Billy could see how she kept worrying at her front tooth with her tongue when she spoke, and how it moved every time she did it.

It made him feel ill to see that. He turned away and took down their precious flint and steel from the cracked mantle over the hearth, and set about making a fire from the meagre store of kindling and sticks they kept carefully dry at the back of the room. Joan took out her little knife and started to skin the rats while he did it. Da was gone and done on the wall and Ma didn’t move much these days.

Billy met Joan’s wide eyes over the first blush of the fire.

I know, that look said, but neither of them wanted to say it.

Neither of them could give voice to what they knew. Joan was too young to find the words for it, and Billy was too weary and too scared, but they both knew.

Ma was dying.

Ma was dying, and then it would just be the two of them.

There were so many dead in Messia that Billy couldn’t have guessed how to count them. Nine months of siege and starvation and disease. The walls

had finally fallen a week ago and now there were soldiers in the streets, looting what little was left and burning what would burn, working their way south through the city. Soon they would reach the street where Billy and Joan and Ma lived, and what then?

He had his sling, and he was good with it, but against grown men in mail and helmets?

No.

No, Billy knew he wasn't going to be able to protect his family when the soldiers finally came. He was only eleven, for the love of the gods.

He sniffed back a tear and put a skewer through the first of the rats Joan had skinned and gutted, and propped it up over the fire to cook. He supposed you didn't ought to eat just one thing all the time, and that might be why Ma's teeth were coming loose and Joan looked close to starving, but when there was only one thing to eat that was what you had and you made the best of it, so far as he could see. It was better than candles, and no mistake.

"Did you see the soldiers?" Joan whispered.

Billy nodded slowly. She meant the *enemy* soldiers, he knew that, and that it didn't need saying any more. They both knew there weren't any of their own left.

"Yes," he whispered back.

"Are they really demons, like the priests said?"

Billy shrugged. He didn't think so, but then he didn't know what demons looked like. They had just looked like men to him, and a few hard-faced women among them. All of them had looked fierce and hungry and dirty and angry like soldiers always did, whichever side they were on.

"Don't know," he said after a moment. "I think they're just folk, like ours. Made to fight by their priests, maybe, same as Da was by ours."

"Do they even have priests, where they come from? I heard they was godless."

Billy bit back a sharp reply that he knew his little sister didn't deserve. How the *fuck* was he supposed to know? He didn't even know where they had come from. Da had said they came from somewhere up north, but that was only because someone in the army had told *him* that. Da had been a potter not a soldier, before he was conscripted and forced up onto the wall with a spear in his hands to die alongside all the other men, so how would he have known?

"I expect they have their own priests," Billy said, after a moment. "Different gods, maybe. Maybe that's why we're fighting them. Don't know."

I don't care, Joan, he thought. What did it matter *why* the men were fighting? They were, and that was that, and that was why Da was dead and Ma was dying and everything was burned and dead and gone and there was nothing left for them to eat but fucking rats.

He started to cry then, hot and hard and angry. He didn't want to and he even less wanted Joan to see him doing it, but he just couldn't help it. Everything was gone and ruined and Da was dead and he was only eleven years old and it wasn't *fair*.

"It's going to be all right isn't it, Billy?" Joan whispered.

Away in the corner on her straw pallet Ma choked on her own phlegm, spat a great reeking gob of it onto the floor, and sagged back into her blanket with a wet gurgle.

No, Billy thought. *No Joan, it fucking well isn't.*

* * *

Joan was the first to die, a couple of days later. The night had been freezing, and Billy woke in the pre-dawn light, cold and hungry as he was every morning. He lay there on the floor for a moment, huddled in his pile of rags and listening to Ma's gurgling breath coming from her pallet in the corner. It took him a minute or two to realise that he couldn't hear Joan's usual snuffles coming from her own bundle.

He sat up and poked the shape of her body with his toe. She didn't move, or make a sound. Moving quietly, not wanting to wake Ma, he wriggled over and pulled a grey cloth that might once have been a wall hanging away from Joan's face. She was quite still, almost peaceful but for the blue around her lips.

Billy knew at once that she was dead. He might only have had eleven years to him but he had seen enough dead bodies in the last year to know what he was seeing now. His little sister was gone.

Billy pulled her into his arms and held her close, sobbing quietly into her filthy hair as their bundles of rags entwined, his warm from his sleeping body and hers as cold as the holy sepulchre she would never have.

"I'm sorry," Billy whispered, his lips almost touching her cold, dead ear and the tears hot on his cheeks. "Oh Joan, I'm so sorry. I tried my best, I really did."

He held her like that for what seemed like a long time, rocking her tiny, stiffening body back and forth in his arms until he had cried himself out. At last he pushed her corpse away and wriggled out of his bundle, pinching his eyes between his finger and thumb to clear away the tears.

There was no time for tears; he had to be a man. It was just him and Ma now, and Ma hadn't got out of her bed since Da was killed on the wall. Billy was all she had left in the world.

He stood up and pushed his feet into the ruin of his boots, pulled the blanket that served him as a cloak around his shoulders, and picked up his sling and Joan's knife. He looped the sling though his rope belt as he did every day, patted his pouch for stones, and tucked Joan's knife through the other side. Armed, he felt more like a man grown.

I've only eleven years to me, Billy thought, but he pushed that thought away with a scowl. Childhood was past and done, ripped away from him, a luxury he

couldn't afford any more. Be a man or starve, that was the choice before him, and Billy had Ma to think of.

He looked over at her, lying on her side on her pallet and drooling green snot onto her pillow of stinking sacking, and he sighed. He was young, yes, but he wasn't a fool. He knew Ma didn't have long left.

* * *

Joan's death was what finished Ma off in the end, Billy reckoned. She couldn't forgive herself, the way he saw it, not that it had been her fault. He remembered burying his sister's pitiful little body in the yard behind their house, and he had wept doing it but even rats were getting scarce by then and a small, wicked part of him was glad to have one less mouth to feed.

Two days later Ma was gone too, choked on her own slime in the night, and then Billy was on his own. He looked at Ma's body, and remembered how much work burying Joan had been, and shook his head in silent remorse. Burying Ma would take more strength than he had, and he knew she wouldn't be there to thank him for it. Her spirit was already walking in the gardens of the gods, so what difference did it make?

He left her where she lay, and he took what little they had left and he headed out alone into the ruins.

He didn't think he'd ever be coming back.

It was hard, that first day alone in the rubble of Messia. There were soldiers everywhere, sacking the city, but most of them were drunk and noisy and they were easy enough to avoid. Billy had spent a long time stalking rats through the alleys and middens of Messia, and he knew how to be quiet when he needed to be. No, it wasn't the soldiers who were the problem.

It was the other survivors.

The sun was just starting to go down when they grabbed him.

It was a lad, with maybe seventeen or eighteen years to him, and his woman had maybe sixteen to her. Her belly was already swollen with child but there was

no motherly love in her face as she pressed a rusty blade to Billy's neck while the lad searched him.

"Knife and a sling," the boy said, disarming Billy with ease like he was a child.

Gods curse it, he *was* a child. He might be almost a man grown, perhaps, but this lad was a foot taller and twenty pounds heavier and there was no *almost* about it with him. Billy never stood a chance.

"Give me that back!" Billy shouted, and the girl pricked his neck with her blade until blood blossomed against his filthy skin.

"You shut up now," she hissed. "If the demons hear us we'll all burn."

"They ain't demons, they're just men," Billy said.

"Horseshit," the lad said, and he punched Billy in the guts hard enough to make him puke up what little watery filth was left in his empty belly. "They're fucking demons, you little cocksucker. The priests said so. We wouldn't have lost otherwise, would we?"

Billy drew in a shuddering breath and spat bile onto the boy's boots, earning himself a cuff to the side of the head for his trouble.

"Check his pouch, Lissa."

The girl thrust a thin, rough hand into Billy's pouch, her stinking armpit in his face as she rummaged.

"Stones for the sling," she said. "Hang on... flint and steel!"

"Give them to me," the boy demanded.

Lissa passed them over, but Billy couldn't help but see the flicker of reluctance that crossed her face as she did so. A flint and steel was a treasure indeed in Messia in these times, and now his had been taken from him. He had nothing else of worth.

"Now what do we do with him?" Lissa asked, looking at the hard-faced boy with wide eyes. "Don't hurt him, Jared."

The boy, Jared, just shrugged.

“You ain’t keeping him,” he said. “Got a brat of our own on the way, ain’ts we? I ain’t feeding another one.”

“But...”

Jared half-raised his hand, and Lissa cowered.

“No, Jared,” she whispered.

“Right, well he can fuck off then, can’t he?” Jared said.

Lissa looked down at Billy, and there was something on her face then that was almost an apology. Billy shrugged and backed away, hands held up to say it was done. He backed away a few more steps, then turned and fled into the darkness.

That was life in Messia, during the sack.

* * *

Billy was alone in the alleys, and the rain came down like the wrath of the gods. He huddled in his blanket-cloak, grateful that they had left him that at least. The doorway offered him scant protection, but it was better than nothing.

He was hungry, he knew that much. Oh gods, but he was hungry.

He would have eaten anything, had the world let him, but there was nothing moving and now he had no way to hunt anyway. Cold rain ran down his face and he considered going back to the house, but Ma was there lying dead and he didn’t want to face that.

He huddled in the doorway, and he wept, and waited to die.

Come the dawn the rain had stopped and Billy hadn’t frozen to death in the night after all. He rose shuddering with cold and made his way out into the thin grey light. He could hear voices in the distance, men who spoke with a strange accent.

Soldiers.

Instinct told him to run and hide, but what was the point? He had survived the previous night, but he knew his chances of doing so again were vanishingly small

if he didn't find food and shelter soon. Soldiers would have food, at least.

Billy hugged a wall and crept toward the noise, his grey rags blending in with the damp stone and helping him to hide. He reached a junction where the alley met a rubble-choked road, and he made himself as small as he could as he peered cautiously around the corner. He could see smoke rising from behind a broken wall, hear raucous voices and smell... oh gods in their gardens, he could smell pork cooking!

Billy's mouth flooded with saliva, and he stifled a groan. He hadn't tasted pork in the better part of a year, and now his empty stomach tore at him with longing. He was shaking with fear as he crept closer, but need drove him and he forced himself to keep going.

Down on his belly in the rubble, Billy wormed his way up against the broken wall and held his breath as he risked a look around the edge. There were six soldiers, five of them rough men and one a scarred woman, all in mail and tattered cloaks. One of the men wore open robes over his mail and had a black hood pulled up over his head, but they were all intent on their food and no one saw him.

"Oi, Cookpot, there any more?" one of the men asked in his strange, thick accent.

"You've had today's ration, I ain't cooking no more now," another replied, a round-faced man who sat closest to the fire.

More, Billy thought. They've got more.

He stared at the soldiers' makeshift camp, trying to work out where the food might be. They didn't have a lot, just some bedrolls and a rough length of canvas that they had rigged up as a shelter, flapping in the wind. Behind that... behind the canvas was a pack. It was perhaps twenty feet away, on the wrong side of the wall. Billy swallowed.

He crept slowly forward, pulling his filthy grey rags over his head to help him blend in with the stone and rubble all around him. Ten feet. Six.

“Whassat?”

Billy froze, his heart hammering so loud he swore they must be able to hear it.

“What’s what?”

“I heard something, down there.”

One of the men was on his feet now, pointing away down an alley in the other direction. The scarred woman was on her feet then, swinging a loaded crossbow up to her shoulder almost faster than Billy could follow.

“I don’t see anything,” she growled, her voice rasping over the wind.

Billy took his chance to clamber over the wall and scuttle toward the pack. He plunged his hands into it and pulled free two packages of meat wrapped in oiled cloth. He stuffed them inside his shirt and managed to get back behind the wall just as the hooded man turned to look his way.

“We’re all jumping at shadows,” the man said. “It’s probably just rats. Lady’s sake, Bloody Anne, sit down and eat. There’ll be killing enough later.”

“Aye,” the woman said, but Billy barely heard her.

He was already wriggling back the way he had come as fast as he could, with the precious meat clutched to his chest. Today was a good day.

* * *

Billy put his head in his hands and wept, the neatly wrapped packages of pork lying on a broken flagstone by his side and the dry sticks it had taken him all morning to scavenge piled in front of him. He had no flint or steel. Jared had taken those, so now he had no way to make a fire. He couldn’t eat it raw. Raw pig was poison, Billy knew that, but the tearing hunger in his belly screamed at him to eat it anyway. Tears ran down

his cheeks, tears of frustration and rage, grief and loss and sheer starving misery.

Something broke inside Billy then, and something woke and spoke to him.

“You can do it, my love.”

It was a woman’s voice, and for a moment she sounded just like his ma. It wasn’t, though. Ma was dead, and the dead spoke to no one.

“You can do it,” she said again, this lady who wasn’t there. “Just push.”

“Push what?” Billy whispered, choking back snot and tears. He got no answer, but somewhere in his head where the thing had broken he could feel something else, something that hadn’t been there before. It felt hot, like a flame.

Billy reached for that hot place and he pushed at it, pushed with his mind in a way he’d never done before. It hurt, bright and sharp in his head, and he clenched his teeth.

“You can do it,” the lady said again. “If you want to live, you’ll do it. *Push!*”

Billy pushed and his head screamed fit to burst with the pain of it. The fire caught, sudden and hot in the pile of sticks, although he had no flint or steel and he hadn’t even moved. It caught hot, and it burned bright. He quickly fed more sticks to the blaze, his hands trembling as he worked. The lady be praised, he wasn’t going to starve after all.

* * *

They found him an hour later.

It had been foolish to leave the fire burning, he supposed, but he was almost warm for the first time in days and he had no idea if he could do the trick again. He’d tried, once he had eaten the first piece of pork and sucked the grease off his fingers, pushing this way and that with his mind, but nothing had happened.

So of course they saw the smoke, and they crept up on him and the first he knew of it he was surrounded.

