

ISSUE 21

Odin



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From the Editor

ADRIAN COLLINS

Welcome to another year, another decade, and another cracking issue of *Grimdark Magazine* to get your teeth stuck in to! This month we have grimdark fan favourite Alex Marshall back with another story from the Crimson Empire backed up by more stories, reviews, interviews, and an article on one of my favourite topics: the slush pile.

In other news, in just another month from now our first foray into releasing collections, *Neon Leviathan*, is going to hit shelves. Make sure you go have a look; if noir SF is your bag, then T.R. Napper's collection is *definitely* something you want in your hands (Richard Morgan and Adrian Tchaikovsky certainly enjoyed it).

That's it from me; happy reading!

Adrian Collins
Founder

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The Undying Lands

MICHAEL R. FLETCHER

Fayad sat on a wood bench beneath the great bowl of the Colosseum of Eternal Life which was something of a misnomer because she was definitely going to die here. Above her head, great beams of wood formed a ceiling, separating her from the fifty thousand men, women, and children filling the arena's seats. Even from down here she heard their screams and jeers, the roar as blood was spilled to the red sands of the arena floor. The cheered their favourites and mocked those they hated. From the rumbling up there right now, there was someone they really liked killing a lot of people they didn't.

And I'm going to be one of them.

Red sand from the arena floor rained down upon her as the crowd stomped their feet and chanted for blood.

Breathing deep, she inhaled dust and ancient straw, sweat and fear, and the dessicated stench of thirty years of death. Stacked shelves lined every wall beneath the great colosseum. The walls above, those confining the fighters to the killing floor, also bore shelves. Even the shit and piss rooms where the fans went to relieve themselves had shelves. Severed heads lined those shelves. There were so many they were crammed together, ear to ear. The oldest were bone and gristle, gaping sockets and grinning bone. The newest heads still blinked and looked around, mouths sometimes moving as they tried to speak or scream.

The one directly across from where Fayad sat was fresh indeed. The young man still had tears for crying. He sobbed and blinked, lips moving. His eyes stayed locked on her and she could tell he was trying to scream. But screaming without lungs is a quiet affair.

“Don’t bother,” she told him. “Can’t hear a fucking thing you’re saying.”

Eyes boring holes in her heart, his lips made quiet smacking sounds.

“Even if I could here you, I wouldn’t care,” she added when his eyes became crazed and desperate.

Finally, sighing, she rose and turned the head so it faced the wall. The manacles binding her wrists and ankles left her just enough freedom to move in small shuffling steps.

“Sorry. Don’t want to spend my last few minutes of life looking at you.”

Collapsing back onto the bench Fayad shook her head, stared down at the red sand and rotting straw beneath her feet.

How the hell did I get here?

She knew. She knew *exactly* how she got here. It was getting drunk and accidentally killing the Duke’s favourite nephew when the little shit grabbed her ass. And those with the temerity to annoy the Duke were carted across two hundred miles to the Colosseum of Eternal Life.

She knew the history. Hell, everyone knew the history. Thirty years ago a powerful necromancer named Leben cast the mother of all spells...and fucked it up big. Instead of just raising the ancient army she knew to be buried beneath the red sands, she turned the land for fifty miles around into a zone of unlife. Anyone killed here became undead.

Leben succeeded at her goal. She raised a massive undead army replete with giants and dragons and giants mounted on even bigger dragons and all manner of nasty. Unfortunately, she also raised their

General, some long dead demonologist who still harboured dreams of conquest. The General killed the necromancer and took his armies south where he conquered the islands and gave birth to the Empire of Corpses. Rumour had it Leben became his wife.

The land, however, remained forever changed.

Leave it to some enterprising asshole Royal to see the possibilities. They built a gladiatorial arena on the site and let convicts fight to the death. Not being cruel—or so they claimed—they arranged for the chance of reprieve. Kill ten opponents in a row and you walked free. Once the live fights were done and only living dead remained, they let them fight it out on the arena floor. The more undead you defeated—defined as ‘rendered incapable of further action’—the better your final resting place. Defeat ten or more, and they stuck your head on a spike where you could watch future fights, see the passing days and nights. The fewer you managed to maim before becoming incapacitated, the shittier your final resting place. If you failed to down even a single opponent, they stuck your head on a shelf in the shitters and you spent the rest of eternity watching people vacate their bowels. That was if you were lucky. The crowd got pretty drunk and people liked to toss the heads into the shit pits and throw things at them. Since shelf space was limited and there was always new heads, no one complained.

Kill at least one. Fayad couldn't even pretend she had any chance of killing ten living opponents and being set free.

The crowd above roared as their current favourite murdered another opponent. Feet stomped, red dust fell from the ceiling.

Forever undying. A last bright moment in the sun and then pain and blood and an eternity of misery.

Fayad glanced at the head she turned to face the wall.

Shit. She winced in guilt.

Motionless, forever staring at a wall. What would that be like?

Word was that when the skull rotted enough the eye lids were gone the dead lost the ability to blink, to close their eyes. They saw everything. And having your eyes rot to nothing or be devoured by insects was no escape. Empty sockets stared forever, all part of the necromancy twisting the land.

Fayad held her eyes open, staring at another one of the heads on the shelf across from her. This one had only grey shreds of tattered flesh clinging to it. Its scalp had slid off one side and lay puddled beside it, maggots, hair, and putrescence.

Eyes watering, she stared, trying to imagine it lasting forever.

Finally, tears streaming, she blinked.

I'll go insane.

Closing her eyes, she sat motionless. This might be the last time she got to enjoy darkness.

Above, the crowds roared and then fell quiet.

They're dragging away the loser, shoving them in a cage with the other dead, saving them for the mad brawl at the end.

How many could she kill?

Well, so far in her life she'd managed to kill exactly one person. While she'd meant to stab him—just a little—she hadn't intended to kill him. And since she hadn't known who she was stabbing, she hadn't meant to kill *him*.

The Magistrate hadn't been much impressed with that defence either.

Fayad heard the shuffling steps of the Kennel Master before she saw him. He came down the steps one at a time, like a child afraid of falling. A big fucker, he was damned near twice her height, all fat and muscle and stupidity. Grey skin hung slack, his eyes yellow like rotting milk. Upon reaching the last step he stopped and glared at the floor as if suspecting a trap.

“Go ahead,” said Fayad, “take the last step. I promise you won’t plummet to your death.”

He stepped down, saying, “Plummet. Plump bits. Plumb it. Plum tits.”

He minced over to Fayad, examining her manacled wrists and ankles.

“The Magistrate changed his mind,” she said. “I’m to be let free.”

“Good. You seem nice.”

“I am.”

Grabbing the chain connecting her wrists he lifted her off the bench and into the air so she hung dangling.

“That’s quite painful,” she informed him through gritted teeth.

He turned her, looking her over from every angle and for a moment she thought maybe she was going to get raped before someone murdered her.

“No hidden weapons?” he said. “Sometimes they forget to search and I get stabbed.” He pouted. “I don’t like getting stabbed.”

Still holding her aloft with a single hand, he lifted his shirt to show her the many stab wounds in his bulging belly. None had healed. None bled. Something white and glistening squirmed in one.

“You’re dead,” she said.

“No, I’ll get better.”

“Right. Good luck.”

Putting her down, he shoved Fayad toward the steps. “Go.” He pushed her again, sending her stumbling, and followed along behind.

“How long have you been down here?” she asked over her shoulder.

“What time is it?”

“Early afternoon,” she guessed.

“What day is it?”

“Fourthday.”

“What year?”

“Thirty-two fifteen from the fall of PalTaq.”

“Oh. Then I don’t know.” He pointed up the stairs with a blunt finger like a boiled sausage. “Go.”

Up she went.

“What weapon you want?” he asked from behind her.

“A ballista and a squad of the Duke’s Marching Dead.”

“What armour?”

“Full plate and a shield wall.”

“Fine.”

“I’m not getting any of that, am I?”

“Nope. Just curious.”

“Fuck.”

“No thanks. Too small. Don’t like skinny.”

Cresting the stairs he herded her down a long hall, pushing and prodding with that fat finger. Daylight turned the far end a blinding cloud of dust and sand. The crowd grew in volume with every step.

Boom! Boom! The stomping of feet.

“I like to give people some motivation to do well,” he said. “It’s sad when they die too fast. The crowd doesn’t like it.”

“I’d hate to disappoint.”

“Some kids threw all the heads in the fourteenth shitter into the shit pit. They dropped stones on them until they sank.”

“Oh.” Fayad’s guts turned to water and tried to escape south.

“All the shelves there are empty.”

“Fucking fantastic. All motivated. Thank you so much.”

Placing a monstrous hand on her shoulder, he dragged her to a stop. He turned her to face a table she hadn’t seen. An assortment of crude weapons lay scattered on its surface. Rusty knives. Bent swords. A trident with only two dull-looking barbs. A leather whip.

“No maul?” she asked.

The big dead stinky guy looked her up and down as if judging her ability to wield such a weapon. "It's out for repairs."

Noting the rough shape of the supplied weapons, she wondered how many pieces the maul had to be in before it was sent for repairs.

"I'll take a sword and a knife."

"Going to unchain your hands and feet now," he said. "No stabbing, please."

"Yeah, yeah."

What would be the point? There was nowhere to run and the big man was already dead. Putting steel in his belly would just upset him, and she figured she had enough problems already.

When he finished unchaining her, he straightened and flashed a quick smile.

"The fuck you grinning about?"

"My knees don't hurt any more. Neither does my lower back."

"The dead feel no pain."

"Every turd has a silver lining," he said, shuffling away in his mincing little steps.

"What do I do?" Fayad called after him.

"Go out and die. If you hide in the tunnel they come get you and break a leg as punishment."

"Great." She had a thought. "Hey!"

He stopped. "What?"

"There's a head facing the wall. Turn it back for me, would you?"

"Okay." And off he shuffled.

Turning back to the bright light and chanting crowds, she shrugged acceptance and set off. Someone out there with a booming voice announced her crime and made accidentally stabbing an ass-grabbing prick sound terribly dramatic.