"I think we've found our pork thief," the round-faced man said, the one called Cookpot, but he didn't look angry about it. "You must be starved, you poor little bugger."

Billy scrambled back on his haunches and made to run, but the scarred woman was there with her crossbow in her hands and he knew he wouldn't get ten yards without a bolt in his back if he did.

"It's all right, boy," the hooded man said, his accent strange to Billy's ears. "We won't hurt you. My name is Tomas Piety, and I'm a priest of Our Lady."

Billy's eyes went wide as he stared at the man.

"It's all right, my love," the woman who wasn't there said to him. "You can trust this one. He's one of mine."

"The lady," Billy said softly. "I know the lady. The lady speaks to me."

"Does she now?" the man asked, and frowned. "I think you'd better come with us, my lad."

And that was how Billy first spoke with Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows, and how he used the cunning for the first time. That was how he first met a man called Tomas Piety, too, and that was more important than either of them knew at the time.**[GdM]**

Peter McLean is the author of the grimdark novels *Priest of Bones*, released in October 2018 from Jo Fletcher Books and Ace/Roc, and *Priest of Lies* (July 2019). His first novels, the Burned Man series, are noir urban fantasy. He has also worked on game tie-in short fiction for various franchises including Warhammer.

An Interview with Devin Madson

TOM SMITH

Welcome grim and dark people! This issue has me catching deep in the outback for a chin wag with Devin Madson. In case you missed it, Devin's new book *We Ride the Storm* has been one of the big surprises of this year's grimdark crop. With an Asian flavor to it and plenty of action and brutality, it should be on the top of everyone's TBR.

[TS] Welcome Devin!

[DM] Thank you, Tom, lovely of you to have braved the snake-infested bush for a chat.

[TS] In *We Ride the Storm*, you introduced the reader to several diverse settings. There was a distinct feudal Asian feel to the emperor's lands, but it in no way limited the story as there were also many pages devoted to the tales of a band of nomadic horselords exiled from their own lands and several unique nations as well. What inspired your worldbuilding for this book?

[DM] The worldbuilding in *We Ride the Storm* has been a long time in the making because the Empire of Kisia existed in my previous trilogy. As that followed a civil war we never really saw outside its borders, but while it's a mishmash of a lot of things I love, there is definitely a heavy feudal Asian aesthetic there. The Levanti horselords on the other hand didn't come from

even a mishmash of real-world cultures rather were born entirely from the first line of the book, Rah with them. So much of their culture revolves around their death rites and their honour and the logistics of a nomadic life on the plain that they just built themselves as I wrote. I'm a pantsner even when it comes to my worldbuilding!

[TS] I liked that in this book you used a very "less is more" approach to describing the magical and supernatural aspects of this world. How would you as the author describe the magic and supernatural aspects of this setting?

[DM] It is a very minimally described magic system at this stage because the people themselves don't understand it. In *We Ride the Storm* you briefly meet the first person who's attempting to study and properly document these odd aberrations that seem to come along every now and then, categorizing their skills and making sense of why certain people have unusual abilities and others don't. Some of that information will be in the second book, *We Lie with Death*, and that will be the first time the soul-based magic system has been properly explained in any of my published works.

[TS] This book was the surprise of the year for me in what has been a bumper crop of solid grimdark in my humble opinion. What have you read this year that really stood out to you, and why?

[DM] I have to admit this year hasn't been a big grimdark reading year for me so far. I have been working so intensely I've needed lighter reads to feed the soul as I bleed the darkness out of it into my own work. That'll probably change soon, but for now I think the book that stood out the most this year for me was *City of Lies* by Sam Hawke. I read it as a buddy read

with my mother on our quest to find great fantasy / mystery novels, and while it falls more heavily on the fantasy side of that divide, I was hugely impressed with the worldbuilding. Worldbuilding often isn't such a huge thing for me because I'm non-visual and don't see images while I read or write, but I was engrossed by the details drip fed into every line. So often we just change the name of an animal to make it seem more fantastical when really it's still the same animal, but Sam Hawke created animals and plants and foods that just... existed without having to be explained. Then she did the same with the society and the characters and I loved every moment of it.

[TS] The opening of this book is one of the most grimdark I have read in recent years. How important was it for you to set an early darker tone? Can we expect more in the future installments of this series?

[DM] I think it's always important to set the tone early so people who won't enjoy my books don't waste time reading them before realising what they're in for. While I didn't set out to write a grimdark book I knew that, due to the nature of the story, I couldn't shy from the truth of it, so up front seemed best. As to whether you can expect more of this in future installments? I found with *We Ride the Storm* that some people were loath to put it firmly in the grimdark camp, but after some of the events in Book 2 my partner informs me I may as well set up my tent there and settle in. So, that's a yes.

[TS] Australia is known for a dark history and deadly animals. Do you think living there has helped you with writing dark material or manifested in any other ways with your writing?

[DM] Living in Australia has probably had the opposite effect on me than one might expect. I love a lot of

things about my country, but it took a long time for its natural aesthetic to be one of them. So while the Australian bush (where I live at least) is very grey and dry, I have always wanted to write more lush and colourful settings. I like writing about rain and snow and deciduous trees and other things I can't see by just looking out my window though they may be common to most people.

It's sadly the same with our deadly animals. Dealing with snakes and spiders is so much a part of my everyday that I prefer to avoid bringing it to my daydreaming. I imagine both will change as I expand the scope of my world, but for now there's not much of Australia in my books I'm afraid.

[TS] What were some of your favorite books growing up that inspired you to write?

[DM] I am not sure what inspired me to write, I've just been doing it as long as I remember. As for favourite books growing up, I loved the Redwall series by Brian Jacques. I also read a lot of Ken Catran's sci-fi books like *Deepwater Black* and *Shadow of Phobos*. My path into adult fantasy was through David Edding's Belgariad series, one I'm eternally grateful to but won't ever go back to read. I'm not sure it has dated as well as I would like and I fear ruining my love for it. Lian Hearn's *Across the Nightingale Floor* also came along at a critical point for me and led to me leaning more and more away from the standard Eurocentric settings I had previously written.

[TS] What are some leisure activities you like to do when you find time?

[DM] Free time is definitely not something I have much of, I'm just so obsessed with work. But when I do take breaks, I am a terrible black-thumb gardener and a

completionist gamer. *Dragon Age*, *Portal*, *Final Fantasy*. And very big difficult jigsaw puzzles with pretty pictures. Hmm... there seem to be some similarities in what I do for work and what I do for leisure.

[TS] What is your take on the current crop of grimdark and other fantasy books out there? Do you have any personal favorites?

[DM] The current crop of grimdark is exceptionally rich, especially from the likes of Anna Stephens and Anna Smith-Spark, and I've got my eye on picking up Peter McLean's *Priest of Bones*. I swear every time I hop on Twitter I catch sight of another book I'm super excited for and I feel it's going to be a long cold walk through hell the day I run out of great books. Every year I think I'll go through my backlog of classics and then I see the debuts...

[TS] What is the biggest thing you have learned in the book writing process that you wish you would have known ahead of time?

[DM] I wish I had known that there are many different ways to write a book, and just to go with my gut on a project by project, or even a scene by scene basis. When you read writing advice it always makes it sound as though there is only one good way to do things. Terry Pratchett did a draft zero, so I should too. Jessica Townsend perfects every line as she goes, so I guess I should do that. Still other authors sprint their material. Or write out of order. It's easy to read the process of another author and make the assumptions that 1) that's the way you should do it because you love their books, and 2) that every author only has one process.

It has taken me five published books to realise that, actually, I have many ways of writing and they all work

for different projects and scenes and moods. Sometimes I have to plan, sometimes it's better if I don't. Sometimes I sprint, especially through the scenes I procrastinate on, while sometimes I take it easy and need to perfect the detail first go. Generally I write in order, but sometimes I'm just not sure what is meant to happen in this scene so I skip it and figure it out by seeing what happens afterwards.

In the same way you have to trust the author not to lead the story astray when you're reading, so you have to learn to trust the author (yourself in this case) to know how best to tell and write that story. Procrastination and the sense of writer's block are, for me, indications I'm doing it the wrong way today.

[TS] What projects can we look forward to seeing from you in the near future?

[DM] Gosh, my obsessive work habits create too many! Let's do this in order of importance. Book 2 of The Reborn Empire, *We Lie With Death*, will be out in late March 2019. I'm also starting a web serial based some 400ish years on in the same world, which will begin dropping late November 2018. And my audio drama, also in the same world, *The 59 Bodies of Saki Laroth*, will begin in mid January 2019.

Most likely there will also be another standalone novel in September/October of 2019, but that's still not confirmed.

[TS] Devin, thanks so much for swinging by. Now how do I get out of here?

[DM] Back past the snakes. Good luck! **[GdM]**

Building a Career with Small Presses

ALAN BAXTER

Publishing has never been a straightforward business, but these days more opportunity than ever exists to get a career. Of course, more isn't always better. However, more *can* be better if you arm yourself with knowledge. I have a wide range of experience, spanning all kinds of deals over some fifteen years, so maybe I can shed a little light on the path to small or mid-sized press publication.

In 2014 I signed a three-book deal with HarperCollins under the Voyager imprint here in Australia, so that's my "Big 5", legacy publisher series. I still seek out big press deals, but before and since my Voyager deal, I've signed with a variety of publishers of differing size, most recently a two-book deal with Grey Matter Press. As a caveat, this is of course all based on my personal experience and my observations of the business going on around me. Other people will have vastly differing experience and opinions and they're probably not wrong. I've fucked up and I've gotten lucky, as have many others. It's good to remember that old adage: If you can't be a role model, be a warning to others. It's also always been a truth of publishing that there are no hard-and-fast right ways of doing anything. People have seen success and failure with a plethora of approaches.

For the purposes of this piece, we're going to assume you have a kick-arse manuscript and you're ready to pin down that mid-level publisher. What decisions should you make and why? There are a metric fucktonne of publishers out there in the small to mid-sized indie playing field. Some of them are kicking arse and building fantastic author careers. Some of them... are not. So how do you figure out where to go with your precious word baby?

When it comes down to it, the only thing that will give you a career is people talking about your work. That leads to other people reading it, and buying more, and talking about it, and the feedback loop is under way. This is why I exhort people to always talk up books they've enjoyed. Word of mouth from enthusiastic readers is worth more than any marketing budget most of us will ever see. Especially if you're trying to get noticed in the online marketplace, that's a sea of noise to navigate. You need other voices to amplify your own. A lot of books either aren't noticed at all or they flare young and die, rather than bursting onto a scene and growing. All the books you know about are the ones which did well. All the others, and there are so many, well, you don't know about them, do you? Marketing budgets and promotion periods dry up real fast, and if your book isn't providing some obvious return on investment right away, many publishers shrug and move on to the next thing. This is especially true of the big legacy publishers, who used to nurture and grow their list but don't these days. Smaller publishers, however, often still have that mindset. So what's all this leading to? Visibility is essential. Look at all the books you've become aware of recently, and note who those publishers are. Pay attention to the publishers actively promoting their authors and nurturing their list. These are the places you should approach. One of the things that made me hunt down Grey Matter Press for a deal was the ongoing visibility

of their books and authors. They get it, they promote. After all, if you've never heard of the books on a publisher's list, chances are no one will ever hear about you if you sign with them.

Another reason I signed with Grey Matter Press is because they make truly beautiful books. But therein lies your caveat. You need to be educated on the presses doing good work here too, and the ones just going through the motions. *Do* they make great books? Do they commission good cover art rather than bad stock imagery? Let's be honest, there are some fucking atrocious book covers out there, and not only from self-publishers trying to save a buck. Look at a publisher's catalogue on their website. Do the covers pop and intrigue you? Or is it like a finger-painting board at the local preschool? Are their books laid out professionally inside? Do they use copy editors? You can learn all this by reading a few of their existing titles. And you should do this anyway to make sure your book is a good fit for their list.

Once you've found your ideal publishers you start approaching them (following their submission guidelines as though your life depended on it, because the life of your book absolutely does!) Many smaller presses are happy to read without the submission coming through an agent, which is great, because agents can be harder to land than a paper plane in a tornado. So submit away, bold writer, and wait for the offers to roll in. Yeah, nah. Not gonna happen. It's a long trudge uphill, paved all the way with polite rejections. But don't be disheartened, we've all been through it. Just keep going.

When you finally get an offer, take a deep breath. I urge you to engage an agent or contract consultant for advice. You can usually have someone look over a contract for a nominal fee (look online for people offering this service—start with a simple Google search for “publishing contract consultant”) and this is valuable

if you're about to sign something that could affect your ongoing career. Sometimes contracts can be sneaky bastards, often including rights grabs best avoided. For example, are they trying to take film and TV rights? No way, dude, you never give those to a publisher. If the publisher negotiates a film or TV deal for you, then you talk about those rights. Don't give them away right off, they are yours. A book publisher is not a film company. Usually, you only sign for print, ebook, and audiobook rights in the initial contract.

Ideally there will still be an advance, albeit a small one. However, it's also pretty common these days to not get an advance at all from the smaller presses, so make sure you get royalties to reflect that. Every small press contract I've signed has involved renegotiating the royalties first. If they won't negotiate, ask yourself why? And make sure you get those royalties from dollar one. The publisher invests in *you* and pays you from the first book sold (either return against advance or immediate royalty). None of this recouping costs first bullshit. You never pay a single cent to be published. And it's not just publishers you need to be wary of. I recently saw a contract from an agency that said if they sell your book to a publisher who doesn't pay an advance, the author pays the agency \$500 before signing. FUCK NO! Run away! That's a bad agency. Same with publishers. You pay nothing to be published—no submission costs, no shared production costs, no expenses.

You may even score an agent if you already have an offer on the table, and they'll check over the contract for you. And you might think, "Why should I give them 15% when I've already got the offer?" Well, because they know loads that you don't and they'll go in and negotiate the contract for you. They're worth their 15% and then some, trust me. Plus, once you're in, they will hopefully rep your next book and maybe get you into a better publisher next time.

You'll get a lot more input throughout the process with smaller publishers, from cover design to release schedules and more, though I strongly advise you bow to their expertise in these matters. You won't see the same kind of advance and marketing campaign as a Big 5 deal, and you won't see the same kind of mainstream attention, but a good indie press is all over the social media scene. So work with them, offer them your skills and do all you can to help their promotions. A good publisher will return the favour. In the small press, the life of a book is sustained through symbiosis. Don't be a diva—work your arse off for the publisher and they'll do the same for you.

Another thing that's becoming more of an issue these days is indie presses trying to be too big. Big 5 publishers get books into bookstores, but the main reason that's possible is simple: money. The Big 5 have the kind of corporate backing that means they can invest capital into books and potential returns. Stores will only take books that can be returned if they don't sell. That requires the publisher to take on the costs of a decent print run and the possible costs of returned books. Once a publisher's titles start to move well through book stores, the profits prop up this business model and it becomes a self-sustaining machine. In the short term, the publisher has to invest tens of thousands to get this ball rolling and may not see money back for two or more years. Twice now I've had publishers think they're better than they are and they've sunk themselves, taking my books with them, trying to grow too big, too quick. Thankfully I've managed to get those rights back and the books have been reissued by new publishers, but not all authors are as fortunate. I always talk to potential publishers about this up front and make sure they have a solid plan for growth. If a publisher does get books in stores, that's fantastic—but have they been at it for a while and are surviving? More likely with smaller press, we're

selling in the online marketplace, with little or no bookstore presence.

I think the hybrid model is going to become more and more the go-to for most authors—that means a combination of different size publishers, plus maybe some self-publishing (though that is another article in itself). Of course, a well-supported Big 5 deal, with successful sales and offers on each of your subsequent books, is still the greatest achievement and the best shot at a solid career. It's the model that will likely see you get the most readers and the best income. But there are a lot of people out there absolutely killing it in small press or self-publishing, some of them out-earning the big trad players. However, those big sellers, be they trad or indie, are the outliers. The majority of us are the new midlisters, putting out our best work through a variety of publishers, building a career like running a marathon. Smart decisions along the way will make that marathon more like a jog along the beach than Sisyphus pushing his boulder. **[GdM]**

Alan Baxter is a British-Australian author who writes supernatural thrillers and urban horror, rides a motorcycle and loves his dogs. He also teaches Kung Fu. He lives among dairy paddocks on the beautiful south coast of NSW, Australia, with his wife, son, dogs and cat. He's the multi-award-winning author of several novels and around eighty short stories and novellas. So far. Read extracts from his novels, novellas, and find free short stories at his website—www.warriorscribe.com—or find him on Twitter @AlanBaxter and Facebook, and feel free to tell him what you think. About anything.

Review: The Ingenious by Darius Hinks

MALRUBIUS

The Ingenious is the new novel from Darius Hicks, winner of the David Gemmell Morningstar Award for his Warhammer novel *Warrior Queen* (Games Workshop, 2010) and author of several other Black Library novels. It tells the story of Isten, a refugee in the roving city of Athanor. Isten was marked at birth with, yes, a birthmark, that foretold her role as the savior of her people, but in a bout of drug addiction and depression, she has removed the mark. Nevertheless, she returns from a year in hiding, hoping to free her people, the Exiles, from poverty and forced subjugation in Athanor and help them find a new home. The novel is replete with beautifully creative settings, highly imaginative magic, fast-paced action, and sympathetic heroes. However, I was slightly disappointed with the flatness of the main antagonist and the jejunity of the prose.

Athanor is an extremely interesting setting. Unleashed by alchemists a thousand years ago, the city roves through time and space, settling temporarily at conjunction wherever its alchemical priests decide, and absorbing people and buildings from its unwilling host cities before moving on again. Athanor has giant beautiful towers at its center, which house its ruler and its governing priest-alchemists, called phraters, but as Isten moves toward its fringes, the true destruction the city wreaks on its hosts is revealed in burnt-out buildings and piles of corpses that line the banks of the

main river. The horridness of this grim side of Athanor, which is only revealed when Isten must clandestinely board a boat carrying weapons as it sails toward an outpost, is a nearly awe-inspiring spectacle for both Isten and the reader. It is totally immersive, from the corpse-strewn muddy banks of the river to the ruins of the city to the alchemically protected outpost tower. Hinks put a lot of love and hard work into this setting, and it shows.

The magic system in *The Ingenious* is similarly well wrought. One complaint I have about a lot of grimdark fantasy is that there is little or no thought given to developing an interesting implementation of magic. That is definitely not the case in *The Ingenious*. The phraters, also known as the Curious Men, who run Athanor, use alchemical powers to control the people, the weapons, and also the Ignorant Men, giant magical fighting men, who are called upon to defend the city in cases of extreme emergency. And what's a grimdark novel without an extreme emergency? Another highlight of the novel, in addition to the grim setting on the cities outskirts, is Hinks's vivid description of these Ignorant Men stomping through the muck of the outskirts and entering the main city to defend it from, who else, Istens fellow Exiles. The magical power of the alchemists, it turns out, can also be transmitted to, or through, the much disparaged commoners of the city, though it is extremely against the law of Athanor. This forms a main subplot of the story when Phrater Alzen, Isten's secret helper (not a spoiler—the "secret" relationship is established at the beginning of the story), imbues Isten with powerful magic to forward his own ambitions.

However, while the magic system is highly complex and imaginative, Phrater Alzen, who becomes the story's main antagonist is not so much. Alzen aspires to become titular *The Ingenious*, a kind of man-god, and the rightful ruler of Athanor. To accomplish this he

must murder untold numbers of people and absorb their power until he finally, as he hopes, breaks through the mundane barriers of humanity and becomes the Ingenious. Isten becomes his unwitting accomplice after he helps her destroy a rival gang. He secretly gives her huge quantities of cinnabar, a powerful and powerfully addictive drug like heroin, to sell cheaply throughout the city so she can ostensibly put the other drug dealers out of business and earn money for her desperate Exiles. She doesn't realize that when people nearly kill themselves with the drug, Alzen comes to their "aid," blaming their sickness on a plague, and kills them for their power. It's a complex relationship, but unfortunately, Alzen is not so complex. By the end of the novel he becomes sort of the mustache-twirling evil villain that is fortunately rare in the best grimdark fiction.

Likewise, there doesn't seem to be much depth to most of the secondary characters in the novel. Isten has a love-hate relationship with her friend Brast, who becomes her protector of sorts, and tries to help her break her cinnabar addiction. Puthnok, who becomes Isten's rival as well as her hero, is a stereotypical revolutionary, albeit a short, shy one with glasses, who wants to free the Exiles from the bonds of servitude by reforming Athanor. Isten herself is a little bit of a grimdark cliché—a drug addicted, alcoholic who must overcome her personal problems, her "flaw" as the fiction writing texts would have it, if she hopes to help her people, aka triumph over the story's main conflict. Despite the novel's close focus on Isten, the point-of-view does change occasionally and perhaps somewhat awkwardly. *The Ingenious* is definitely a plot-centered story with made-to-fit characters.

The other complaint I have about *The Ingenious* is the prose, but before I explain why it doesn't satisfy my admittedly highly critical and perhaps zealous desire for great writing, I must say that several other

reviewers have enjoyed Hinks's prose very much and have noted it as a strong point of the novel. And like those other reviewers, I agree that Hinks's descriptions are vivid and lively and even spectacular at some points, but at others the mechanics of the prose had me rolling my eyes and sighing. Because I received an advance copy, I am not permitted to quote from the book, and perhaps it will undergo another edit, but the prose seems very juvenile to me in the way it *tells* the characters feelings rather than or in addition to showing them. It is very common in amateur or YA prose to read something like, "the character's eyes went wide *with shock and excitement*" or "the character frowned *with disdain*." These additional, tacked on prepositional phrases are totally unnecessary and, to me at least, extremely annoying. "Eyes went wide" shows excitement and shock (somewhat depending on the context). A "frown" shows disdain if the writer has set up the frown appropriately. And there is nothing wrong with the way Hinks uses these actions and facial expressions (for example), it's just the tacked on *telling* that drives me a little bit nuts. Similarly, when a writer describes something spectacular, and does it well, as Hinks does, he doesn't need the narrator to *tell* the reader, "It was a spectacular sight." It's redundant, boring, intrusive, and slightly condescending. If you read the consensus top writers in grimdark (Lawrence, Abercrombie, etc), they rarely (but not never) do this. If the narrator or the characters *show* the reader something adequately, then nothing more needs to be said. Okay, you get the point, hopefully. Whether you agree or not is your own business. Rant over.

Nevertheless, *The Ingenious* is a spectacular, in the true sense of the word, novel, and I think many *Grimdark Magazine* readers are going to love it. It also, despite its slightly cartoonish villain, meets many of the expectations of grimdark. The setting is mostly pretty grim. The characters are not heroes in the

conventional sense, and Isten never fully commits to the idealism of Puthnok's revolution. So, if you're not a nitpicking prose fetishist asshole, you might want to pick up *The Ingenious*. The highly imaginative and creative spectacle is worth the read.

The Ingenious will be published by Angry Robot on 5 February 2019.**[GdM]**

Hatred for Heroes

CAMERON JOHNSTON

A heavysset man in scorched blacksmith leathers barged past Mara, his eyes burning red and blinded by tears as he fled sobbing down the street. She staggered backwards, flailing to keep her basket of fish from landing in a steaming mound of fresh horse dung. Glaring after him, she bitterly regretted doing the beleaguered head cook a favour by fetching his rare and expensive kingfish for the Liberation Day morn-feast. First she had been handed an entire basket of heavy fish and now her pristine white apron bore a sooty smear. She'd enjoyed a long night of gruelling work and could have done without the hassle.

The weeping man was not alone in his distress. As she approached Frandell's Grand Temple a growing crowd was filling the cobbled square below its soaring copper spires, all clutching loved ones, wailing, gnashing teeth and sobbing like their mothers had all just gone belly up right front of their eyes. She spotted a fellow maid from the palace loitering with a gaggle of lowly kitchen scullions and waved her over.

Jessa scrubbed a hand across her mouth, dabbed the corners of her eyes with lacy cuffs and peeled away from the crowd. The girl sniffled and stared at Mara's impassive expression. "You haven't heard then?"

"Apparently not," Mara replied. "What has everybody in such a state?"

Jessa dissolved into a blubbering puddle of tears and snot and waved a stained kerchief in the direction of the grand temple.

Mara passed her the heavy basket of fish, careful not to let the girl's glistening hands touch her. "Best you take this to kitchens and get yourself a stiff brandy to steady your nerves." Jessa's reply was unintelligible through her devastated sobs, but she clutched the basket tight, nodded, and ran for the palace, wailing all the way.

Mara scowled and turned back to the crowd, trying to see through a forest of bobbing heads and feathered feast day hats. Most were staring at what was nailed to the great door of the temple, while others were busy retching. She pushed her way through the unresisting and unresponsive crowd.

Priestesses were on their knees praying, foreheads pressed hard against bloodied cobbles. Cold-eyed warriors in battle-scarred steel held their swords out before them in salute, lips and chins trembling. The queen herself was present, dressed not in one of her formal gowns but in a flimsy bed-shift and slippers, staring in numb shock at the severed hands of her husband nailed to the ancient oak panels. There was no mistaking King Cypher's hands with the twin gems of Ar and Owar embedded in the palms. Both mystic artefacts were dull and lifeless when only last night they had burned with arcane might for all to see and marvel at.

"Who... why..." the queen whispered, choking on the words as tears rolled down her cheeks. "And on Liberation Day..."

Liberation Day—celebrating ten years of peace and prosperity after the tyrannical Dread Lord's fall at the hands of the Chosen One, the perfect knight beloved of the gods, bards, and all goodly people... the very same man whose gore-crustad hands now adorned the temple door.

The queen stared at red-smeared cobbles—so much blood had been shed that no man could have possibly survived it. "Find this fucking murderer," she

croaked. "Make him pay for his atrocity. Make his end agony."

Mara's lips thinned. Her jaw clenched hard as she fought the urge to grin, or to vomit, she wasn't quite sure which. The queen's words echoed her own sentiments exactly. The murderer would indeed pay, and he had already begun to.

At midnight she changed out of her fancy maid's uniform and into rough working gear with thick beeswaxed leather boots to make the descent into the sewers beneath the palace. She picked up her tool bag, slipped out of the bedroom and entered the underground tunnels through the grate in the adjacent privy, a perk of the larger servant's quarters befitting her position.

Shuttered lantern held aloft, she splashed through the steady stream of filth flowing through the tunnels that wormed through the foundations of the new palace, the third to be built on this ancient site. Her hair dripped with what she hoped was water seeping from above, but the reek bothered her only slightly: as the daughter of a rat-catcher she had grown up crawling through many such foul and forgotten places in search of tails for a half-penny a piece.

The sturdy sewers of the new palace decayed into crumbling workings of the old. This maze of tunnels was long forgotten by all but the rat-catchers guild, and nowadays even they did not dare to descend this far into the black depths below the daylight realm of man. What more fitting place for revenge could there be than to imprison her father's murderer in a secret place the old man had shown her so very long ago during their travels through the realm.

A rusted iron gate with a shiny new lock and chain blocked her path. She pulled a brass key from her belt, unlocked it, and shoved the door wide. It screeched, panicking the hungry rats within. They fled from the dim

light of her lantern, a skittering tide of claws across stone. In the centre of the chamber, a filth-crusted naked man dangled from chains running through a hoop in the arched ceiling. King Cypher's portly body was covered in old scars from sword and axe and his arms were stretched tight above his head, cuffed at chain-wrapped elbows instead of wrists that ended in pitch-covered stumps. His trailing feet were a gory mess of rat bites and Mara smiled at the sight of gnawed stubs where two toes had once been, the edges angry and swollen and already tinged with green.