Was the Duke's nephew here, somewhere in the Undying Lands? Some wealthy families built elaborate mausoleums—sprawling mansions—where their dead

were held as pampered prisoners. No one wanted corpses running free, but many wanted to visit their deceased to ask advice or just visit missed relatives.

People, she decided, were short-sighted self-centred assholes. No one cared what the dead wanted.

The announcer wrapped up his spiel as she stumbled into the sunlight. Hot air, desert dry, stank of camels and sweat. Blood stained patches of the red sand a darker crimson. The colosseum, packed to capacity, dragged her to a halt. Never before had she been the centre of attention for fifty thousand people.

Fifty thousand people came to watch me die.

Well, not just her. Her and a bunch of other poor bastards.

When the crowd spotted her, a slight girl of twenty, bent sword in one hand, rusted dagger in the other, they boomed.

“Fuck you!” she screamed at them, voice cracking.

Though most couldn't hear her, they seemed to appreciate the sentiment. Across the bloody arena stands stood her opponent. He'd been hurt and limped forward, blood pouring from a long gash in his leg. His left arm looked to have been broken at the elbow and hung swinging.

The announcer went into great length detailing her opponent's many crimes. Apparently he was a thief and a murderer, a pirate and a sell-sword, a spy and an assassin.

Assassin. Fantastic.

“And this,” concluded the announcer, “shall be his tenth fight today!”

Fayad's heart fell. She faced a man who already killed nine opponents. If he killed her, he walked free.

If? When.

He grinned at her, teeth bloody like he killed his last opponent by biting him to death.

One little girl who accidentally stabbed someone for grabbing her ass against a seasoned killer who was one more wee murder away from freedom.

The crowd were on their feet now, screaming, a deafening roar of blood lust. The sound felt like a crushing weight, like their hate sucked the air from her lungs. Blood! Blood! Blood!

They want him to win. They want him to kill me.

She saw it. She saw his perfect hair and his perfect, if bloody, teeth. She saw that cocky grin, the flat muscled plain of his belly. He was square jawed and handsome, roguishly so.

And Fayad was going to kill him.

He limped forward, confident in his victory. And how could he not be?

Fayad retreated, circling away, and again the crowd booed.

I'll let him bleed some more. Hopefully it would slow him, weaken him.

He followed, calling, "Keep running away and they'll put an arrow in you to slow you down."

Glancing at the towering wall surrounding the arena, she spotted the evenly spaced archers up there. They stood watching, arrows nocked but not drawn.

Shit.

Was he lying? Again she circled away until the nearest archer raised his bow and took aim.

Scooting closer she feinted a stab, staying well out of sword range.

Ignoring the feint, her opponent said, "Sorry, girl."

They circled, finding their range, and testing each other's speed and strength. His long arms gave him a decided advantage. He also clearly knew a lot more about sword fighting. Her feints were usually ignored. When she did lunge forward in an attempt to stab him with her bent sword, her attacks were bashed aside with a speed and strength that threatened to send her weapon spinning to the sand.

Even limping, his balance was perfect. He moved with flawless grace. This was a born killer. Fayad, on the other hand, liked drinking in pubs.

She considered throwing the rusty knife at him, but had never thrown a knife before. The weight felt awkward in her hand, too heavy in the grip.

Knocking aside another clumsy attack, he lashed out leaving a gash across her ribs. It burned like fire and she staggered away.

The crowd roared, a deafening crescendo. Blood! Blood! Blood!

He attacked, a liquid blur of steel, following relentlessly. Her sword sang harsh discordant notes of metallic agony, the blade shedding bright slivers and bending under the onslaught. Once she started retreating, she couldn't stop. He pressed and pressed, driving her back. Blood poured from a wound in her side, sheening her belly crimson. A splinter of steel flew from her sword, cutting her over her left eye. Still he pressed, stabbing, slashing, ever forward. She blinked sweat and blood burning her eyes, turning the world red.

He's not defending.

Not in the least. But his ceaseless attacks meant that if she launched her own attack, he'd cut her for sure.

Already cut. Must—

Fayad's sword shattered, the bent blade spinning away to kick up a plume of red sand.

"Fu—"

He stabbed her in the belly, ran her through.

Reaching back she touched the blade protruding from her back. "Oh."

"Sorry," he said. "Life is war and I'm a warrior. You..." He shrugged.

The crowd screamed and chanted, but they all seemed so far away.

He withdrew his sword and she crumpled, knees folding.

Fayad lay in sanguine sand, her life pulsing out, adding to the many stains. Knowing it was pointless, she fought to stanch the wound.

He stood over her, tall and handsome and deadly.

"In other circumstances," he said, flashing an apologetic grin.

In other circumstances I'd have accidentally stabbed you in a shitty tavern.

"You're my tenth." He let out a long sigh. "I go free. The gods," he winked, "have found me innocent."

She blinked up at him, seeing him through blood.

Not one. She failed to kill a single opponent. They'd cut her head off and stick it in a fucking shitter where she could watch fat old men grunt out craps.

Forever.

Or at least until some bored kid tossed her head into the bog. Then she'd sink away, see nothing but shit.

How many heads were in there? How long did you have to be an undying skull sank in excrement before you went mad? Would insanity be an escape?

"Belly wound," he said, moving closer. "I didn't... that's a bad way to go. Long and slow."

Fayad showed her own bloody grin. "And you can't leave until I'm dead."

He limped closer, grimacing. "True. But I would save you the many hours of agony."

He's lost a lot of blood. He wouldn't last hours out here in the sun.

She coughed and pain tore her Gods it hurt so much.

He ran you through. You're already dead. Why fight it? Let him finish you.

An eternity in a shit pit.

Fayad groaned in agony. "Do it. Make it fast."

He limped closer. "I take no pleasure in doing this. Life is—"

“War, I know.” She closed her eyes so she saw only his blurred form through blood and lashes. “Do it now. Hurts too much.”

He raised his sword.

Lashing out with the dagger, Fayad slashed his hamstring and he screamed. Leg buckling, he collapsed to land heavily beside her. She stabbed him in the chest and he punched her, breaking her nose. For a moment they wrestled, and then fell apart, gasping. Eyes streaming, Fayad’s world smeared red sand and pain and blood.

The crowd fell silent, watching, waiting to see who still lived.

Fayad felt for her knife and couldn’t find it. She’d lost it. Blinking away tears, she saw him beside her, blood pulsing from the wound in his chest. He lay blinking into the sky, watching a bird circle far above.

“Why?” he asked.

“Life is war.”

“But you were already dying.”

She coughed a wet bloody laugh. “In the Undying Lands, death is war too.”

“Ah,” he said. “Fuck.”

“I had to kill one person to earn a better resting place for my head.”

“Only works if I die first.”

“Belly wound,” she parroted. “Bad way to die. Long and slow.”

“Got me there,” he admitted. “I’m going fast.” He turned his head, studying her with dark eyes. “I don’t envy you the next few hours. They won’t end you early. There’s no mercy here.”

“Once you’re dead I’ll end it myself. If I can find my damned knife.”

“Not that easy.” He shifted in the sand, grunting. “I think I landed on your knife.” He rolled to one side, cursing in pain. “Get it.”

Fayad reclaimed her rusting blade. She considered stabbing him again, but there was no point. He was definitely dying faster than she.

“How do they do it?” she asked. “How do they take the heads?”

“Couple living men in full plate come out with axes. It’s the final part of the show, watching the dead get dismembered.”

“Great.”

“If you manage to kill one, they give you a job working for the colosseum. You get to see all the fights.”

Fayad thought of the big Kennel Master, the way he stomped back into the tunnels, turning his back on the arena. “Oh to dream.” She looked around as best she could. “They’re not here yet.” The pain made thought difficult. She wanted to curl around her agony and and cry.

“Soon,” he said.

“Then we don’t have time to waste.”

“What?”

“The war isn’t over.”

Fayad killed him, stabbing him over and over in the chest until she got his heart. The crowd roared approval, stamping and chanting. Blood! Blood! Blood!

Now for the hard part. She turned the knife on herself, held it over her heart, cold steel pricking flesh.

That hurts already.

“Death is war,” she said, driving the rusty blade into her heart.

She woke to find him standing over her, sword drawn, wounds no longer bleeding. Offering a hand, he pulled her to her feet.

“Tell me there’s a plan,” he said.

She stood, staring at the chanting crowd, the people who just watched her kill both him and herself and who apparently loved the spectacle. The world was grey, muted. She felt nothing, no pain.

“We fight our way free.”

“Great plan.”

“You have something better?”

“Nope.”

At the far end of the arena a huge gate rose. Two men in full plate, huge axes held ready, marched into the arena. The crowd screamed and chanted and stomped. Blood! Blood! Blood!

The dead don't bleed.

“We have two advantages,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Me,” He winked. “And the fact that assholes in plate armour in the desert sun get tired fast. Make them chase you. If an archer hits you, leave the arrow in unless it's making movement awkward. Save it as a weapon for later when that shitty knife breaks. When you do fight, go for the joints, the neck. Cut and run. Let them bleed.”

“When the gate opens again to send in more men, we have to be ready to rush it and get out.”

“So whatever happens, don't let them damage your lovely legs.”

Fayad watched the approaching men. “What are you going to do when we get out of here?”

“Confidence, I like that. I thought I might ask if you wanted to go for a drink.”

“The dead drink?”

“This one does.”

Fayad laughed. “Yeah. This one too.”

Michael R. Fletcher is a science fiction and fantasy author, a grilled cheese aficionado, and a whiskey-swilling reprobate. He spends his days choreographing his forklift musical (titled "Get Forked"), and using caffeine as a substitute for sanity. Any suggestions that he is actually Dyrk Ashton in disguise are all lies.

An Interview with Sarah Chorn

TOM SMITH

Greetings and salutations Grimsters! I'm writing today from the Sunset Lands where I caught up with the very busy Sarah Chorn. I know Sarah primarily as an editor, but her recent release *Seraphina's Lament* has been generating some great buzz so I thought I might pick her brain.

[TS] Sarah, thanks for taking time out of your busy day!

[SC] No problem!

[TS] I have heard many mentions and reviews that state your book *Seraphina's Lament* was based on the Holodomor (Ukrainian Genocide). It's not as widely known as the holocaust, how did you come across it and how did the study of it impact you personally?

[SC] It's no secret that I read a lot. However, when I edit, I pretty much only read nonfiction, and usually historical nonfiction. I kind of go to my library and wander a bit until something catches my eye. This specific time, I landed on a book called *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* by Timothy Snyder (My series title is sort of in homage to that book, because it really was the thing that got the wheels turning.). Anyway, the book covers a whole lot of things in that time period, and it's all brutal and horrible, but it starts out with the Holodomor, which is something I'd

never heard of until I read that book. The famine, the death, the ruthlessness with which Stalin stole their grain and food, all to subsidize his plan to modernize his empire was just... staggering to me. I remember thinking, "My god, this famine was so extreme, it is almost a character in its own right" (and, for those who have read the book, there is where Taub comes from).

So that book led to a bunch of others. *Red Famine* by Anne Applebaum is also very good. *Stalin: In the Court of the Red Tsar* by Simon Sebag Montefiore covers it from a different angle. There's not a whole lot out there, though. I ended up doing a ton of research online as well. I think it's tragic that this genocide isn't well-known. I think it's tragic that so many lives were lost, and the western world is basically oblivious to it. It's an injustice, and it can never be corrected, but it should be recognized for having happened. We owe it to those who suffered, to recognize the injustices done to them. To hear their stories. To act, in whatever way we can, as a witness.

My interludes in *Seraphina's Lament*, were all inspired by real-life, first-hand accounts of the Holodomor from many of the books I read, as well as online Holodomor Memorial websites, many of which had first-hand accounts and photographs. I felt like I needed to add something in my book to maybe give a voice to some of the stories that were lost, forgotten, and/or buried.

[TS] You are also known as an editor (editing for several authors our readers would know), was it hard for you to flip that switch from editor to writer? What were your biggest challenges?

[SC] The balance between editing and writing hasn't really been that hard for me. If I take a bit of a break between doing one thing or the other, I'm usually okay. I am very, very careful about crossing streams, so to

speaking, which is why I read so much nonfiction now. I don't edit nonfiction. I don't write it, and no one I edit for does, either, so it kind of functions as the palate cleaner (and often times inspiration for my writing). It gives my brain just enough of a break between one thing and the other that by the time I switch gears, I'm ready for it. The biggest problem I've had, is balancing editing, writing, and reviewing. My reviewing has kind of taken a nosedive, but I just don't have that kind of time anymore. I do what I can, when I can.

[TS] As an Editor, what would be your first advice for an aspiring writer with a book they just finished writing, and what do you think is the worst mistake a first time writer can make?

[SC] I think the answer to both of these questions is one and the same: Don't give up. Writing isn't easy. It's not just sitting at your keyboard and letting the genius flow through you. Sometimes writing feels a lot more like a battle than anything else, and a whole lot of very enthusiastic people give up. They are daunted by how hard it ends up being, or just the scope of what they are writing, or they expect their first draft to be perfect and it's not and so they walk away from it. No one's first draft is any good. Writing is not easy. And writing a novel is daunting to everyone, whether you've done it before or not. Don't give up. Keep going. You can't improve anything if there's nothing to improve, so put words on the page, and worry about everything else some other time. Tell yourself the story. The rest of it will fall in line later.

[TS] Oxford Comma? Yay, nay, or something else?

[SC] Yes, I'm a big fan. I use it all the time. I warn my clients first, though. "I'm a proponent of the Oxford

Comma. If you aren't, let me know and remember not to add them in."

[TS] Much of the online discussion I have seen about *Seraphina's Lament* revolves around her disabilities. Glokta from Joe Abercrombie's *First Law* was a great character (although his disabilities were man-made) and Andy Peloquin has done a great job creating some very real world characters with disabilities as well. I think it is fantastic that the fantasy world (and grimdark in particular) seems to be finally recognizing that every character is not like someone off of the CW network—perfect physique, perfect skin and hair—that in fact all of us have our flaws and differences which sometimes make even mundane aspects of life difficult to handle. What was your thought process like when creating Seraphina?

[SC] I have a chronic illness called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. I also have a severe spine injury, and I'm currently dealing with some equally severe hip issues. Chronic pain is my life. I am **always** hurting. I can't walk without a cane. Sometimes I have to use a wheelchair. Sometimes I can't even get out of bed. My life is limited. I guess that was the inspiration behind Seraphina. I never really saw *myself* in any of the characters with chronic pain I read, and I really wanted to give my experience a voice. Seraphina's disabilities are man-made as well, but her pain, and the main disabilities she deals with, are very much my own. She needs mobility assistance. She has a hard time walking without support. She's in pain, and it limits how much she can do. It's always there, always part of her, and her grappling with her disabilities and her pain, the emotions that come with it, are also very much my own.

So, I wanted to give my experience a voice. I wanted other people out there who need mobility devices, who are constantly dealing with chronic pain,

who are disabled, to see a bit of themselves in a character. Not just any character, though. I wanted her to be the core, the linchpin that holds it all together. I wanted to give my fantasy a strong heroine who determines the course of fate, who just happens to be disabled. We can be badass too.

[TS] What inspired you sit down and write a fantasy novel? Conversely, what got you into editing?

[SC] I've been writing for as long as I've known how to write. I've never not been writing. Ever. So, writing a book isn't new to me. Fantasy isn't, either. Not really. I got into the genre when I was in high school, and I just kept with it. There's something amazing about "once upon a time" and creating an entire new world and the people who populate it. It gives the writer a certain freedom to play with ideas that they may not feel like they have otherwise. I've been reviewing SFF for ten years now (though not nearly as much these past two years due to writing/editing). Writing a fantasy book wasn't ever a decision for me, it was just the next logical step in my uh... evolution.

Editing is a bit different. As I said, I've been reviewing for a thousand internet years (which is about ten human years). A few years ago, an author emailed me to ask about my editing rates. I said I wasn't an editor. They basically said, "Well, that's stupid. So how much would you charge me to edit this book?" That was really the first time I thought about editing in any serious manner. Then, through word of mouth, the fact that I edit books spread and I've had a pretty steady clientele, which has been FANTASTIC. I had a few other freelance editors help me learn the freelance ropes. I love doing it, not just because I love editing, but I learn so much from each and every single one of the books I edit. I love the relationships I form with the

authors, and I love surrounding myself by such inspiring talent. I really have the best job.

[TS] What element of a book gets your attention the fastest? Prose? Character development or worldbuilding?

[SC] Prose, by far. It's like painting. What first gets me about Van Gogh, is the colors he uses, the brush strokes, the way he uses paint itself. Then, the subject starts taking focus. The first thing I notice about his work, though is his artistry. His intent. The way he takes a scene, and visualizes it in his artistic medium. The setting matters. Of course it matters, but what first grabs me is how an artist wields the tools of their trade. How they express themselves through their art. Their unique voice. Their unique vision.

The way a writer uses words fascinates me. The other stuff is important, yes, and it's fascinating as well, and also very important, but it's the words, the unique voice, the rhythm, that I notice first. Then, if all that other stuff is there, world building that is unique, characters that are complex and believable, a plot that doesn't quit... if all that is there, as well as the prose, I will sing your praises forever. I will build statues in your honor.

[TS] When you find the time to read for fun, not work, what are some recent books you have enjoyed?

[SC] I read a book in November that I'm still thinking about. It's called *The Mastermind* by Evan Ratliff. It's a nonfiction, true crime book (true crime is not usually my bag, but this one hooked me). Anyway, it's about this guy named Paul Calder Le Roux. He was this coding genius. He started this online pharmacy wherein people could basically order prescription drugs without a prescription. He got millions and millions from that,

and set himself up in the Philippines. He had houses full of gold bars in Hong Kong, stole people's identities to open up front corporations, he sold meth from North Korea, had entire militias under his command, had assassins working for him, and its likely he bought and paid for a whole bunch of politicians.

Anyway, it's about that guy and it just blew my mind. Like I said, I read it in November, and I'm still thinking about it.

[TS] Do you think the current dystopian leaning the world has had in the last couple of decades has affected fantasy, or even literature in general? If so, in what ways?

[SC] This is a complex topic that I have lots of opinions on, but I will largely just talk about the positives here. So, the short answer is: I do.

The long answer: Art is influenced by what's happening around the artist. It's impossible for one thing not to affect the other.

Politics, and the internet are affecting things in big ways. First, politics, because... well, look at what's happening. But the internet has connected the world. We can talk to people, research things, learn about people, places, lifestyles all around the world in the blink of an eye, and then we can all go on Twitter and grandstand about it. This has given rise to people being heard, for better or worse. I also think it gives readers and writers more of an understanding, a willingness to write about "the other." Or even, themselves.

I'm not sure if, ten years ago, I would have been brave enough to write a character like Seraphina. However, after being online, and connecting with others who share many of my experiences, I learned that there's a community of people out there who were all wanting to read a book with a character who they

could see part of themselves in, and that made me brave enough to put a lot of my experiences and emotions on paper.

Right now, I think people are a lot more inclined to read books that have hope. Less dark, more light. Diversity has also become a huge deal (finally), not just in our books, but also in the world around us. Representation matters. We see more books featuring people of color, disabilities, LGBTQ+, religious and cultural difference, and more. It's a very vibrant, interesting time in literature.

[TS] What can we expect to see from you in the near future? Writing or any other projects you are working on?