He raised his head and blinked against the light, tongue lolling over cracked lips. "Help me." His eyes were still glazed with the aftereffects of a potent soporific but he blinked and managed to focus on her. His expression hardened into that of a man accustomed to being obeyed. "Mara? Come, wench, set me free."

"Oh sire!" she cried, rushing over. "What has happened to you?" She leaned over to examine his bonds.

He coughed, chains rattling. "Some degenerate cultists of the Dread Lord no doubt. Free me and we shall escape this place. Evil cannot hold me. How long I have been bound here? I cannot even feel my hands and feet." He winced as the numbing effects of the soporific seemed to fade and the ghostly spikes of pain began.

She finished checking he was held securely and backed away, her smile hard and brittle. "Oh, freedom is not at all what I had in mind for you."

His jaw dropped. "Mara? What are you..." Recollection flickered behind his eyes. He remembered the last time he had been conscious. After the feast, in her bedroom, drinking her wine, about to have his way with the wanton wench. He

thrashed in his chains, snarling. “Ar and Owar I call upon your might!”

She waited, foot tapping.

He again tried to summon his magic. Nothing.

“Help!” he shouted, voice cracking.

She folded her arms. “This deep, none shall hear your cries of agony. Perhaps you should look up at your hands.” She took great pleasure in witnessing the birth of horror across his face.

He stared mutely up at the stumps, then retched, a thin splatter that oozed down his naked body. “Why? Whatever have I done to deserve this? I liberated you from evil.”

She circled her dangling prey. “For this I have endured your murdering hands on my body and your filthy cock between my legs. Finally, you will pay for your crimes. I will see justice done.”

He barked with manic laughter. “Justice? There is no justice here, just an obsessed woman with a sick mind. I am no murderer.”

She showed him no emotion: she had learned to hide her loathing all this time, working her way up the ranks from kitchen scullion to prettified maid with the goal of catching his roving eye and luring him away from his guards so she could catch him at his most vulnerable. She removed iron tongs from her tool bag and, after a moment’s reluctance, took them to his balls. She clamped it tight and twisted until he howled even through the fading soporific numbness.

“Call it revenge then,” she said as the screams began. “I will not deny my crime as you have with yours. You are a mass murderer. This is plain and simple fact.”

Despite his pain, he managed to snarl a denial: “You lie! The truth is that only evildoers have fallen by my hand. My queen and knights will find us soon. Free me now and I swear you shall have mercy.”

She paused, then removed the tongs. “There is no mercy to be found in you, Cypher. You are sickeningly certain of your own righteousness. But let us delay justice for a time. Tell me a story, O great and glorious Chosen One: the tale of your raid on the village of HERNslow.”

He glowered at her until she opened the tongs again. Then he winced and began to speak, probably trying to delay the torture and buy his loyal followers more time to rescue him. “I had word that the Dread Lord was shipping grain supplies through the town, destined to feed his army. If I could destroy those supplies then he would be forced to march on the kingdom before all his forces were gathered—that or they would starve. I succeeded.”

“Details!” she hissed, iron tongs clacking together like the jaws of a ravenous beast.

“I slipped across the border with a few trusted followers, then made my way to HERNslow and located the warehouse where they stored the shipment. At nightfall we struck under the cover of rain and fog, surprised and slew the guards, put the building to the torch and returned triumphant having struck a blow against the Dread Lord.”

Mara was silent for a time, struggling to keep her face impassive. “So very heroic of you. Tell me of the guards.”

The king frowned. “What about them?”

“Describe them. What did they look like? How were they dressed?”

“There were five or six,” he answered. “Why should I remember the faces of the enemy?”

She shook her head slowly, sadly. “You can’t even remember all the people you have killed. Perhaps for you they all blur into one. I imagine you lost count after the first few dozen. You only killed one guard on the Dread Lord’s payroll that night. Just one. The rest were not even armed.”

His expression remained defiant as he twisted against his chains. “Only because we surprised them.”

She punched him in the belly, his heroic hard muscle long-since turned to fat. “Rojer, father of three. A vintner checking his stock.”

Another blow as he swayed back and forth on his chains, wheezing for breath, the tips of what was left of his toes scraping across the slimy floor. “Jacob, an apprentice farrier delivering horseshoes. It was less than a month after his coming of age ceremony.”

A third punch, deep into soft bruised flesh, her own knuckles raw. “A nameless traveller just trying to dry sodden clothes around the guard’s brazier.” He shuddered and swung back and forth, choking back his cries of pain. Still so arrogant, so proud.

“And then there was my father, a travelling rat-catcher just doing his job.” She took a deep shuddering breath, mustered every scrap of force she possessed, and then drove her fist into his crotch.

Air exploded from him. He mewled and tried to curl up in a ball, thwarted by the chains. Snot and spittle drooled down his chin and his eyes rolled wildly.

“However powerful and heroic you believe you are,” she said, “you are only human.”

He began to scream and thrash against the chains, his panic having washed away the last of the soporific in his blood.

She punched him in the face, one for the road. “You didn’t stop to ask who they were or what they were doing there. You didn’t even ask if they would stand aside. You cut down all who were present without hesitation and without regret. A pattern you repeated in many places—not that the bards have any interest in singing tales of your innocent victims.”

She leaned in close and whispered in his ear. “You are a murdering fanatic certain of his own virtue. What good you caused does not outweigh the pain left in your wake or the lives you trampled into the dirt on your

blind charge to glory. They have not been forgotten, and you are not forgiven.”

She picked up her lantern and bag of tools and left the chamber, the gate squealing as she closed and locked it. “Scream all you like, King Cypher. Nobody will hear you. Nobody is even looking for you: a pig’s throat was slit, the blood collected, and in the dead of night your hands were nailed to the temple door and the blood poured all across the steps. Far too much blood for any man to survive.” She smiled as his howls grew louder and deeper. “I look forward to seeing you again soon.”

She left him there to scream, to dangle and rattle his chains alone in the darkness.

Hours... passed... days... King Cypher had no way to judge time as he faded in and out of consciousness, the agony from his straining joints, his burning infected feet and brutalised crotch building to a crescendo and then plunging him down into darkness, only to be woken again by small sharp teeth sinking into his toes, forcing him to kick out at the vermin.

Eventually he noticed a vague glow from the tunnel beyond the gate, accompanied by the distant sound of a man’s voice cursing the crud on his boots.

“Help!” he shouted, his throat red-raw and stabbing.

A moment of stillness, then feet splashing towards him. “Sire? Is that you?”

A familiar face at the iron grate, illuminated by a flickering lantern: one of his palace guards; he could not recall the man’s name. “Free me,” he croaked.

A heavy boot hit rusted iron. The gate burst open, sending a twisted bar clanging across the floor. The guard ran towards him, mail clinking. He slowed, stopped and stared, stifled a gag. “Sire... who did this to you?”

King Cypher grimaced. “A deluded, evil bitch. Get me out of here...”

“Wilhelm, sire,” the guard said as he examined the chains running up through the hoop in the ceiling to the wall where they were fastened.

“Of course you are,” the king said. “I am exhausted.” The guard loosed the chains and sent Cypher sprawling across slimy stone. He hissed in pain as Wilhelm undid clasps and unwound chain to free him. He lifted a hand to be helped to his feet and both of them stared at the black stump of his wrist. “Give me your boots and get me out of this disgusting pit.”

His arm around the barefoot guard’s shoulder, they limped down the tunnel, step after agonising step, their only light the swinging lantern held in Wilhelm’s other hand. The guard indicated a long, dark chamber to the right, deep shadow-wreathed alcoves lining the walls. “This way, sire. You shall be free soon. Why did they do this to you on Liberation Day? There must be meaning there. Were they cultists of the Dread Lord?”

The king winced and panted for breath. “Undoubtedly. Wittered on some nonsense about me slaying her father, who was guarding something or other for the Dread Lord. Claimed he was innocent. Pah! A likely story.”

Wilhelm sighed. “These fools do not understand that total war was called for. If you had to risk the deaths of innocents to achieve your greater goal then so be it.”

The king chuckled. “You are a pragmatic man—remind me to promote you. Any who stood between the Dread Lord and me were his allies. I lose no sleep over the lives taken due to the Dread Lord’s machinations. I was chosen by gods and prophecy to usher in this new golden age, so how can my actions possibly be wrong.”

Cypher found himself falling, his support withdrawn. He landed on his knees in a puddle of filth and fell to all fours, howling as he tried to break his fall with stumps instead of hands.

“Nope,” Wilhelm said. “I can’t bear to touch this rancid pig a second longer. I know you all wanted this ruse to continue for a while yet but I’m not one for torture. We shouldn’t be as callous as this bastard.”

Five shadowy figures stepped from the alcoves, deeper black against the shadows. Wilhelm lit their lanterns to reveal three women and two men.

Cypher cringed at the sight of Mara with her tool bag in her hand. “What... what is this?”

“Revenge,” she said. “Justice. A balancing of the scales. You truly believe I was the only one you wronged? You, Cypher, murdered my innocent father at HERNSLAW.”

“You are mistaken—he was in league with the guards.”

An old woman spat on him, hot spittle running down his cheek. “You murdered my little Garold, at Hartford. All for carrying a few messages.”

“Willingly working for the Dread Lord as his eyes and ears.”

A young man and woman stepped forward, siblings. “We are children of HERNSLAW,” they said. “When you burned our warehouse you destroyed our food stores as well. Our family starved to death that winter that we might eat and live.”

“You were all in bed with evil,” Cypher hissed. “A few less soldiers to serve in his army.”

A balding man drew a dagger from his belt and tested the point with his thumb. “At the end of the war my unarmed wife, cousin, and a dozen others sought to bar you and your followers from the bridge to Bersin. It was a peaceful protest against the purges and you had your cavalry trample them into the cobbles. Then you sacked the town.”

“Their hatred for moral clarity was their own undoing,” the king replied. “Leave no stone unturned when rooting out evil—only those with black hearts would stand in the path of righteousness. Their coin

was rightfully liberated to aid my quest in ushering in a new age.”

Mara growled. “Life is not a fucking bard’s tale. Other people are not merely actors in your personal power fantasy.”

“And I,” Wilhelm said, “was born across the border in the lands of the Dread Lord.”

The king hissed. “And so you finally reveal yourselves as black-hearted cultists in service to your evil master.”

The guard shook his head sadly. “As if they ever had a choice. My village is a ruin. My people no longer exist. Those of us who survived your purges after the war now live in your kingdom’s slums as broken and impoverished families with no land to call our own.”

“Your people are evil in blood and bone. The darkness had to be rooted out and destroyed and I was the only one with the balls to do it.”

“Not for much longer,” Mara replied, brandishing her tool bag.

Wilhelm blocked her with an outspread arm. “Do not sink to his level.”

“I am a hero,” King Cypher spat. “None of you will ever reach my level.”

Mara laughed, harsh and mocking. “What, your level of kneeling in the filth of a sewer with your severed hands nailed to the temple door? You so-called heroes... charging in like enraged bulls to slaughter everything in your path, stealing everything not nailed down; the lot of you are naught but murdering thieves.”

“A hero,” the guard said, flat and hard. “A hero to some, a villain to others. As are we all.”

“I will not let him go free,” Mara stated. “He deserves to die.”

“Then make a quick end of it,” Wilhelm said, looking at each of the group. “Let us be done with this vile thing and call it justice. There is no excuse for torture.”

Cypher staggered to his feet. “The gods chose me to begin an age of peace and prosperity. Despite all your petty moralising, none of you have the right to cast judgement. History has proven my actions to be correct.”

“You built an empire atop the backs of the dead,” Wilhelm snapped. “Ach! Do as you will, Mara. I want nothing more to do with him.” He stalked off, and the two younger siblings followed, their eyes brimming with tears. The others watched the lights dimming round the bend of the tunnel.

In their moment of distraction, Cypher seized his chance: missing his hands, weak and pained and broken as he was, he was still the hero who had taken down the Dread Lord. He was still deadly. He kicked the old woman in the side of the knee. It broke with a sickening crack and she fell screaming. Before the bald man could react, the king’s shoulder slammed into his chest, smashing him back into the wall, skull bouncing off the stone. The man slid down leaving behind a glistening slug-trail on the stonework.

The king grinned at Mara, his face a demonic mask in the flickering light of fallen lanterns. “Now it’s your turn, traitorous wench.”

He advanced, but the old woman was more determined than he had imagined. She sank her remaining teeth into his calf and bit down hard. He screamed and kicked out, but failed to dislodge her. Mara panicked and swung her heavy tool bag up into his face. He spewed blood and broken teeth, and then crashed to the floor unconscious.

He was only out for a few seconds, but that was all Mara needed to grab a hammer from her bag and pulverise his right knee. She stood over him, hands shaking, already swinging at the other. Steel shattered bone, crack and scream echoing through the tunnels. He writhed in the muck to the old woman’s mad cackle, choking on blood from split lips and a broken nose.

“You should go, my sweet Mara,” the old woman said. “Wilhelm was right. This is no place now for justice. This here is evil work you won’t ever forget. But then I gots nothing left to live for save this, an I reckon he will last a goodly while. My Garold was all I ever had. Leave this to me.”

The king snarled and twisted, every movement filled with agony. “I am Chosen! I’ll gut you bitches.”

“Not without eyes you won’t,” the old woman said, dragging herself towards him, knife poised.

Mara looked away, sickened by the sounds of gargling screams and a two wet slurps and pops of suction.

“Go,” the old woman repeated. “Do some good with your life.”

Mara fled, leaving them both to their fates. He had brought peace but he had never paid the cost of his glory himself—Innocent people had always paid in his stead. The sight of what she had done to him was burned into her mind far beyond forgetting and she fought the urge to paint the guilt-tinged memory in terms of long-delayed justice; after all, that had been his way.