[SC] I've got a book called *Of Honey and Wildfires* that I'm planning to put out in March. It's not set in the same world as *Seraphina's Lament*. It is a stand-alone, set in a Wild West-ish world with a magic system that was inspired largely by the early oil industry, and coal mining in the 1800's. In June/July I plan to release the second book in The Bloodlands trilogy, called *An Elegy for Hope*. Then, if I can keep my pace up, I will attempt to release another book in the winter. This one is also going to be a stand-alone, but set in the same world as *Of Honey and Wildfires*. I'm dabbling with titles, but the tentative working title for this book is *Glass Rhapsody*.

[TS] Sarah, thanks so much for stopping by!

[SC] Thank you for having me!

Review: Bent Heavens by Daniel Kraus

MALRUBIUS

Imagine that Stephen King wrote *E.T.*, and you'll have an idea of what's it's like to read *Bent Heavens*, the new science fiction horror novel by Daniel Kraus (co-author of the *Shape of Water* with Guillermo del Toro). It's a fast-paced, somewhat horrifying story about teenage girl, Liv Fleming, whose father, Lee, disappears for good not long after returning from two years during which he claims to have been abducted by aliens. Despite the social, emotional, and psychological damage her father has done to his family in his little Iowa town, Liv and her best friend, Doug Monk, carry on his tradition of maintaining traps he set all around their yard, before his final disappearance, to catch any aliens that might come seeking to abduct him again. And hopefully, Liv can prove him right after all. When tension and conflict at high school become impossible for Liv, she decides it's time to get over the loss of her father. She sets out to destroy the traps at last and end her living nightmare, and guess what she finds...

Bent Heavens is narrowed to so few characters for its 304 pages that it feels as claustrophobic as Liv's father's weapon-filled backyard shed. Aside from Liv and Doug, the story contains brief appearances by Liv's mother, Liv's love interest Bruno Mayorga (who happens to be an illegal "alien"), Liv's English teacher (who has taken Liv's father's job at her school), a mysterious journalist named Carbajal, and few others.

The characters are unique and well drawn, each with quirks that play into their roles in the story. Liv is kind and resourceful. Doug is a weird loner from a tough upbringing and loyal to a fault. Liv's mother is battling an alcohol problem as a result of her husband's insanity and final disappearance. Carbajal, the one person who might know something about Lee's disappearance, is jaded and physically deformed. Together, they form an interesting ensemble, though at some points it seems they exist only to forward the intense plot.

The plot of *Bent Heavens* is very straightforward. Liv wants to find out what happened to her father so she can finally put the years' long nightmare to bed. With some pretty effective jumping back and forth the plot covers the period beginning when Lee arrives naked at the town square after a two-year absence and proceeds through Liv's desperate, harrowing, night-long quest to find out what happened to him after his second and final disappearance. Kraus does an excellent job of building tension throughout the novel by forcing Liv through a quick-hitting sequence of increasingly challenging complications, both physically and emotionally, from a fight with a teacher to a broken toe and more, until at last she must finally seek out answers on her own in the explosive—because what's a big ending without some kind of explosions, right?—ending.

Kraus is an excellent writer, and what I most enjoyed about *Bent Heavens* is his ability, as story tension increased, to turn the most mundane of settings, an old and nearly forgotten Iowa farm town, into the creepiest collection of corn rows, woods, silos, and old farmhouses you would never want to be caught in alone. As Liv's fear and horror increase, the settings, through her eyes, from Carbajal's dark, stinking apartment in Nowheresville to the farmlands on the edge of America's former self, become increasingly

malignant and claustrophobic. The reader feels immersed not only in this backward, useless part of America's erstwhile heartland, but also in Liv's head, seeing things she really, really does not want to see but cannot avoid. It's a gripping trip through a mind-boggling labyrinth that completely captures the intensity and strangeness of Liv's quest.

Overall, I enjoyed *Bent Heavens* very much. If I had to complain about something (and I don't but I will), much of the complexity of the plot (of which there isn't much to begin with, which is okay) and its reveal is based on the kind of misunderstanding that happens in the telephone game. One person says something, and as it is passed on to others, the words get twisted and mistaken until the original meaning is lost. It's a little bit gimmicky once, but more than once it becomes thematic, to what effect, I am still not sure. Perhaps, we live our lives thinking we understand things that we really don't. I'm not sure if that's what Kraus intended, but it fits.

Nevertheless, with regard to themes and authorial intention, *Bent Heavens* is fairly deep, exploring love and loss, family relationships, isolation, change, helplessness, revenge, brutality, and more. Though it may seem like a lot for a medium-length novel, the themes are deftly handled, thoughtful yet unobtrusive, with perhaps one exception. *Bent Heavens* is a cautionary tale, and the author even includes an explanation of such as an afterword. I won't spoil it for those of you who might want to read this enjoyable and entertaining novel, but at some times, especially in the middle of the book, the skeletons of that cautionary tale can be seen a little too clearly through its skin and flesh. As such, *Bent Heavens* may make a better edge-of-your-seat paced movie, which I expect will follow, than a book in which the reader has time to dwell on each moment, each scene.

But is it grimdark? As the characters start to unravel the mystery of Lee's disappearance, they definitely lose their moral compass, which lends itself to a major theme of the cautionary tale, which is probably why the publishers asked us to review it. The settings, even the mundane ones, are quite grim, and there is enough violence of sorts to be grimdark in a horror-novel sort of way. Overall, though, Liv never really loses her way. She is a hero, albeit one with plenty of regrets, but still a hero. So, if you're looking for a very entertaining read that crosses the line between alien-contact science fiction and rural American horror, or even a fast-paced read with a strong female protagonist, *Bent Heavens* should be on your TBR. If you're looking to stick to your traditional fighting fiction grimdark fantasy or sci-fi, this might not be it.

Bent Heavens is scheduled for release on 25 February 2020 in the US and 1 March 2020 in the UK and elsewhere.

Guardian of the Grove

M.L. SPENCER

The Arsonist slashed out with his knife, and I sprang back out of his way. The blade changed course with a glint of light, came back around for another chance at me. I dodged sideways this time, our dance following the classic pattern of a waltz yet lacking all the requisite grace. My opponent was doing the leading, a fool's grin on his face. He had me on the defensive, and that was making him cocky, which is usually a mistake in a knife fight. I struck out with my fist, the heavy steel rings on my fingers smashing his temple, ringing his skull like a bell. Dazed, he staggered back against the stone of the derelict fortress. I slid my knife between his ribs. Before he could do more than grunt, I stuck him twice more, his blood spraying the wall. He wheezed and went down hard, the shit-eating grin melting off his face.

I whirled around, looking for my apprentice, and saw there was already another blade coming at me from behind. The son-of-a-bitch thought he'd stick me in the back while I was distracted by his dying companion. I got my knife up just in time, deflected the slash. He was inexperienced and overextended. I reached out and caught his back as he came in, using his own momentum to trap his blade against my body. I held him against me like a lover and carved up his back with my knife, slicing chunks out of his kidney. He whimpered as he slumped against me, sagging down my chest to join his two friends dying on the floor.

The next man was more experienced. He circled cautiously, waiting for an opening. When he lunged, his blade moved with the speed of a snake strike. I flinched

away just in time. Damn, he was fast. Faster than me. Few men were god-blessed enough to have better reflexes than me. Fewer still had my training and focus. He didn't. I fainted right, then came in under his guard, jabbing him in the gut. When he reached reflexively for the wound, I knocked the knife out of his hand and hacked at his neck. All his speed didn't save him from a severed carotid. He went down like his friends and lay clutching his neck and gurgling while his blood drained out of him.

I turned in time to see my apprentice battering a fourth man in the head with the tiller of his crossbow. I'd have to remember to ask him where the hell he'd been for the first three. He squeezed the trigger of the crossbow, sending a close-range bolt through his opponent's chest. Turning, he glanced first at the dead men on the floor and then at me, staring at me with eyes wide as platters. It took me a full second to realize why. I was so filled with the rush of the fight, I hadn't noticed the line of blood spreading quickly across the front of my shirt.

Fuck.

I lifted my shirt and did a quick study of the knife wound that parted my skin. It wasn't good, but then again, it could be worse. Not something that would kill me right away. The way I figured, I had maybe two or three days of agony before I quit this shithole. At least I was walking somewhat upright, for now.

There was still a chance I could kill Vax, if I hurried.

The problem is, it's hard to hurry with a gut wound. Holding my abdomen, I wiped the blade of my knife dry on my shirt and shambled off toward the keep's north tower, trailing my hand along the wall to steady myself.

"Where are you going?" Castigere called after me, pausing to span his crossbow. "Aridashar! Wait up!"

I didn't respond. Seconds later, I heard the clatter of his footsteps rushing to catch up with me. I didn't turn to look at him.

“He headed off that way.” I nodded ahead. “Toward the tower.”

“What the hell do you think you can do, like that?”

I shrugged, which, the way I felt, was saying a lot. The wound was starting to hurt. *Really* hurt. A pulsating ache throbbed harder with every stride. I glanced down at my hand pressed over the wound and found it washed in blood. Castigere was right: I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I supposed I was being a stubborn ass. But a stubborn ass can still kill a man, and that’s exactly where I was going—to kill a man. Vax had murdered my brothers, the other Guardians of the Greenwood. Everyone but me and Castigere.

It’s said every man lives three lives. The first life, you live for yourself. The second life, you live for others. It’s the third life that counts the most. You live that third life for duty, and then you die the final death.

I’d already lived two lives. Wasted lives. Wasted purposes. I wasn’t happy in either one of them. Not that it mattered—when you boil it down, happiness is just another form of ignorance. And that’s the irony—I was the Guardian of an elder god. I wasn’t supposed to find happiness or love in this life, only duty. But life is nothing but a series of ironies. I’d found love and happiness when I shouldn’t, and now I’d lost both. All I had left was a cruel choice between duty or vengeance.

Maybe I could have both, if I played my cards right.

“What do you think, boss?” Castigere asked, his voice cautious and quiet. “What do you say we turn around and go back? There’s still time. If we can get you back to the grove, the green sap could help with that.” He nodded at my wound.

Of all the apprentices I’d ever taken on, Castigere had to be the most naïve. He was the embodiment of the phrase “he means well.” Although, in this case, he was probably right—turning back was the logical thing to do. I’d left Edelwyle unprotected and, to make

matters worse, I'd taken Castigere with me. I figured there wasn't much of a risk. The only threat to the sacred tree was the man I intended to kill. And if I intended to kill someone, they were usually as good as dead.

I shook my head. "This won't take long."

I limped on, drizzling a trail of blood behind me along the floor of the ruin. Ahead, the ceiling had crumbled away, leaving a man-size mound of debris heaped in a conical pile. A web of vines squirmed down through the gaping hole, groping into the guts of the ancient fortress. The whole place stank of mildew and abandonment. I moved forward with a pressing urgency. The longer it took us to find Vax, the greater the chance he'd accomplish his goal of felling the god I had pledged to defend. Leaning heavily on the wall, I shambled faster.

"What if the other Arsonists double back?" Castigere asked. He had given up trying to reason with me and was now trying to leverage my sense of duty. Seeing through him was like staring through an open window.

"Vax coordinates the Arsonists," I said. "We kill him, they're left directionless."

We came to a corner, and Castigere threw his hand up, halting me. Raising his crossbow, he swung around the corner, glancing around before lowering his weapon, looking vastly relieved.

"It's clear," he said breathlessly.

I didn't know why he sounded winded when I was the one losing all the blood. And I was starting to feel it, the blood loss. I was beginning to feel lightheaded and cold, and an oily film of perspiration slicked my brow. Every stride I took was a little harder than the one before it. I was beginning to fear that perhaps I'd had it wrong. Maybe I didn't have a couple days left in me, or even another hour. The bleeding was coming faster, the effort of walking making it worse.

“Come on, boss,” said Castigere. “Enough’s enough.”

“The hell it is,” I said and turned my head to spit a mouthful of blood on the ground.

Seeing the look in his eyes made me almost wish I’d chosen differently. The Arsonists wanted the Great Trees dead. Little by little, they were burning down the elder gods and the gardens they tended, making the world a brittle place. They wanted to shatter the walls of the world and tear them wide open, exposing us all to the aether.

They were going to release the therlings. Just the thought made me shudder.

At least I wouldn’t have to live to see the end of times. Because that’s what was coming, I had no doubt. The Great Trees were anchors, gods that held the world together and kept us all from crumbling away into the abyss. By burning down the Great Trees, the Arsonists were attempting to chisel a hole from our world into the World Above. I couldn’t let that happen.

Up ahead, an arch that looked gnawed on by a dragon formed the entrance to what was left of the fortress’s north tower. That’s where Vax would be, I felt sure, because that’s where I would be. He would want the advantage of high ground. He wouldn’t be worried about what might be coming at him from within the interior of the ruin itself. He wouldn’t be watching his back—he had no reason to suspect I was here. My rightful place was in the grove, and none of his men had survived to tell him I’d changed my mind about that. If I was a proper Guardian, I wouldn’t be here. But, then again, I’d never been a proper Guardian.

Castigere swept ahead of me through the doorway with his crossbow poised, aiming the weapon every which direction and scouring every shadow to make certain the room was empty. If there really had been an ambush waiting for us in the dark, then Castigere charging in there with the light behind him would have

made their work easy. But he seemed hell-bent on heroics today, even though I'd already tried twice to talk him down. Heroes die, because that is their purpose. And a dead hero is just another obstacle to stumble over.

We stopped inside the room at the tower's base, pausing to get our bearings. The room was every bit as much of a ruin as the rest of the place. There wasn't much left of the people who had formerly occupied the fortress, just shreds of rugs and tapestries that had rotted decades ago, a few husks of furniture, and four rusted suits of armor left behind like toppled corpses. The entire chamber stunk of guano.

I stood wavering, staring at the spiral staircase that led up through the shadows to the top of the tower. Damn, I was thirsty. And tired. Not tired in the usual way, but tired the way blood loss makes you feel. I'd lost my share of blood many times before, but never this much. Castigere was right. I should have turned back when I had the chance. Blowing out a sigh, I started up the stairs.

"What if he's not up there?" my naïve apprentice asked.

I shot him a reproachful glare. If he kept talking, we'd both end up dead, along with the god we were supposed to be defending. Every step I took was torture. It felt like the knife was still poking into me, twisting its way deeper toward my spine. I gritted my teeth, lugging my body up the stairs by brute force of will. A board creaked beneath my weight, and I paused between steps, biting back a growl of frustration. It seemed even the ruin was conspiring against us.

I reached a hand up and wiped cold sweat off my brow. For a moment, my vision dimmed. Then I felt Castigere's steadying hand on my arm, and the world came squirming back into detail. I gave him a slight smile of gratitude, which was the best I could do under the circumstances, with the amount of pain I was in.

He asked, "You going to be all right, boss?"

The irony of the question made me want to laugh.

"I'll make it up there." That's all I had to do.

Castigere would do the rest.

I started forward again, gritting my teeth and gripping my stomach with a gore-slicked hand. Up we spiraled into the heights of the tower, toward a red glow of moonlight that spilled down on us through windows high above. The light flickered sporadically, as if cast by lightning.

The staircase brightened as we approached the top of the ancient tower. Twelve hundred years ago, Hauskrad Keep had been built to ward the entrance to the Greenwood. Its destruction had precipitated a war that lasted nearly three hundred years. After the war, the keep had never been restored; there was no need. The Guardians of the Grove were deemed sufficient to protect the Greenwood: men like me and Castigere. Like Vax, before he betrayed his brothers and his god.

Now, the three of us were all that was left of that broken brotherhood.

And soon, there would be none.

The light flickered again, and a roll of thunder rumbled in the distance. Thunder without a storm. I had no idea what was making that noise, and hearing it made my pulse stumble. Castigere aimed a look at me, his young eyes filling with fear. In that moment, I felt sorry for him. Sorry deep down in my bones. To love a god is to embrace death as both ends and means. Castigere had sworn his vows to Edelwyle, just as I had. But his soul was young, unlike mine. Too young to die the third death.

Up ahead, I could see where the top of the stairs met the roof of the tower. Now more than ever, it was important to keep focus, to make certain Vax was well and truly distracted before I played my hand. We couldn't rely on stealth, something I was no longer capable of, but surprise shouldn't be too much to ask.

If there was any justice in the world, I would be staring right into Vax's cruel eyes when he died. I wanted to see his pain, and I hoped he suffered as much as Shirvar had suffered.

I raised my hand, and Castigere paused at my side. I gazed up through the opening above us, at a red-mottled sky that looked like flayed tissue. It wasn't the kind of glow a fire would cast. This was something different, as though the sky had been torn wide open and was bleeding its guts out all over the world. The wind howled as if in anguish, funneled toward us through the opening of the staircase. It whipped my face, billowed my cloak. Castigere brought his hand up as if seeking to fend off the gale.

The terrible thunder rolled over us again, so loud it rattled the blocks of the tower and vibrated my insides. I didn't know what it was and didn't think I wanted to know. My brain started working to the best of its current abilities, pondering what kind of power Vax had tapped into that could so distort the skies.

It took me only a moment to put it all together, and when I did I nearly vomited.

"What is that?" Castigere hissed.

I didn't want to answer him, mostly because I was afraid of the answer. Nevertheless, I did. "It's the aether."

Castigere paled. "But that would mean..."

I nodded, swallowing heavily. Vax had ripped a chunk right out of the sky, and we were staring up through the gap into the space between worlds. I felt my insides turn to ice, my bowels loosening. Somehow, in the time I'd spent hunting him down, Vax had found a way to destroy the Greenwood's sacred tree, one of the last anchors that held the world together.

Edelwyle was dead. I'd made a decision that had killed the god I had sworn to serve.

Never had I felt such an enormity of defeat. I staggered under the weight of it, dropped to my knees on the stairs. The realization was like a deathblow. Only, death would be a welcome release from what I was now feeling. I had failed in every way it was possible to fail, and nothing could erase that. Arrogance, like all luxuries, comes at an exorbitant price. But I wasn't going to be the one paying for it. The people who came after me would, born to a failing world that was slowly bleeding to death.

I felt Castigere's hand on my arm and glanced into the compassionate eyes of my apprentice. I opened my mouth to say something but then closed it again because there wasn't a damn thing I could say that would change anything. He had to know that. The look in his eyes told me he did. It didn't matter anyway: there were still four anchors left in the world, four more gods that Vax would have to kill. Our mission hadn't changed one bit; it had just gotten more desperate.

Gritting my teeth, I pushed myself to my feet. "It's time," I said as another rumble of thunder shuddered the fabric of the world. I extended my hand. "Give me the crossbow."

Castigere blinked once, then stared at me dumbly. "What?"

"Give me the crossbow," I repeated, spitting blood.

He looked flummoxed, but he handed it over. I raised the weapon and trained it on him. His jaw slackened, and he put his hands up.

I tossed him my knife. "I need blood," I said. "And I don't have enough of my own."

His eyes grew wide, but he nodded. Good. He understood the need. Nevertheless, I kept the stock of the crossbow pressed against my cheek and didn't lower it. Castigere held the knife between his teeth, freeing his hands to roll his sleeve up over his elbow, exposing the smooth, youthful flesh of his forearm. His

muscles were well defined, and I could see his healthy veins running like ropes beneath his skin.

I'd never been good at blood magic. Any form of magic took talent and time, and though I'd spent years studying the art, I'd never acquired a talent for it. I was a poor sangromancer at best, not even worthy of carrying the label.

Which explained why nobody knew I was one.

"Right there." I nodded to indicate a prominent vein that bisected the inside of his arm before branching like a river into tributaries. "That one."

Raising his knife, Castigere looked at me with eyes bright with fear. "Just cut it?"

He didn't know what he was in for, I could tell. People didn't bother to educate themselves anymore about the arcane. Mancer talents were rare and mostly forgotten, at least in this world. A more discerning apprentice would have recognized the signs on me: the white scars that crosshatched my skin, the permanent dark circles below my eyes. I never understood why no one ever asked how I had risen through the ranks of our order so quickly. I was deadly in far more ways than I appeared. I was the hidden monster lurking within, waiting to carve its way out.