She wondered if Cypher had always been a deluded fanatic, or if he had truly sought to be a hero in the beginning but as the bodies piled ever higher the guilt had twisted his mind into the belief that what he was doing had to be—could only be—right. He had convinced himself that he was chosen to carry out the will of the gods, and that total victory at any cost justified the slaughter—such was the price of his fucking glory.[GdM]

Cameron Johnston is a Scottish writer of speculative fiction (usually a mix of fantasy and horror) and a member of the Glasgow Science Fiction Writers' Circle since 2010.

He is also a swordsman, gamer, enthusiast of archaeology and history, a fine ale drinker, builder of LEGO, a cat-slave, and owns far too many books to fit on his shelves.

An Interview with Cameron Johnston

TOM SMITH

Salutations Grimlings! I tracked Scottish author Cameron Johnston to a dark, seedy tavern to pick his brain about all things grim. You may have already read Cam's debut *The Traitor God* which came out this year. If you haven't, stop reading right now and run out and get it! Grim and dark with some unusual fantasy elements to it that had me wanting more.

[TS] Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk with us Cameron!

[CJ] Thank you for having me! You are not wrong about the busy schedule: a debut author can spend years on a book, but when the publisher wants a second in less than a year it's a shock to the system, and a real learning experience.

[TS] This book hooked me early in with the protagonist Edrin Walker being likable enough, but also clearly not a good guy in the classic sense. I loved the "Memento" style approach where the protagonist himself doesn't know part of his past either so I felt like we were learning and figuring out things together. What made you decide to go this route? Was it a specific idea built into the outline, or something that just came to you?

[CJ] It was always a concept that I was toying with, a unique opportunity afforded by a magic user who

specialises in mind-magic. At one stage in the rough draft I included an extra-dimensional entity that hunted people down by the taste of their memories, and Edrin Walker had to hide his own to escape from it. Sadly, that idea tied the rest of the plot in confusing knots and subtracted rather than added to the story. That said, I still liked the idea of an important part of his history being locked away inside his head and in subsequent drafts of the manuscript that developed into the dread (but much less confusing) secret currently locked away inside him.

[TS] This setting of Setharis has what I will call “street level gods” in that they walk the earth and seem to be living amongst the people of the world. They seem similar to the ascendants in the Malazan books and the deep kings and nameless from McDonald’s *The Raven’s Mark* series with a more interactive pantheon. How would you as the author describe them to a layman?

[CJ] Magic is a very physical thing in this setting, bedded in the blood and bone of magic users, so I didn’t want to have distant gods larking off in some spiritual realm or other. The gods of Setharis were once human, or so the legends say. Imagine the rich and powerful (and semi-unstable / obsessive) people in this world and then hand them almost unlimited magical power... terrifying, right? Add in a soul-crushing, endless, and vitally important duty that binds them to a single city populated by people they don’t much care for unless it affects them directly, or if they are bored, and that gives you the normal situation of Setharis. Of course, in *The Traitor God*, the gods have now gone missing...

[TS] I found the character building and development in *The Traitor God* fascinating. Were there any particular

works as you were growing up that inspired you as far as character development, and how?

[CJ] I always loved an anti-hero. To me, the likes of Elric of Melniboné and Conan the Cimmerian seemed more real and vastly more interesting than the pure-hearted farm boys with magic swords that filled the fantasy genre in the 80s and early 90s. From them I was inspired to write moral ambiguity and shades of grey. From the pages of Hellblazer, I was inspired by the very human feel of John Constantine's flaws and his black streak of bastardry as he tried to muddle through a world of dark magic while trying to do little bits of good here and there.

[TS] While reading this book, I couldn't help thinking what a great graphic novel it would make. Have you considered translating some of your writing to other media down the road?

[CJ] People have suggested it would make a great video game as well, and I'm very open to offers for both. I've dabbled enough in other arenas like screenwriting to know that a whole different skillset and breadth of knowledge is required by other fiction formats. Many writers balk at the thought of TV / film or graphic novels and games diverging from their original works, but I'm of the opinion that what works in a literary format is not always ideal for others, and I'd be happy to let actual experts adapt them.

[TS] Scotland has a rich and dark history of war and violence. How do you think growing up with that local history has influenced your writing personally?

[CJ] It's not so much the history of war and violence that has influenced my writing as the ancient places and artefacts. As a kid I always wanted to be out

exploring castles and historic sites, or look at swords and armour in museums. There's something sublime about touching a standing stone or walking around a stone circle thousands of years old and pondering the mysteries of the distant past. Which is not to say that Scottish history does not encourage a wide streak of fatalism and cynicism that meshes very well with grimdark fantasy.

[TS] As a new to the scene writer, our readers probably don't know a lot about you personally. What sort of things do you like to do when not writing? Do you have a different day job or write full time now?

[CJ] Oh I wish I could write full time! Perhaps one day, if things go very, very well, I could give up the IT day job to focus on literary adventures and dark magic. When I'm not writing I love reading, playing board games and PC games, watching old science fiction, horror and fantasy films, and on occasion I like to practice longsword, though that's lapsed a little while I've been focused so much on writing. I've recently been taking lessons in blacksmithing for research and I'm finding it to be enormous fun as well as stress-busting work. I love all things historical, and I've even taken part in an archaeological excavation of an Iron Age hillfort here in Scotland.

[TS] Which books did young Cameron read that influenced you into writing now?

[CJ] *Dragonlance* by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman really kicked off my love of adventurous fantasy and made me want to write my own adventures with dragons, wizards and warriors. *The Dark is Rising* sequence by Susan Cooper and *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* by Alan Garner encouraged my love of mystical landscapes and folklore (see question 5) and

I really wanted to venture into the magical locations found between those pages. *Necroscope* by Brian Lumley has some of the best and weirdest vampires I have ever encountered in fiction and I wanted to write my own stories with characters and creatures that were just as different and twisted as those. Then there is HP Lovecraft with all the looming dread, eldritch monsters, and humanity's precarious place in an uncaring universe.

[TS] Fantasy has changed directions many times since I first started reading it in the 1980's, which direction would you like to see more of?

[CJ] I like grimdark with a touch of heart and humour, and I'm happy to see a little more of that coming in to mix with darker than black fiction. I would also love to see more of what might be called landscape fantasy—fiction that celebrates the mysteries of the world around the characters, from haunted moors and gloomy, ill-omened forests to dusty forgotten tombs and sunken dungeons. I'm a big fan of places so rich in character that they might as well be a separate character in a novel.

[TS] If you could work with another writer on a joint series, who would you like to work with and why?

[CJ] Choices choices... an urban fantasy with Peter McLean would be tremendous, but today I will opt for a sprawling fantasy written with Jen Williams—I love the way she brings her characters to life (especially *Vintage*), the tavern fights would be truly epic, and the humour bold and bawdy.

[TS] What can we expect to see from you in the way of books or projects in the near future? When is the sequel due out?

[CJ] The sequel, *God of Broken Things*, is due out in June 2019 and after that—gods of publishing and writing being kind—I currently have a number of other projects waiting in the wings crying out for some loving attention. In the meantime, I will be working on a short story for the hallowed pages of this most Grimdark of magazines.

[TS] Cameron, thanks so much for joining us! Now, let's see how the whiskey selection is in this place...

[CJ] Thanks, Tom, it's been a real pleasure. I'll have a Lagavulin—the man, the legend, that is Ron Swanson is never wrong.**[GdM]**

Scene and Summary: An Indispensable Internal Structure of Showing and Telling

MIKE MYERS

Fictional stories, be they short, long, or somewhere in the middle, need internal structure to keep the reader engaged, and that structure should be invisible to the reader—it should seem so natural that is unnoticeable. The reader flows from scene, the so-called building block of fiction, to summary, the little bits in between the scenes that connect them so they make sense and keep the reader moving along, to scene again, to summary again, to... well, you get the point. As a writer, if you do this well, many other important elements of fiction like setting, pacing, action, and dialogue will fall into place or will at least be easier to fix if they don't, and your reader will stay engaged and keep turning the pages.

There are only two parts to a story's internal structure: scene and summary. This is not to say there are no beginnings, middles, ends, climaxes, denouements, arcs, conflicts, dialogues, settings, plots, or whatever, but it *is* to say that the development of these and other familiar story elements will take place in scenes and summaries. Your farmhand or shunned third daughter will be called to action in a scene at the beginning of your stereotypical fantasy

novel, and he or she will defeat the dragon at the climax in a scene near the end. In between, he or she might get drunk in a scene, have sex in a scene, try to steal the ring from Frodo in a scene, push a rival of a cliff in a scene, etc. These scenes will be connected by summaries in which the character will assess what happened in the preceding scene, determine their options going forward, make a choice about what to do next, and then, like magic, enter the next scene. There are other little things that I'll get to, but so far, this is all you need.

The most important distinction between scene and summary is that scenes happen in real-time: they are *shown* in play-by-play action and dialogue. Summary, on the other hand, is *told* in, well, summary. Yes, it's part of the old showing/telling dichotomy. When you read (if you read about writing) that *telling* is sometimes okay, this summary interlude is what they mean. You are summarizing the events and thoughts of your character that lead to the next important event, which will take place in a scene.

In a scene, you *show* everything. Even the character's thoughts are the actual thoughts they are having at that very moment:

“Abigail looked down at her chest. *Shit, I'm bleeding*, she realized. She picked up her sword again and swung it for the editor's throat.”

It's all real-time. And it is all *showing*, *no telling*. It's just like a scene on film: there are no time lapses, no interruptions, no narrative navel-pondering, and for fuck's sake don't let your narrator *tell* the reader what's about to be *shown*:

“*But it was too late for this editor, too late to save his own life. It was over.* He raised his bloody

shield to deflect the blow, but, well, it was too late, *as I already fucking told you.*”

Don't do it. It's a spoiler, and it will take the energy right out of your action. In scene, you strictly rely on your characters, their actions and their dialogue, to engage your reader and push your story forward. If the action in your scene is not as engaging as you'd like, you might go back and see if you are interrupting it with narrative babble and *telling*:

“Abigail had the editor pinned against the wall with her sword. *She would finally kill him. She had waited years for this. She wasn't a good swordswoman, but he was average at best.* On the other hand, she had taken fencing lessons from a fantasy author two years ago at a castle in the Basque region of Spain. *But she hadn't practiced in a while,* and her boots were too loose. Boots her mother bequeathed her in her will *that would give her great traction.* She nodded her head, set her jaw, gritted her teeth, sighed and glared at him with her icy, steely, blue-grey, narrowed, almond-shaped, medium-sized eyes. *She wanted revenge...* and on and on and on.”

Yes, this also includes some immediate thoughts, but are they worth stopping the action for at this moment? I doubt it. Cut the stuff that's not extremely important right now, and then decide if any of it can go into the summary before or after the scene. And cut anything that is *telling*. *Show* that she isn't a good swordswoman in the action or *tell* about it in the summary when she decides to fight the editor. And if you feel the need, show the boots giving her great traction when she almost slips and falls, and she internally thanks her mother for them. It will help make

the action of the scene much more exciting and engaging.

The other piece of this two-pronged approach at fiction writing is summary, in which your narrator *tells* your readers what they need to know to get to the next scene. This will usually include, either explicitly or implicitly, the point-of-view character's post-mortem of the preceding scene, their consideration of available options, and their choice of what *important thing* to do next, which will be shown in the next scene.

“After she killed the editor, the writer went home, took a hot bath, and went to bed. It felt good to kill the editor, and she thought it would really help her writing. It felt so good she wondered if she should get another editor and maybe kill him, too. She wished she had killed the one who told her to write everything in scenes and summaries. What kind of bullshit was that? She picked up her iPhone from her night table and scrolled through her contacts. Yeah, that’s him, she remembered, Mike Myers. That fucking guy. (And into the scene...) She pressed the call button and waited.

‘Hello?’

Yep, she remembered that squeaky voice. ‘Is this Mike Myers, the editor?’ she asked sensually.

‘Wait a second,’ he replied. ‘Didn’t you just kill an editor in a medieval swordfight and now you’re calling me on an iPhone? You know that’s an anachro—’

‘Shut the fuck up! I’ll fucking kill you!’ She slammed the phone down, cracking its screen... (and then back to summary...)

The writer didn’t sleep well that night thinking of all the editors she wanted to kill...”

Even when your scene ends in a cliffhanger for one of your characters,

“The editor backed away from the sword-wielding madwoman as far as he could toward the cliff. Then his boot hit nothing but air and over he went, screaming.”

You will still have a summary when you next visit the character. You might have a scene or a whole chapter featuring another set of characters in between. But when you return to your hero at the bottom of the cliff, you will summarize.

“The editor woke from the shock of his fall. He wondered how he had survived it. Then he noticed the fat, splatted alligator beneath him and realized it had cushioned his fall and saved his life. Thanks, alligator. He knew he’d lost this battle but not the war. He wouldn’t give up. He’d climb back up and confront the author again. There was no excuse for having five different characters ‘setting their jaws’ in one scene. He wouldn’t allow it... (and back into scene). He stood up and began to climb.”

The summary stage can also help you construct your setting for the next scene before launching into real-time.

“They had walked seventeen miles of hill country through a blizzard. They needed a place to stay for the night or they would freeze. At last, in the early evening, they spotted a house in a little ravine. It was a small white cape under a tall oak tree. Its lights were on and smoke rose in a plume from a chimney somewhere on the back of the roof. They continued to trudge through the

thigh-high snow until they at last reached the front door of the house..." (and into the scene...).

The point here is to set up what you need in the scene. When the travellers get inside the house, you've already mentioned the fire that they can then throw the witch into. I can't even count on my twenty-one fingers and toes how many times I've picked up a story to edit, and in the middle of scene a character reaches for something that just popped out of nowhere.

"She reached into the desk and took out knife."

Desk? What desk? You never said anything about a desk. If this happens, you can go back to your transition from summary to scene and find a place to put the desk so it's there when you need it later.

"The room inside was a lot like his mother's living room. It had a sofa on one side, a TV on the other, and on the far wall was a large fireplace (okay, how about here) and next to it an old wooden desk."

Done.