"Just slice it," I told him. "I'll do the rest. You stay here while I head up. I'll draw what I need from you."

He stared at me, unblinking, his hand trembling on the hilt of the knife.

"It'll hurt," I warned. No sense lying or trying to break it to him easy. "It'll feel like I'm ripping your life out of you, because I am. You'll want to scream, but don't. You'll want to run, but don't. There's no fighting it, so don't try. You'll give me everything I need because you have no fucking choice. Do you understand?"

Castigere looked at me with tears in his eyes. Still, he nodded. Brave, ignorant fool. Why the hell did he think I'd taken him on? He'd never had the skillset to

be a Guardian. All he'd ever been from the start was a portable blood supply.

I clapped him on the shoulder. "Cut it."

I turned and headed up the last of the stairs. I didn't look back to see if he complied; I knew that he would. Neither one of us had a choice, not if we wanted to stop Vax. Castigere knew this was bigger than him, bigger than me. He'd always aspired to be a hero, and I had just provided him the opportunity.

I crested the top of the stairs and stepped out onto the flat rooftop of the tower. Vax was there, standing with his back to me, his mottled green cloak rippling, his long hair tossed about by the wind. Overhead, a sky the color of raw meat squirmed and distorted, crackling with lightning that swarmed across it. Any person looking up would think the world was being assaulted by powerful magic, but they'd be wrong. It was the lack of powerful magic that tortured the sky. Edelwyle was no more. Somehow, Vax's men had slain the Great Tree while I'd been foolishly stalking their master. With that anchor gone, the world was falling apart, crumbling into the abyss.

The ground heaved, and the fortress groaned in agony.

I withdrew my boot knife and used it to slice the skin of my palm. There was a sharp pain, then the blood came. Slowly at first. Then it surged, running out of me as, below on the stairs, Castigere performed his final act. I knelt and drew a line across the stones in front of me with the blood of my apprentice flowing from my veins.

Vax didn't turn around. He didn't know I was there. His concentration was pinned on the sky, no doubt waiting for the moment the other anchors would fall, bringing his plan to fruition. I had to hurry.

Castigere's blood spilled out of me, gushing from the wound. It ran down my hand, a potent supply that seemed never-ending. But it, too, would have an end.

I had only limited time to scribe the phrases of Vax's unmaking across the porous stone of Hauskrad Keep. I smeared the blood as quickly as I could, drawing an elaborate series of logograms that, while sloppy and unnuanced, should be good enough to kill him dead.

I scribbled fast, working my way across the roof, until the blood stopped coming and the wound dried up. Too soon. Much too soon. I didn't have enough blood to activate the glyphs. Aghast, I stood and stared in panic at my creation: a shimmering field of characters that glowed faintly with an eldritch light, not near bright enough to do any good. I lifted my gaze to Vax and found that my former brother had turned toward me.

He looked at me and sneered. "You bled him too fast."

Vax moved toward me, pausing over the first row of glyphs. He ground his boot into the blood-scrawled stone as if squishing the life out of it. The characters beneath his foot went dark. He glanced up at me and smiled. Then he took another step, rubbing the light out of another line of logograms. Then another, inching forward, until he was standing right in front of me.

"The world is becoming brittle," Vax said. "Soon, I'll be able to leave this place for a better one. Thank you for helping make that happen."

My stomach tightened. I was starting to feel dizzy again. Without Castigere's blood to sustain me, I was fading fast.

Vax set a hand on my shoulder. "You were always selfish. All it took was the death of your lover to lure you away. My men just had to follow your trail back to Edelwyle. You made it too easy."

The little blood that was left in me heated to boiling. "*You bastard—*"

I swiped out to hit him, but I was too slow and clumsy from blood loss. He caught my fist and wrenched my arm behind my back. The next thing I

knew, my own knife was at my throat. When he forced me toward the edge of the rooftop, I went without struggle; there was no fight left in me. The weight of failure bore down upon my shoulders, too heavy and too painful to bear. If it wasn't for Vax's powerful arms around me, I would have collapsed.

He held me at the very edge of the rooftop, the ground falling away from me many stories below. The blade of my boot knife was pressed against my throat, my arms pinned behind me. All it would take was him letting go. The wind whipped at us from behind, lashing Vax's hair against my face. I stood there frozen, not daring to move, gazing down at my death.

"Rest at ease, Aridashar," he whispered in my ear. "At least you'll leave behind a legacy. You will be forever known as the man who killed his god."

A shout from behind us made me jolt. The blade of the knife raked my skin. Vax whirled, yanking me back from the ledge and jerking me around in front of him to use as a shield. My jaw dropped at the sight of my apprentice standing only feet away from us, his leather belt serving as a tourniquet to bind his arm. Drops of blood dribbled from his hand, feeding the stones of the roof. Drinking it in, the intricate field of my smudged logograms flared awake beneath his feet.

With a slight smile, Castigere raised his knife and slit his own throat. His blood gushed, pouring out of him onto the glyphs, and their magic surged, their lights swelling to a blinding brilliance. Vax screamed as his soul was seared from the fabric of the universe, and I fell away from him.

The world went white and then faded to black.

I dropped to the roof, where I lay watching my blood mix with Castigere's.

M.L. Spencer lives in Southern California with her three children and two cats. She has been obsessed with fantasy ever since the days of childhood bedtime stories. She grew up reading and writing fantasy fiction, playing MMORPG games, and living, as mom put it, “in her own worlds.” ML now spends each day working to bring those worlds into reality. She loves to read and write grimdark fantasy because it probes the deep, dark questions of human nature and moral ethics.

Slush: The Good, the Bad, and the so Very Ugly

AMANDA J. SPEDDING

Slush, oh how I love and hate thee. I've read a tonne of slush over the years, and it's simultaneously exciting, terrifying, and hella frustrating. Exciting because you know you're going to find absolute gems you can't wait to publish. Terrifying because there are some things *no one* should be subjected to reading. And frustrating because guidelines are for *everyone*, no exceptions.

For Cohesion Press' recent publication, *SNAFU: Last Stand*, we received close to 350 submissions—that's a lot of reading. The slush pile held joy, disappointment and, unfortunately, way more 'oh, hell no' than I anticipated. That last category isn't your goal.

There are things an author should keep in mind when subbing to markets (all markets). So let's take a look at some of the most important parts of the submission process, and what those of us who sit on the other side of the desk find important – the good, the bad, and the so very ugly.

Before I start, though, I would like to say that editors and publishers know how much hard work, time and angst goes into wrangling your imagination onto the page. We understand this is your baby, which is why I'll first discuss guidelines and why they matter.

Guidelines. They're there for a reason. They are inherent to the stories the publishers want to put out into the world. Don't ignore them. Don't cherry pick.

Nothing frustrates an editor more than a submission that flouts guidelines. It tells us you either didn't read them, or you didn't give a shit.

Cohesion Press publishes military horror. We are very specific about that, like sighting down the crosshairs specific. All submission markets will be the same when it comes to what they're seeking: it will be in their guidelines. READ the guidelines, twice if you must. Most of all, and I can't stress this enough: *ADHERE* to the guidelines. That really is the most important part.

Guidelines are there to help you decide if your story fits the market. If it doesn't fit, if you can't hit those requested markers, then find a market that *does* suit.

Word Count. This requires a special mention. Word counts are set by the publisher with regard to how much room (or total word count) they have available for the publication. Some publications have a little leeway either side, but don't be that person who subs a novella for a short-story publication. Query, if you're allowed, but if you're way over word count then find a more suitable market.

Trunk stories. You may think editors can't spot these but we can. It's in the little things, the language, and the attention to detail that doesn't quite hit the theme and tone of the guidelines. When it comes to themed anthologies, chances are you have a short story somewhere that may fit the bill. That's great! Don't send it. <raises hands in self-defence> Hear me out. Chances are that story sitting in a folder in another on your computer for three years isn't your best work, so don't dust it off, chuck it in an email and hit send. Rewrite it, tweak it, hone it. Don't send it hoping the editor will fix it so it fits the guidelines—they won't.

What not... You'll find publishers may include a 'what not to send/sub' section in their guidelines. This is as important as the 'what to' send. If a publisher says they don't want to read tales of violence or rape or racism or bigotry, then don't send those stories. One more time for those in the back: **DON'T SEND THOSE STORIES!**

Cover letters. Some publishers will ask for one, others won't. Either way, make them short and to the point. Be professional, polite, and if you know the editor or publisher's name, use it—it's likely to be on the publication's site. Don't send a list of every single publication you've ever had (top five should do), and don't tell an editor what to think of your story or where to send payment for its guaranteed acceptance.

Tips for short stories. (No one can guarantee you'll sell your story, but here are some tips that might help.)

- Your first line is important, your first paragraph more so. Chances are you're in slush with a fuck tonne of others so your story needs to stand out. This doesn't necessarily mean shock value, it means making the editor want more. Intrigue, conflict, voice, these are important to catch publishers' attention.
- Write tight. Especially important for short stories. Make the words fight for their right to be there. Easy cuts:
 - Lose 'that'—nine times out of ten you don't need it
 - Kill the adverbs, scrutinise the adjectives
 - 'Up' and 'down' are redundant when they follow stand, rise, sit, crouch etc (the action denotes direction)
 - Heads nod, shoulders shrug—that's all you need

- Sometimes simple works better; lose flowery prose for clarity and impact
- Don't describe *every* movement a character makes; you can put them at a window without us watching them walk across the room.
- Keep the story focussed.
- Make the reader/editor fate-invested in your characters. Characters don't have to be likeable for a reader to be invested, it's all about *needing* to see the outcome. Think character motivation: give them clear goals, show what drives them, what they're striving to achieve (for good or ill) and then throw conflict in their path (internal and external). Nothing should ever be easy, and there should always be consequences for actions/decisions.
- While editors will fix grammar and spelling et al, too many errors drag us from your tale. Read your work. Read it again. Get it beta-read if you're able. *Every* writer is too close to their work to see any issues. Another set of eyes may pick up what you can no longer see.
- High-action/tension stories (and scenes) work better in an 'active' voice—it has a stronger, clearer tone and conveys immediacy. Lose your passive words: watched, saw, heard etc. Don't have a character feel the rumble beneath her feet, have its power knock her off them. Short, sharp sentences help build tension.

Rejections. We all know their sting. It's part of the gig. Things to *not* do upon rejection: do not reject said rejection (true story), or writer-splain the story because it wasn't "read right". Don't be that person.

Guidelines (again). Read them. Adhere to them. Don't let your story sit for months in slush if it doesn't suit when you could have it sitting in slush if it does—it improves your chances of an acceptance.

I spoke earlier about editors and publishers respecting the work you put into your tales; that respect has to flow from the author as well. We love our jobs. We love discovering new tales and authors. We don't love being abused for the work we do. Be professional, not precious. It makes the world of difference.

Amanda J. Spedding is the owner of Phoenix Editing, pitch consultant for Blur Studios, and editor-in-chief at Cohesion Press for their award-nominated *SNAFU* series, of which Tim Miller (*Deadpool*, *Terminator: Dark Fate*) is an avid reader. She has worked on stories that have been picked up by Netflix's Emmy-winning animated series *Love, Death & Robots* (Tim Miller and David Fincher) for season one, and the upcoming season two.

Review: The Vagabond King by Jodie Bond

NATE AUBIN

In Jodie Bond's debut novel, *The Vagabond King*, a devastating raid by an army of immortals leaves Prince Threon with a murdered family and a stolen kingdom. But when the deposed royal sets out to claim his vengeance, free his people, and restore himself to the throne, he discovers a struggle on two fronts: human and divine. While armies of men do battle, the gods wage a war of their own, pulling strings and playing cosmic chess with mortals as the pieces. In the midst of it all, the former prince is left with little but the clothes on his back, a handful of misfit allies, and the burning desire to take back what's rightfully his.

The Vagabond King is told in the third person with Threon and a selection of others acting as its primary POV characters. One of these is Savanta, an inventor who dared to create a Da Vinci-esque flying machine and enter the domain of the sky god, Zenith. Transformed into a winged, grey skinned creature of the air and forced into Zenith's service as punishment, Savanta desires little more than to end her divine indenture and return to the daughter she left behind. On the other end of the theological spectrum, Azzania is a priestess of the Void. While Azzania's own religion refuses to acknowledge Zenith and his brethren as deities, she, Savanta, and Threon find common purpose in fomenting rebellion against the earth god Deyar's aforementioned army of immortals and the empire it serves. Lleu, one of the undying soldiers in

that legion, acts as the final POV character. Born to a father from the empire and a mother from Threon's occupied kingdom, Lleu faces intense internal conflict and an addict's struggle with the life-extending vish drug.

While I thought this was a solid and enjoyable fantasy tale in many regards, I felt like it didn't do enough to break the mold and distinguish itself from the rest of the genre. What *The Vagabond King* does offer in good, solid (if slightly predictable) plot and steady pacing, it somewhat lacks in surprises and inventive worldbuilding concepts. Threon himself is a likable enough primary protagonist, but one of the major issues I have with him is the way the majority of his character development happens off-page. He begins the novel as a pampered noble on the night of the raid, and his narrow escape is followed by a five-year timeskip that glosses over his transition to such a radically different life.

That said, there was a lot I enjoyed about this book as well, particularly from the perspective of a grimdark reader. Bond's gods are pleasingly ruthless and manipulative, and Zenith in particular has a way of stealing the scene and grabbing readers' attention whenever he shows up with his acid wit and cloak of stars. The author also does a good job of depicting the ugly realities of war, even when it's the protagonists doing the violence. At times, *The Vagabond King* felt like it had the aesthetics and feel of classic 80's fantasy with its band of plucky underdogs going against a tyrannical empress (complete with a pair white tigers). These fantastical elements were juxtaposed nicely with the gritty realism of addiction, slavery, and the realities of resource scarcity. The novel's ending is strong and surprising and closes the book on a high note. Overall, I would give this book a solid 3.5 stars. If you're looking for a fun adventure in the vein of *Dragonlance* or the *Forgotten Realms* with a little more modern grit, this

might be the book for you.

An Interview with Richard Nell

TOM SMITH

Hail and greetings Grimdarkians! I'm with you today from the island paradise of Sri Kon where I tracked down Richard Nell. If you aren't familiar with Richard's work, he wrote *Kings of Paradise* and *Kings of Ash* in the Ash and Sand series. These two indies are some of my favorite books in the last several years. I was pleasantly surprised with how good these books were. I was several times reminded of Malazan Book of the Fallen which I consider high praise.

Book three, *Kings of Heaven* was originally slated for August 2019, but was pushed back and will be released early this year.

[TS] Richard, thanks for taking the time to chat with us.

[RN] My pleasure!

[TS] You use a really diverse landscape to tell your tales in *Kings of Paradise* and *Kings of Ash*. What provided your inspiration for that?

[RN] I suppose I always felt our own world is so big, and complicated, fantasy should reflect that. So I went from frozen wasteland to white-sand paradise, and drew from (see also: stole) a lot from real cultures, including South-East Asian islanders, Danes, Chinese dynasties, and the list goes on.

[TS] I have been reading fantasy a long time and have found Ruka to be a pretty unique character. At first he was very reminiscent to me of Karsa Orlong from the Malazan Book of the Fallen series, but you definitely fleshed him out into something unique and intriguing. I still can't tell if I find him a hero or villain. How would you as the writer describe Ruka and his ambitions and desires?

[RN] Ruka believes (and desires) many of the things we would attribute to a hero. But, like the rest of us, he has a darker side, too. Ultimately, you'll have to read the series to decide if he's a fallen hero, a redeemed villain, or something else entirely.

[TS] Having also read your latest release *The God King's Legacy*, I noticed a little shifting of gears into more of a Flintlock Fantasy theme. Is that something you are going to continue on with, or do you have ideas for something all new after you finish the King's series?

[RN] There's likely a whole trilogy in the God-King universe, full of demon-infused legendary knights and the changing of an old and settled world. I have a few other projects on the go and exactly which will come after *Kings of Heaven* I'm not yet sure! But I hope to release something else in 2020.

[TS] The magic system in these books seems to be somewhat mind oriented so far, with Ruka and his little mental world where he builds things that he can rip into the real world, and then Prince Kale and his abilities unleashed from training with monks. How would you best describe the magic system to a new reader?

[RN] It's definitely experienced as a 'soft' magic system, with the rules not even understood by the users, let alone anyone else. You might think of the

magic as powerful resources that exist, sort of like iron, but unexploited and misunderstood by man.

[TS] What writers, books, shows or movies cemented younger Richard's interest in fantasy and made you want to write your own books?

[RN] Oh dear the list would be too extensive. When I was a kid I remember loving *Legend* and *The NeverEnding Story*, all kinds of fairy tales (but particularly the darker variety). I read early and voraciously, from *King Arthur* to *Dragonlance*. I loved it all.

[TS] As an indie writer, what do you see as your most significant challenges to succeeding? And what do you consider to be a success?

[RN] Attention. We're all competing for scraps of focus in a cluttered world, and I'm not an advertiser/marketer by nature—I'm a reclusive old axe-wielding lunatic who'd be happier bearded and alone in some dark wood. But one does what one must.

[TS] If you could explore one of your characters in a short story or even a new series, who would it be and what would they be doing?

[RN] Oh I'd love to do many. Ruka's parents (Beyla and Brand) deserve their own story—Brand in particular isn't ever seen in the books themselves, so we'd see how they met and what led to their fateful choices. I'd love to show Amit of Naran and his brothers in their revolution, too.

[TS] What is your opinion on the grimdark sub-genre, and do you see the growing of a grimdark sub-genre as a positive or negative for fantasy as a whole?

[RN] I had no idea what grimdark was until people said I'd written it. In many ways, our lives are so comfortable and removed from the realities of a 'grimdark' world, I think there's a bit of truth-seeking going on. A reminder, perhaps, of what life can very quickly become removed from the miracle of peace and civilization. Anything that helps toughen up the modern citizen and reader is a positive in my book.

[TS] What projects do you have upcoming that you would like to tell our readers about?

[RN] *Kings of Heaven* (the third and final book of the Ash and Sand series) will be released this year, with a goal of March. It's the end of six years of labour for me, and I hope it brings curious readers all the epic, bittersweet, glorious feelings a series finisher owes. It certainly does already for me.

[TS] Richard, it's been a pleasure having you, thanks so much for stopping by! Now where can I catch a boat out of here?

[RN] Not at all. Boats are everywhere. Just watch the waves, and the Southern horizon.

Bloody Roots

ALEX MARSHALL

Some castles are born bad, slipping into this world clotted with the cooling blood of those who fell so that they might rise. Erected in the ashes of atrocity, such keeps seem hell-bent on their own annihilation, summoning siege and sabotage to their thirsty moats as a Hand of Glory draws luna moths to its five sputtering flames. The First Dark taints these structures from keystone to finial; however hotly the hearths may blaze on the winter solstice, however gaily the halls may dance with lotus lanterns during summer festivals, there is always the dim, damp tinge of the grave hanging in the perfumed air, the sense that when you stride those battlements you never patrol alone.

Those who presume to rule these cursed citadels find themselves enthralled to the cold commands of a sovereign whom no one else can hear. Some stand for a campaign, others a dynasty, but they are never truly held. Not by mortal masters.

Myo'tab was not such a castle.

Its origins were unremarkable, and there is no reason to suppose its noble foremother and her descendants found anything inauspicious about their fortress for the first few centuries of its existence. The badness only fell upon Ito Cay and its castle when its final mistress revolted against the Empress of the Immaculate Isles and provoked the wrath of the gods—or at least the wrath of the Empress. But in the Immaculate Isles there was little distinguishing the one from the other.