Similarly, having a well-defined internal structure of scenes and summaries can help with your pacing. Why does this story sag here? Well, most likely you have a scene (or scenes) that is too long for its relative importance to the story. Or it could be that your summary is too long relative to its importance to the story and the scenes it is sandwiched between. On the other hand, why does your climax, perhaps, lack the excitement and punch you want? Perhaps the scene is too short to express the full importance of your story's main conflict that is soon to be resolved. Locate that exact scene and build up the tension in it with more conflict between the characters and more relevant action.

And that's the basics of how it works: scene>summary>scene>etc., all the way from start to finish, two distinct ways of writing, interwoven to engage your reader and move your story forward in an effective, internally organized way.

This material is adapted from Dwight Swain's indispensable book *Techniques of the Selling Writer* (University of Oklahoma Press). I've read dozens (and dozens) of books on writing, and it is by far my favourite. If you think you need brushing up on your knowledge of story structure or other practical fiction writing skills, please get yourself a copy. **[GdM]**

Mike Myers is senior editor at British Fantasy Award Nominee *Grimdark Magazine*, and has worked in this capacity with such amazing authors as Mark Lawrence, Brian Staveley, Anna Smith Spark, Michael R. Fletcher, Aliette de Bodard, Alex Marshall (Jesse Bullington), and many more. He is also the editor of the r/fantasy Stabby Award-winning anthology *Evil is a Matter of Perspective*. He is available for freelance editing and can be contacted through his website at www.sffeditor.com.

Rage Wolf

ANDY REMIC

This story is dedicated to my old friend, Peter G. Haworth. RIP.

1. She Chameleon

You'll burn in hell, she thought; I fucking guarantee it, more than I guarantee the sun will rise, the world will spin, or a *Splice* defecates in the woods. I hate you. I fucking hate you with passion, without anger, a low-level mental corruption, like coals glowing in a burned-down fire. I never believed I could hate somebody with so much purity, clarity, addiction. I want to take your fucking stupid pig-head in my delicate, beautifully manicured and pastel-tinted nail-lacquered hands, and crush your fucking skull right in. I want to squeeze, squeeze hard and squeeze slow, feeling your skull crack, splinter, buckle and break, as my thumbs push gradually, sumptuously, erotically into your eyes and I feel those opium orbs squirm, then pop, jelly writhing across thumbnails, then push farther in, deeper in, sinking into your diseased brain of repression, mashing the twisted idiot-matter that lies within, failing to compute that *this is death* and *this is the end* and *this is what you always needed*. That's what I want. I want to kill you. But more—I hate you so much, *so fucking much*, I want you to suffer for all eternity. I want you to fucking burn. I want you to suffer like I know I have suffered, through no fault of my own, through my

fucking perfection-shell, my purity-mask, my humility-shroud, a concept you could never comprehend. You accelerate. I am the ignominious. You are the cunt, no arguments, no discussion, no neutral ground; and I want to see you slowly destroyed and decimated and fucked-up beyond all fucking recognition. Because. *Because* that's what I command.

I turn, twisting naked under rich satin sheets, stretching as I watch the sun sink below the horizon of the crenellated city walls of Vagandrak. She Chameleon. *My control*. A man lies in my bed, deep in sleep, snoring gently. I cannot remember his name. But I remember yours—it is branded into the frontal lobes of my brain, and despite my singularity, I hate nobody as much as I fucking despise you, pity you, spit on you, piss on you, and I know to murder you—a simple assassination—would not only be a joy to the world, a love-letter to humanity and a release for you from that self-imposed misery you call a life... it would be a natural justice. A return to the natural order of the Earth.

Distantly, across the city, a new-born babe wails its first sounds of life.

And I smile.

2. Fear Not, For I Am With Thee

My name is Dek. I was once a 'hero'—supposedly, so they say, so the bards sing, those dicks—from the days of the Iron Wolves and Desekra Fortress; days of fighting and killing the mud-orcs. I was a hero showered in riches for helping slaughter the bastard sorcerer Morkagoth, and turn back the evil killer, Orlana the Horse Lady, who'd escaped from that hell which cowers below all other hells: The Furnace. A place of ultimate desolation.

Once, I was a pit-fighter, with blood and death constantly on my knuckles.

Now, I am an empty shell. My best friends are dead.
Crumbled into ash.

Fear not, for I am with thee.

Donkey. Shit.

I am alone.

Nobody is with me.

I am Dek. Once I was fury incarnate, now I'm just tired. Ha ha. Fucked up beyond redemption. Now, I am an empty, crushed shell stranded on a lonely, eternal beach of gentle lapping waves, serenity, melancholy, and emptiness filling my heart and mind and soul. The sea is slate grey, and unforgiving; a cruel mistress, if ever I saw one. I never imagined I could sink so low. I never imagined my life could turn out like this.

3. Ghosts of the Past

Dek sat in The Fighting Cocks tavern. A fire burned in the huge, stone-carved fireplace keeping the cruel bitch of winter at bay, oak crackling, demons dancing through the fire, red and orange sprites spinning and whirling and twisting and fucking. *The Cocks* was considered a place of disrepute. It was not, for example, a place where a *gentleman* or *lady* frequented, to, say, sample a varied selection of *fine wines* and aromatic cheeses and cracker platters.

It was late. Sunday night. The fire cast a warm orange glow, logs crackling like pig fat roasting over a spit. Most men and whores had left for their beds, or at least, somebody else's, and Dek sat alone with a goblet of Vagandrak Red, staring down into deep bloody depths and spying a distorted image of his own brutal face.

He ran a hand over his balding, shaved head, a patchwork quilt of old scars, rough under his fingers, each one an attempt on his life, either in battle or the Red Thumb Fighting Pits. But he was still alive. Just a-fuckingbout.

Tonight, was Dek's fifty-fifth birthday.

And he sat alone. Alone, except for the ghosts.

He scratched his white, close-cropped beard, small, dark eyes staring down into the wine. In those depths swam the blood of hundreds, probably thousands. He had lost count. *One thing is for sure*, he mused, mood sombre, melancholy; a lyre string plucked by a weary jester tired of life: *When I die, I sure as fuck ain't going to no paradise.*

Truth was, Dek was feeling his age. And with age came weariness. Dek had fought his entire life, and although, yes, it was sometimes pleasurable, during his time in the Pits, to punch somebody in the back of the head, he was tired. Tired of watching his back. Tired of looking over his shoulder. Seventeen assassination attempts he'd survived; murdered every single cunt who tried to take his life with razor steel and clubs. But there came a time when Dek thought, *maybe it's time to move on. Maybe it's time to pack a bag, and just fuck off into the wilderness and simply... disappear.* Who will miss me? Who will care? When Dek dies, it'll be a dire, miserable funeral on a cold and misty morn, a few old cheap flowers tossed onto a pauper's coffin—if he was lucky. No cannon salute for Dek, despite decades of fighting for his country and his king. Oh no. The insanity of King Yoon had seen to that. The notoriety of Dek's recent reputation had seen to that. In fact, Dek was truly, absolutely, genuinely amazed to still be alive, still breathing the acrid air of Vagandrak, still pissing in the sewers and eyeing the scum who surrounded him. It was a brutal world; and most brutal of all, he fitted in perfectly, an oiled cog in a machine of natural decadence.

But—the saddest thing of all?

He did not care.

Many was the night he curled alone under his blankets and thought to himself, *if there is a dark and twisted god who actually gives a fuck—please, allow me to die in my sleep. I do not want to wake. I do not*

wish to see the dawn. I do not wish to hear the birds sing. I do not wish to smell the freshly cut grass, hear the bawl of a new-born infant, the yelp of a cute furry puppy, nor engage in witty banter with a group of cunts who, in reality, don't care whether I live or die.

I have so-called friends. And yet I am alone in an infinite universe.

Alone. And desolate.

Dek drained the goblet, and despite having told himself this was the last one, he raised his hand and a young barmaid brought over a large, fluted crystal decanter.

“How you feeling there, Dek?” she enquired, her accent holding a burr of the west, musical and caring.

“Can you see the ghosts?” He looked up then, a sudden movement like the strike of a snake. His eyes focussed on the pretty, young barmaid. “Can you see them?”

“Aye, I can see them, old soldier.” She looked around, and smiled kindly, her red locks shifting, and then filled his goblet with a practised hand. “Now you take it easy now, there's not many a man in here could carry you home.”

Dek gave a half-smile that wouldn't have been out of place on a corpse. “I'll work on it,” he said, and watched her retreat to the haven behind the bar. There was a certain limited sanctuary in having a barrier between the many idiots a woman had to deal with, and an even better inner peace knowing a barmaid had somebody like Dek who would always step in to defend the honour of a woman.

The door to the tavern opened, allowing a gust of chilled air to whirl inside on light flurries of snow. Dek did not look up, did not look over, only acknowledged the intrusion with a little shiver, not necessarily at the cold, but at the presence of the ghosts that surrounded him.

It's a cold night, said Narnok the Axeman.

That'd be true, smiled Trista. *Although not as cold as a night on the battlements at Desekra Fortress.*

Ahh, the Pass of Splintered Bones, smiled Kiki, running a hand through her shoulder-length brown hair, although her smile was crooked with a million shattered memories; memories of pain, of cancer, and of her twisted sister who spoke evil words in her mind like a dark drug that she could not exhume. *Old days. Good days. Bad days.*

“Dek,” said the woman.

Dek shivered, and did not look up. The ghosts were still speaking in his head, and he did not want to dismiss their conversation; after all, the dead were all he had left to help celebrate his birthday. And if truth be told, they were all he needed.

“Dek!”

Slowly, Dek's head lifted and his small dark eyes fixed on the woman. She was middle-aged, slim descending into fat, with bobbed hair. Her clothes were nondescript; she could have been rich dressing as poor, or just poor. Her eyes were narrowed, and it was the eyes that Dek recognised. Memories came flooding back and a growl, more animal than human, began low in his throat.

“Sharala. What, in the name of the Seven Sisters, are you doing here?”

She stared at him for a long time, head tilted to one side, and he could not read her face. He had never been able to read her face, even all those years ago when they had been together. All those moments when he thought, *what is she thinking? she asked a question, I need to give the right answer, I don't want another argument please gods spare me from another fucking argument I'm tired of fucking arguing and all I just fucking want is... peace. What's going through her poisoned little rat-brain? Her corrupted mind? Her twisted perception of reality? Her inception poisons?*

Dek shrugged off the past like a cloak of ash from a funeral pyre of murdered children.

“Fuck off,” he said.

“I need your help,” she said.

Dek considered this. “Fuck off,” he repeated, and turned, showing her his broad back. *Go on, stick the knife in again, like you did a thousand fucking times. You think I'll sit here on my birthday and listen to your shit, your lies, your deceit, your trickery, your witchcraft, your acid tongue, your snakebite and your fucking verbal abominations?*

“I need your help,” said Sharala, and there was an odd chord that struck a high-pitched weird tone in Dek's soul; for despite his soldiering, fighting, killing, murdering, despite the battles and the punch-ups and the Red Thumb Fighting Pits, Dek was a good man, an honourable man, with an honourable soul. He knew right from wrong. He knew good from bad. Fuck the law. He knew the natural justice of things. But he also knew; knew he was too old and too tired and too worn out with the trials and challenges of life. Dek couldn't give a fuck about anything, or anybody, any longer. His Ma and Da were dead; long gone and worm meat and a product of disintegration; ashes to ashes and fuck you too. His brother was dead. And his friends? His brothers-in-arms?

All gone, gone and lost. Voices in his memory. Shadows flickering on a tavern wall.

Dek turned. “Sharala. It's been a long time. I don't want no trouble. All those lies you told, getting me locked up by the City Watch, those men you hired to kill me, all that shit; just—just please, leave me alone. Go away, to whatever cockroach hole you crawled out of; go back to the other fucking insects. Leave me in peace with my memories of good men and women.”

“It's our daughter. She's been kidnapped.”

“What?” Dek stared into her narrowed eyes.

“Our daughter. She. Has. Been. Kidnapped. By an officer, a slave-trader and a rogue; his name is Izak. General Izak. He has powerful connections with King Yoon, and I don't know what to do or I would never have come here—because I want you dead more than any man in Vagandrak.”

Dek stared, and stared hard.

“We have a daughter?” he said, and his voice was low and cool and dangerous, and his eyes were knives, and his heart was an inferno, and his mind was a scorpion pit. “You're telling me we have a fucking daughter?”

“Yes. She's twelve years old. Her name is Elise. She has your eyes. Your stubbornness. Your temper. And she's been taken.”

Dek's mouth dropped open, and he forced it shut with a *clack* of teeth. He ground his jaws, and narrowed his eyes, and his hand was going for one of his sixteen hidden knives before he caught himself and his brain wound itself in; he breathed deeply, turned away, and drank the entire goblet of Vagandrak Red in one gulp.

“You never told me.”

“No.”

“You cunt.”

“Maybe.”

“You kept my fucking child from me?” Dek surged to his feet, upending the long oak table and sending his goblet and several uncleaned plates crashing to the floor, followed by the clatter of toppling stools and a hush that settled over *The Fighting Cocks* like a funeral shroud. Normally, it would have taken four men to lift that trestle bench. Dek's fury had returned, and he did not make a pretty sight. No angry man ever does. “I had a child, all these years,” he snarled, eyes dancing with the light of an inferno, “and you never let me see her? You took her from me? You hid her from me? This most precious gift that life can give, my daughter, *my*

fucking daughter, my *only* daughter, you purposefully didn't tell me about her—for twelve fucking years?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Sharala smiled, a narrow, thin affair that had nothing to do with humour, and everything to do with control. "Because I hate you," she said.

Dek stared at his ex-lover. A woman he had known a million years ago. *True ugliness is the sight of hate on a person's face*, he thought. He felt sick; he wanted to puke there and then. And he realised: *I wish I had never, ever fucking met you. Not in a decade, a thousand years, an eternity. I wish our paths had never crossed. I wish I could have lived my life without ever seeing your face, hearing your voice, smelling your stink, tasting your wretchedness.*

"Elise was taken by force yesterday, when I sent her out to buy fish for supper, at the Green Man Market. She's being held prisoner. She's going to be sold to the Whoremasters, and you know what happens to twelve-year-old girls who go to the Whoremasters; she'll be lucky to see the age of fifteen. And if she does, she'll be so destroyed, she'll no longer be a human being. Meet me by the Red Tower in thirty minutes. Then I'll tell you what to do."

"Always the one in control, eh?" snarled Dek. "Always the one giving out instructions. You always were like that, in your head. Well tell me this—how do I know you're telling the truth? How do I know this isn't some other cunt's kid and you're just using me as a handy free sword-for-hire? I ain't no mercenary scum." He spat on the upturned oak table.

Sharala stared up at him, at his shaved head, his scars, his half-finished tattoos, his strapped-up fingers, his broad shoulders, his white beard, his furious eyes. And she smiled. "You know I'm telling the truth," she said, voice soft. She pressed her hand to her chest. "Because you feel it, here, in your heart, in your soul."

You can feel it. Close your eyes and listen; listen to the beating of Elise's heart.”

And Dek knew. And Dek growled. And Dek was lost.

Sharala turned and strode purposefully across the tavern, exiting in a gush of powdered snow; Dek slumped back on the bench and held his hand up to the bar. The red-headed barmaid almost ran to him, a goblet of Vagandrak Red in both hands, and he took it without a word, without looking at her, and drained it in one.

“Amarissa?” he said.

“Dek?”

“Go tell Skellgann to pass me my sword,” he said, and as he looked around at the last few remnants of *The Fighting Cocks*, they all looked away.

4. The Red Tower

The wind howled, sending light flurries of snow swirling in dervish spirals down the cobbled streets leading to the Red Tower. As ever, the tower loomed through the darkness as Dek's boots trod through snow and he paused on the corner, hidden in shadows, by the stone-clad edge of a three-storey town house. Before him stood a large open square, dotted with evergreen bushes and memorials to soldiers and kings long dead; the Red Tower dominated the open space, perhaps fifty feet square at its base. It had once been a torturer's tower, a place where people accused of treason were taken to have the 'truth' pried from their mouths, fingers, eyes and bollocks. There was, and had always been, a very real air of menace about the place; not because of the dark red stones from which it was built, so very reminiscent of the blood spilt within those terribly historic walls; not because of the hundreds, if not thousands of intricate carvings and swirls and sculptures, forced onto every single part of the external surface depicting demons and devils and warriors centuries dead; not because of the lack of

windows until one reached the summit of the tower, perhaps thirty storeys high, finally giving way to an opening from which 'traitors' had once been hung by the neck until dead. No. It was said there was a dark magick on the place, *in* the very stones; a blood-oil magick from centuries before; an age ago. It was said the Red Tower had been built by an ancient race of men and women who were not quite human; men and women whose bodies ran with the help of intricate clockwork devices inserted into their bodies using surgery and dark sorcery, clockwork machines woven into their hearts in order to keep them alive, and who had to drink blood-oil to lubricate the machines which aided their very longevity—a blood-oil harvested from the living, thus forcing them into a vampiric half-life. Dek shivered as he remembered the legends, and remembered *Kell's Legend* which had been sung to him by a travelling bard when he was just four or five years old, sitting around the village campfire, eyes wide at the song and its beautiful, horrific content...

The mighty Kell stood proud on sandy shores,
He'd willingly cast out a palace of bores,
He pondered on glory of merciless days,
As lounging by his feet decadent poets sang
praise,
But now his axe of old lay down by his side,
A weapon of terror, and worthy genocide,
As the sea-sweet whisper carried o'er to him,
Her voice a bright loving invitation to swim,
Eternal bed, quoth she, I bring long soothing
sleep,
Come to me my darling, now please don't you
weep;

Our hero of old, he felt not the dread,
Of battles gone by, of children now dead,
He dreamt of the slaughter at Valantrium Moor,

A thousand dead foes, there could not be a cure
Of low evil ways and bright terrible deeds,
Of men turned so bad, he'd harvest the weeds,
His mighty axe hummed, *Ilanna* by name,
Twin sharp blades of steel, without any shame
For the deeds she did do, the men she did slay,
Every single living creature was legitimate prey;

Kell waded through life on a river of blood,
His axe in his hands, dreams misunderstood,
In Moonlake and Skulkra he fought with the best
This hero of old, this hero obsessed,
This hero turned champion of King Searlan
Defiant and worthy a merciless man,
Through Jangir and Black Pike Kell slaughtered
the foe,
Each battle was empty, each moment gone slow,
With each bloody murder Kell now felt more pain,
Reversal and angst brought home true heart
bane.

And
Kell now stood with his axe in hand,
The sea raged before him, time torn into strands,
He pondered his Legend and screamed at the
stars,
Death open beneath him to heal all the scars
Of the hatred he'd felt, and the murders he'd done
And the people he'd killed all the pleasure and life
He'd
destroyed.

Kell stared melancholy into great rolling waves of
a Dark Green World,
And knew he could blame no other but himself for
The long Days of Blood, the long Days of Shame,
The worst times flowing through long evil dark
years of pain,

And the Legend dispersed and the honour was
gone
And all savagery fucked in a world ripped
undone,
And the answer was clear as the stars in the sky
All the bright stars the white stars the time was to
die,
Kell took up *Ilanna* and bade world farewell,
The demons tore through him as he ended the
spell
And closed his eyes.

Dek grunted, and shook his head as if clearing a particularly nasty hangover. *Focus*, he thought. *Focus on the now and the real, and the fact that it's a very real possibility this is a fucking trap. Sharala is still the traitorous bitch she always was, and I'm about to get a right good kicking for my troubles.*

A dark and melancholic mood had settled on Dek. He scanned the area carefully, including the rooftops, for signs of archers or possible foes. Snow drifted down like chilled confetti, and settled across the razor-edge of his black short-sword. He spotted Sharala on the second scan; she was crouched at the base of a bronze statue atop a marble block. The bronze had long ago turned green, a toxic cloak of patina, and the figure depicted a broad-shouldered warrior holding a spear and gazing up with admiration at the summit of the tower. Dek's small dark eyes moved over the terrain once more, alcohol fumes on his breath, his mind relaxed now, settling into that place that made him ready to... fight. No drunken brawl for Dek. No need to drink eight tankards of ale before he had the courage to enter into combat; he pitied such men, such weaklings, cowering cowards.

Sharala spotted him. *She has a keen eye, that one.* She beckoned him, and yet still Dek waited, eyes moving from doorway to doorway, window to window.

Dek was a man who didn't like surprises; especially when he was being summoned by a woman whom he knew wanted him dead.

A daughter?

Really?

You're being a fucking dick, Narnok would have growled, scowling with his one good eye, milky eye fixed like a blank white platter. And Dek would have agreed. But Sharala had stabbed him with the only weapon that could now work on the battle-hardened ex-hero; emotional blackmail.

Dek moved cautiously around the edge of the square, senses hyper-alert, then sprinted low to the base of the statue, glancing around and watching Sharala closely in case she pulled a blade on him. Her eyes were fixed intently, and their gazes locked.

"What next?"

"She's being held at the top of that." She gestured sideways with her head.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me? That's a relic of the Vampire Warlords, or so it's said. King Yoon himself probably couldn't get in."

"Oh, he can, and he has. He has several of his generals carry out illicit trade from those very walls. I can get you in, but you have to do the rest."

"I cannot trust you."

Sharala shrugged. "You and I both know I could have had a hundred archers on these rooftops; you know I have the money. After all. I took most of it from you." She flashed another one of her narrow smiles. "But this is different, Dek. I can't send an army in, or the bloody king will have me, and probably our daughter Elise, executed for High Treason. I need you to do this. For her, not for me. She's your blood, Dek. Your kin."

"On one condition."

"Name it."

“If what you say is true, if I really am the father to a little girl, then for the love of God, let me be a part of her life? A child needs both parents. A child needs a mother, but also needs a father. You have abused your position, Sharala.”

Sharala nodded. “You have a deal.”

“If you break it, I really will come looking for you.”

Sharala sighed. “I’ve done some bad things in my life, Dek. Just like you’ve done bad things. Things I regret. At this moment in time I need you; Elise needs you. I know you’re one of the only warriors in this city who might be able to pull this off. I...” She took a deep breath, “I’m sorry for not telling you about her.”

Dek stared hard at her, trying to read the emotions in her eyes. But as usual, her eyes, her face, were devoid of humanity. She was an alabaster statue; a replicated being without a single ounce of mortality on show. A living statue: emotionless. Marble.

“How do we get in?”

“Follow me.”

They ran low across the snow-peppered ground, and stopped near a corner of the carved, red-stone base. Dek stared at a weird demon cavorting around a fire, the carving frighteningly realistic. The demon had vampire fangs and Dek shivered. “Keep a lookout,” hissed Sharala, and shifted across the wall, her eyes scanning the stonework. “Here.” Her hands came up, and gently she began to press certain areas of stone, and trace patterns in others, working her way outwards from a central position. Suddenly, there came a low grinding sound, and for an instant Dek thought it was an earthquake; but then certain stones shifted, moved, slid and *retracted*, a puzzle opening itself like a cubic stone flower, until Dek blinked, and there was a man-sized hole.

“Be quick,” said Sharala, glancing around.

“You’re going to close it behind me?”

“Yes!”

"I'll be fucking entombed!" snapped Dek.

"I'll open it again, but you must be quick. If Yoon's City Watch see us..."

Frowning, Dek ducked his head inside. He had expected to use a brand, but a central lodestone of crystal ran chest high along the walls, and from this emanated a weak, white glow, just enough to navigate by, an internal starlight by which to see.

"You'd better not be full of shit," said Dek, frowning at Sharala.

"Go on! Quickly!" her hands started to move in intricate patterns once more, and it was only then Dek realised her eyes contained a tiny, silver glow. He shook his head. Dark magick. *So. She has become a witch, has she?* Dek shivered. He could think of no worse person to carry such mystical power.

With a series of lurching, grinding movements the stones shifted back into place and Dek released a long, slow, cool breath. He reached out and touched the line of glowing crystal, and his hand snapped back quickly leaving a strip of flesh in place. It was colder than ice.

"Nice place," he muttered, and glancing at his blade, and composing himself, he moved into the heart of the Red Tower.

5. Heart of Darkness

Dek paused on the tight, spiral stairs. A light sweat caressed his brow. His boots were struggling to find purchase on what could only be describe as narrow steps, the spiral making each step wider at the outside, feebly narrow at the internal connection. Dek was a big man, with big feet; climbing these steps was not a comfortable activity.

Voices drifted down. Dek could hear two. He waited, patiently, detecting the distinctive sounds of rolling dice, and trying to pick out any other background indicators. Despite his battered ears and the multiple stitching on his skull, Dek's hearing was in perfect

condition, especially when it came to detecting enemies and their status; he caught a snippet of words and could tell both—guards?—were entirely sober. Dek ground his teeth. This meant there was an element of professionalism about them. Guard duty was notorious for its boredom and Dek himself had got completely pissed on GD. It went with the territory.

Let's do it.

Slowly, he sheathed his sword in the scabbard which sat in line with his spine. He padded up the last few steps, deceptively silent for such a large man, and peered over the edge. With eyes at floor level, he saw two guards sat at a small, round table, rolling dice and talking quietly. They wore black armour, and beside each on a wooden bench sat two winged helms, the likes of which Dek had never encountered in all his years of soldiering. Three candles burned steadily, black wax and orange glows masking the silver line of crystal which circled the room shimmer. Sheathed swords were propped against the wall and the two guards were obviously at ease, confident in the tower's security.

Dek climbed onto the floor in a tight crouch, using the guard's back as a shield from visibility. A candle suddenly hissed and spluttered, wax running down the shaft, and the guard opposite turned, a quick glance but it gave Dek the opportunity he needed. He leapt forward, arm encircling the guard's neck and compressing with incredible force. The guard tried to push backwards, choking, and in one swift movement Dek's sword was out, the tip unwavering before the second guard's eyes.

There came a sudden hiatus.

The guards froze.

"Listen lads," growled Dek, voice low, "I ain't a bad man, and I don't want to kill you, like. But if you give me any trouble, I'll be forced to stick out your eyes. Understand—and don't fucking say it, just nod."

The guard opposite gave a slow, simple nod, eyes fixed on his comrade who had gone purple and suddenly stopped choking. Dek let his limp, unconscious body slump to the floor, the man's head bouncing from the round table on the way down. and he lay, splayed out, a marionette with cut strings.

"What about..." began the second guard, and a swift, hefty hook to the temple dropped him like a sack of donkey shit.

"There's a good boy," said Dek, and his head snapped right. More stairs to ascend...

The ageing warrior climbed, footfalls that would shame a panther; three more times he came across guards, and three more times he laid them out cold until his knuckles were throbbing and bloody and he was sure he'd broken at least two bones in his right hand. *If only God had made softer skulls*, he pondered as he crept ever onwards and upwards; *but then, if that were the case, my head-butts wouldn't have quite the same bite*. He grinned to himself, and felt suddenly glad to be alive. These guards were guarding... something, that was for sure. Their armour intrigued him; he realised that the wings on each helm were indeed wings—the wings of a dragon.

By his internal calculations, Dek reckoned he was nearing the top of the Red Tower. He breathed deeply, slow exhalations, readying himself. He could taste sour wine and betrayal, but knew he had to push on. He'd come this far.

As previously, he reached the edge of the platform. A cold breeze drifted down, and his nostrils twitched; he could smell the snow. He could also hear movement, and a couple of feeble whimpers, like those of a child. He heard boots scuffing stone, and heavy breathing. A tinge of excitement. Dek's eyes narrowed.

Dek raised himself a little. There were five guards, *five*, and this time they were wearing their helms and bearing unsheathed blades. Against the far wall three

young girls hung from gleaming black chains, each with blood dribbling from nostrils and tears on their cheeks. The entire room was lit by candlelight and starlight from three broad portals which surrounded the circumference of the Red Tower's summit, and a figure stood with his back to Dek, wearing no helm but the gold bars of general on his armoured epaulettes.

Dek scanned the room. Five guards. A general. That was tough. Real tough. *I mean, three, in a fair fight, three I can deal with; but six?* But an internal voice mocked him. *Is this really one of the Iron Wolves? A man who strode the battlements of Desekra Fortress at the Pass of Splintered Bones, killing hundreds of mud-orcs, facing down the sorcerer Morkagoth, and years later after Dalgoran cajoled you all back together, facing down his replacement, Orlana the Changer, and her terrible bastard Splice?*

Has Dek the Hero become a thing of shadow and ash?

Then Dek's eyes fell on the girl at the centre of the three, and a fist lodged in his throat. For a second which was a billion years of dying, he could not breathe, could not think, did not exist in this realm or plane or layer of mortality; for before him, without any doubt on the face of this miserable fucking world, lay chained his daughter. There could be no question. This was Elise, the child Sharala had spoken of; and she was Dek's only child.

Dek's eyes narrowed to slits.

Fury ate him, like nothing he had ever felt.

Worse than acid.

Worse than a Splice feeding on his pulped brain.

He felt the pulse of his blood, his heartbeat, quickening, and a strange feeling clamped his brain. This was it. Immortality in the flesh. *His* immortality—his daughter. His kin. A girl he would die for. A girl he would kill for.

“Welcome, Dek of the Pits,” came a voice from across the stone platform. General Izak turned and his eyes levelled with Dek on the brink of the steps. “Why don’t you join us?” He had no visible weapons. His tone was one of gentle amusement. This general was of medium height, medium build, his brown hair greying at the temples; his gaze bore no fury, his mouth was a straight line of gentle comedy. He was a grey man. A nothing. And yet, and yet, Dek had heard the stories of this cunt—raping women, killing children, raping children, having entire garrisons hanged, killing the... innocent. He was the serpent under the tree. The thorn in the rose. The scorpion in your boot. He was a grey man, a nothing, and yet everything *because* of that greyness. You never saw the cunt coming. That was what made him so fucking dangerous.

Dek stood, stretched his back, and slowly moved into the chamber. The five armoured guards turned to face him. Their swords gleamed with practised honing and fresh oil. Their boots were polished with military precision. They smiled, as one, at this new intrusion; this gentle entertainment.

Fuck this, thought Dek.

And attacked.

Dek leapt forward, sword sweeping down but reversing at the last instant as the guard lifted fast to deflect the blow; the tip of Dek’s sword slammed forward through the visor and through the guard’s brain. The man screamed, he screamed like a little girl under the wheels of a six-horse carriage, and there was a grating of steel on steel as Dek’s sword came free and he twisted, a blade whistling past his ear, past his fast shifting body, and Dek altered his stance with an almost balletic movement where the guard’s blade missed him by a thumb’s breadth, leaving him overexposed, and Dek’s short black blade smashed down, a brutal three-strike hammering at the exposed place between helm and plate-mail shoulder guards,

attacking the neck, half decapitating the man who hit the ground pumping bright new blood across ripe stone. Dek faced the other three, and cracked the tendons in his neck, his face as grim as a devil possessed; as sick as sin.

“Well,” snapped Izak, ever the pedantic military prick, “kill him then!” It was the bark of an order but Dek was in the fucking zone, already moving as the words left Izak’s slick spittle-wet lips and he leapt, right boot connecting with the right hand guard’s chest, kicking off from the man, leaping high, sword in both hands coming down on the middle guard’s helm with such weight and ferocity it cleaved through steel, through skull, and sent pulped brain slopping across the stone. Dek rode the man to the ground, his sword lashing up to cut between armoured plates and snick the femoral artery of the next living cadaver. Blood flushed out like a cesspit emptying, the man howled and grabbed his groin as a splatter of slick blood pooled out, slowly, easing, crimson, and gleaming, spreading into a bloody mirror.

Dek whirled, stood neatly, and faced the final guard whom he’d kicked in the chest.

Izak looked stunned.

Four deaths in as many seconds.

“I want my girl,” growled Dek, head lowered, eyes narrowed, fixed past the guard who was clutching his chest from the kick, wheezing, despite his breast-plate; and beyond, to the general. “Release her. Now!”

“Fucking *kill him!*” screamed General Izak, and his voice was high like a child’s, petulant almost; this was a cunt who always got what he wanted. But not this time. The guard lunged, Dek caught his blade, his wrist flicked, and the guard’s sword clattered across the stone platform.

“I could let you live,” said Dek, stepping forward, in close with a head-butt which accompanied breaking gristle; then, grabbing the guard’s breast-plate, he

propelled the man off the edge of the platform, and out into the darkness, out into the peppered snow, where he wailed as he fell, arms and legs flapping as if some sudden evolution might teach him to fly. "But I won't," Dek whispered.

There was a distant crunch.

The man's body collapsed in on itself.

It folded on impact.

Snow soaked up oozing blood.

Dek turned, and his narrowed eyes met Izak's. The general had drawn a blade and it was held against Elise's throat.

Dek took a step forward. He was splattered with blood, and brains, and his right hand and arm were a tattooed sleeve of blood ending with a dark sword of iron in a dark fist of death.

"Let her go," said Dek.

"Fuck you," barked General Izak, grey eyes hard as flint.

"So be it."

Dek took three steps forward, every muscle in his being tensing as he watched Izak's tiniest movements, absorbed his intention, decoded his actions, his thoughts, his very existence. Quick as a striking cobra, Dek's arm came up and back and slashed forward, his short black sword an extension of the movement as it spun end over end, slicing off Izak's left ear, cutting the dagger in two and embedding in the lime mortar between stone blocks, where it vibrated gently. There came a plop as Izak's bloody ear hit the stone floor. The girls were crying. Izak shrieked, and swiftly hit a block on the wall, a tiny portal opened, and the one-eared general disappeared from view in the blink of an eye; vanished into a secret passageway.

"Later," muttered the stocky warrior known as Dek, and he paused, and surveyed the carnage. The three girls were looking at him in terror. He corrected himself. The two girls either side of his daughter were looking

at him in terror. He strode forward, boot treading the head of a dead guard where brains oozed out onto stone, and with a tug retrieved his sword. Then he moved to the central girl, to his daughter, to Elise, his child, and stared into her eyes. She met his stern gaze with defiance, and a smile defined her lips.

“You are my father,” she said, and her head tilted to one side as she observed him.

“Yes. Look away.”

Dek’s sword smashed the chains into shards, and Elise threw her arms around his neck and hugged him, and for a moment he was at a loss as to what to do. Dek was a hero, a warrior, a fighter, a killer, a deserter, a bastard, a liar, and a cunt, if truth be told. He wasn’t used to a hug from a twelve-year-old girl, even less used to a hug from...

“You are my little girl?”

“I am, da,” she said, and planted a tiny kiss on his cheek.

“I... I was never there for you.”

“But you came when you were needed the most.”

“I have missed so *much* of your life.”

“But you are here now. I knew, one day, you would find me.”

“You don’t hate me?”

Elise looked at Dek with eyes wiser than her modest years. “Why would I hate you?” she said, words soft, and her breath was sweet, her hair smelled of flowers, her tears had dried, and instinctively Dek knew it was time to take her home.

“Shall I escort you from this place of death?” he whispered.

“Yes da,” she said. “Take me home.”

6. Retribution

The snow fell heavier now, huge flakes tumbling from skies of lead and ochre. Sharala’s magick opened the portal, and Dek and Elise stepped free, followed by the

other two whimpering girls. Dek surveyed the square, still looking for tricks, for traps, for enemies; his mind never stopped. Dek trusted no motherfucker on the face of the fucking planet. And that's just the way it had to be. The way it would always be.

Sharala ran forward, grasped her daughter by the shoulders and wailed in relief. Dek took a step backwards, wary of this woman who had sent assassins to kill him in the past, sent letters of hate, monsters and death, contacted King Yoon in an attempt to have him hung from the Black Gallows; done everything she could in her power to fuck up his life; or at least, bring him a languorous death.

Now, he suddenly realised, his task was done. He was expendable. And he knew it. They all knew it.

"I'll be going," he said, eyes still scanning the rooftops for archers, snow layering his blood-encrusted clothing like an alabaster shroud. He knew it was only a matter of time. To stay here was to be dead here.

"Wait," said Sharala. She turned to him. Snow lay wet on her face.

"What?"

"Thank you. I mean it."

Dek shrugged. "I mistrusted you. But... she's my girl. I'd kill for her, and I'd die for her."

Sharala stared at him, and her mouth opened to speak, but words did not come out—instead, the steel tip of a long dagger emerged from her as if she were a magician regurgitating a shining blade. Blood splattered the snow-encrusted cobbles. Sharala went rigid, and Dek understood, realised with horror what had happened. And as the dead body of Sharala hit the freezing cobbles, the hilt of the dagger protruding from the back of her skull, Dek's eyes met those of his daughter.

"What did you do?" Dek whispered in horror.

“It was a trap,” said Elise. “She thought you would die up there. She was working with General Izak. They were lovers.”

Dek stared at her. “You killed your mother,” he said.

Elise’s dark, hard stare met her father’s in a gaze he should have recognised—for it was his own. She portrayed a cold brittle smile; like ice. “My mother was an unforgiving bitch,” the girl said.

Shouts emerged from the deep shadows of long, deserted streets.

“We need to go,” growled Dek. “Now!”

“You don’t hate me, do you?” pleaded Elise, suddenly grabbing his arm and looking up at the grizzled warrior. “She may have been my mother; but some cunts have it coming. She tortured me, for my whole life.”

Dek placed his arm on his daughter’s shoulder. “Come with me,” he said, and forced a smile. “Quickly now. Before the City Watch comes.”

“You’ll look after me?”

Dek stared into the pretty, blood-speckled face. Into the face of this child. This killer. His baby.

His heart melted. “With every ounce of my soul,” he promised, and led her out, and away, and into the darkness.

Out, into a dark world of reality. **[GdM]**

Author's Note:

This short story is my first completed work in well over two years. This short story references seven of my former novels: Kell's Legend, Soul Stealers, Vampire Warlords, The Iron Wolves, The White Towers, The Dragon Engine and Twilight of the Dragons, all published by Angry Robot Books. You can read more about Dek and the Vachine in these previous works. I hope you'll seek out their well-meant anarchy.

Andy Remic, 2019.

Andy Remic is the author of twenty-three novels. He has two fabulous children, a Border Collie called Tilly, lives in Lincolnshire UK, and enjoys mountain biking, mountain climbing, kick boxing, rabbits and chainsaw combat. He has been called “the Tarantino of fantasy” and his work compared with David Gemmell, Michael Moorcock and George R. R. Martin.

Remic is also an indie filmmaker, and as well as short films has made three features, *Impurity* (a very low budget horror flick), *Memoirs Of A Spectrum Addict* and *Spectrum Addict: Load “Film2”* which are in-depth dissections of the old 8-bit computer by Sinclair Research.

Current novels are: Spiral, Quake, Warhead, War Machine, Biohell, Hardcore, SIM, Serial Killers Incorporated, Kell’s Legend, Soul Stealers, Vampire Warlords, Cloneworld, Theme Planet, Toxicity and the anthology, The Clockwork Vampire Chronicles. His latest works are The Iron Wolves, The White Towers, The Dragon Engine and Twilight of the Dragons, published by Angry Robot Books, and three works published by TOR: A Song for No Man’s Land, Return of Souls and The Iron Beast.

You can read more at:

<https://andyremic.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.remicmedia.com/specyaddict/>

Thank you to our Subscribers

ADRIAN COLLINS AND THE GdM TEAM

GdM's subscriptions are run through Patreon. A massive thank you for the members of our horde who help us plan for each quarter:

Morally Confused Champions: Casey Jonkmans, Edea Baldwin, Peter Greenshields, Teo, Tony.

Filthy Sappers: A. M. Steiner, AJ Spedding, Ben Galley, Christopher Lee, J Caleb Design, Krystle Chang, Levi Ergott, M.L. Spencer, Nathan Bain, Pierce A Erickson.

Ravenous Raider: Adam Williams, Al Burke, Alan Baxter, Andrea Frogley, Andrew Lyons, Andrew Menzies, Anna Smith-Spark, Anna Stephens, Anne mccluskey, Belle McQuattie, Björn Edelenbos, Bruce Villas, Bryan Geddes, C Wags, C.A. Caskabel, Cameron Atkinson, Charlotte Wyatt, Chris Haught, Coleton Winters, Corbin Talley, Cory Miller, Courtney Ewert, Craig Aird, Craig Hackl, Curtis Moore, Dann Todd, Darren Fuller, Darren Moroney, David Walters, Doug Thomson, Emma-Kate Writing, glenn curry, Harmony Todd, James Gotaas, James McStravick, Jared Pannell, Jessica van der Torre, Joel Pearson, John Zerne, Jon, Josh, Justin James, Karel Drápela, Keontez George, Larry J. Field, Lex1nat0r, Lou, Yardley, Marc Rasp, Mark Gris, Martin Key, Matthew Hoffman, Michael Blevins, Mike Leach, Mike Myers,

Mike Witteman, Nate Aubin, Nerine, Nichole Wester, Olivier, Philip Overby, Pierre, Randi Rainbow, Rich Riddle, Richard Reid, Rick Galli, RJ Hayden, Rolf Laun, Sam Hooker, Sarah Wells, Selim Ulug, Shaun Davis, Shyning, Steven Schroeder, Stewart Corbett, Terry, Thomas A. Smith, Timandra Whitecastle, Tom Flintoff, Tom Nickles, William King, William Lohman, Zachary Fritz, Zoltán Velkei.

Front Line Meatshield (No Reward): None.

To join the horde, head on over to our page:
<https://www.patreon.com/user?u=177000>

©Copyright 2018 Grimdark Magazine