Kang-ho knew the song well. Every Immaculate did. The whole point of the story was that this place had started out happy and as close to humble as you could get in the ostentations Isles before mortal hubris poisoned that peace. That's how cautionary tales operate—order must first exist before its violation can lead to tragedy. But why let a cheap little thing like the truth get in the way of a rich song?

"This isle was cursed long before it even rose from the sea," Kang-ho told his employers as they wobbled around on the kelp-strewn shingle, slowly regaining their landlegs after the long voyage. "A country so vile even the Undergods could not abide its fell presence, and so they bid Ukuru, Emperor of the Harpyfish, to harness it onto his mighty back and lift it those countless fathoms to the surface, where the ugly light of our hated sun would blind its blasphemous sight from their holy eyes."

Was that laying it on too thick? Kang-ho paused to assess his audience. The Creep silently stared at Kang-ho through the eyeholes in her featureless wicker mask, as the Creep was wont to do, but the captain didn't seem to be paying Kang-ho any mind. The autumn wind blew the captain's wild white hair around his gaunt face like seaweed tickling the chin of a drowned sailor. The old Imperial's attention was fixed on where his crew struggled to unload the oxen and their laden wagons from the scow. The tide that had so graciously delivered them the final league to the shores of Ito Cay now withdrew her favors, and the last wagon looked on the verge of floundering in the surf.

"This em-per-or harpy-fish," the Creep sing-songed in her mocking voice, her ugly spiked mace resting lightly atop her shoulder as if it weighed no more than a tin scepter. "Do you think it kinfolk to the master's servant who delivered us here?"

"All citizens of the deep share the same briny blood," said Kang-ho, snapping up the brocaded collar

of his flashy Raniputri peacoat to give the impression that his shiver arose from the breeze and not the reminder of their means of conveyance. He'd agreed to the job before seeing their ship, his employer's generous terms overriding his better judgment. Seeing the glorified barge slumped against the quay, he'd laughed aloud at their naiveté in thinking such a craft capable of navigating the open sea. He didn't laugh when the great grey mass of what he told himself must be a whale briefly surfaced ahead of the ship, the lines that tethered the scow to its bulk snapping taut as it plunged ahead, pulling them after it like the oxen towed their carts.

A seabeast-borne vessel wasn't unheard of in the Isles, of course, but only members of the sorcerous court on the capital isle of Othean were permitted to use them. While a few rogue reef-shamans might ignore the dictate and drive their dolphin sledges through the surf of their remote atolls as they'd always done, Kang-ho had never heard of an Outlander commanding such a craft.

You might think a native son of the Immaculate Isles would relish the opportunity to ply the waves in a whale-drawn barge like the legendary god-founders of Othean, but the truth was it freaked Kang-ho right the fuck out. The whole plan was to sneak off with as much loot as he could liberate from their wagons, meet his partner Eldamar on the opposite end of the isle, and sail off into the labyrinth of outlying islands before he was missed, but what if the captain's whale was no mere dray animal but capable of hunting them like a blood eel? Kang-ho had no doubt the vast shadow that towed the laden scow at such ferocious speed could smash their little skiff to matchsticks.

Wade that tide pool when he came to it. For now the last wagon had cleared the waves, and the captain returned his attention to the guide who had

successfully threaded them through the Isles, avoiding every Immaculate customs ship and local patrol.

“The passage is complete,” said the captain, pulling an ominously stained pouch from his equally stained great coat and tossing it to Kang-ho.

“And the debt is paid,” said Kang-ho, the heavy clink of coins thudding into his palm sending a warm shiver through his own pouch.

“You’ll wait in the boat,” said the Creep

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” said Kang-ho, pocketing his payment and rubbing his hands together. “You’ve paid far too well for me to let your venture sink now, so close to success.”

“You’ll wait in the boat,” repeated the Creep, but Kang-ho had aroused the captain’s curiosity.

“State your meaning, Immaculate.”

“Myo’tab Castle may have lain empty these many cold centuries, but Immaculate keeps are renowned for their cunning traps,” said Kang-ho. “You hired me to see you safely to the end of your journey, and navigating around Othean’s patrol routes was just the first leg of our adventure. Until I’ve brought you inside the castle walls I don’t consider my job complete.”

“Our path is clear,” said the Creep, pushing at the fresh corpse of a gull with her boot. “Look around you, bright-eyes, this crab’s windfall is proof our herald gained the castle despite your traps.”

“Begging your mate’s pardon, captain, but I’ve never been big on riddles,” said Kang-ho, but following the Creep’s gaze up the shore he noticed just how many seabirds were rotting away beneath the sinking autumn sun. Every beach boasts its dead bounty, and he’d been so caught up in his scheming he hadn’t noticed just how heavily the shore was peppered with fallen birds. Not just the usual gulls and terns, either; a kingfisher lay on a seaweed bier, and farther up sprawled the majestic ruins of an osprey. And extending out in all directions lay a profusion of dead

crabs, blue-shelled mosaics set in the shingle. Gooseflesh again pimpled Kang-ho's skin, but now no breeze blew to mask his discomfort, the sudden stillness peppering the salty air with the bouquet of decay.

"He wants to come, let him come," the captain told the Creep. "Makes no difference."

"No, I suppose it doesn't," said the Creep, her eyeholes trying to snag Kang-ho's gaze but he denied her, looking to the bosun who came slip-sliding up the pebbly beach.

"Trouble unloading the cargo, Missus Sweetbreads?" the captain asked.

"Got wetter'n a kraken's kiss, sir, but we caught it 'fore it could float free." The frowning harlequin mask tattooed over her heavy face contorted as she grinned. Missus Sweetbreads had the looks of a goblin shark and the personality to match. "Against the odds and against the gods, we've come safely to the end of the earth, just as you said."

Maybe it was just a problem with his Crimson translation skills, but shouldn't that be *ends* of the earth?

"Against the odds and against the gods, we've come safely home to the end of the earth," agreed the captain, and he, the bosun, and the Creep all shook their fists at the gathering clouds overhead.

Hmmm. Kang-ho had initially chalked up their dopey catchphrase and accompanying gestures to the sort of weedy custom that naturally sprouts in any crew, as unintelligible to outsiders as a high tea ceremony, but here on this somber shore a darker possibility occurred to him—what if they were some kind of loony cult? That might explain the masks everyone but the captain wore, some of them constructed of cloth or beaten metal or woven osiers, others inked into their very features like the bosun's here.

That could be a problem. Kang-ho had assumed they were simple pirates looking to bury their ill-gotten booty in a secure location—Immaculate waters were notoriously well patrolled, but by royal decree all were forbidden from setting foot on this doomed isle, so what better hiding place than right here in plain sight? If Kang-ho ever amassed a sizeable hoard, this would certainly be where he'd stash the goods.

But what if the captain's masked cohort weren't a crew of bloody-handed reavers? What if they were a loopy Imperial sect who aimed to settle in spooky old Myo'tab Castle, and these wagons were laden with food and fresh water and stacks of holy scrolls, instead of treasure he could lightly pilfer in the short term and return to dig up in full at a later date? What a tragedy that would be!

"Lead on, then, Master Daebak, lest we fall into a trap," said the Creep, but Kang-ho was so caught up in his bad luck reverie he momentarily forgot the false name he'd given them and just blinked at the wicker visage. The captain strode off toward the ancient black track that switchbacked up the barren slope of the headland without so much as a swath of sea oats or patch of lichen sprouting from the dead earth. The two-score crew and their oxen carts rose a cacophonous chorus of gritty stone grinding on gritty stone as they climbed the pebbly beach.

Missus Sweetbreads barked orders, and the Creep stepped closer to Kang-ho, murmuring through her mask, "Make no mistake, *Master Daebak*, if I had my druthers we'd split your belly open right here and now, and I'd read your schemes in your steaming guts."

At last, some good news! This was certainly what Kang-ho would expect from honest pirates—you hire a local to take you to your future hideout, then you murder him in cold blood to preserve your secret. The crane-and-bull story he'd fed them about Myo'tab being riddled with traps that only he could guard

against had been designed to forestall this predictable end, and he was encouraged to hear the Creep plainly state her evil inclinations. Maybe this song would have a happy ending after all!

Kang-ho's optimism lasted exactly as long as it took them to hike halfway up the headland. As the trail curled around an inlet, the Creep pointed out the black rocks of the bay far below. Hundreds of corpses lay heaped on the jagged shore, countless gulls tearing at their rancid flesh and flinging it about in an orgy of gastronomical excess. Only seals, sure, but to see an entire colony laid out like that raised a very big and ominous question, one which Kang-ho didn't appreciate the Creep obliquely answering before he'd even asked it.

"Further evidence our herald gained the inner sanctum of Myo'tab even without your help avoiding its pitfalls," said the Creep, her hooded cape flapping around her mace in the spray-kissed wind. "Better you had stayed on the boat."

"Better for whom?" Kang-ho asked, trying to keep his voice light even as his stomach sank. Of all the mysteries Ito Cay presented, none were so troubling as his unexpectedly finding himself simpatico with the Creep. She'd been eyeing him like a hungry egret sizing up an eel ever since they'd met in that dingy tavern on the bordershores.

"Before you leave this world you'll admit I was right," said the Creep, shifting her mace from one shoulder to the other. "If only to yourself."

"Against the odds and against the gods," said Kang-ho, casually resting a sweaty palm on the pommel of his favorite knife and glancing back to see how close the wagons were. Alas, they were already rounding the bend below—too close to risk shanking the Creep and pitching her over the side of the gritty trail to join the seal graveyard.

“Righter than you know,” said the Creep, taking out her pipe. Kang-ho had coveted the templewarden ever since he’d clapped eyes on it, the stem a length of albatross bone and the bowl a spit of craggy briar. “Spare a light?”

“Light’s in short supply on this isle,” said Kang-ho, but took out his own humble pearwood pipe and the abalone-inlaid matchbox he’d filched off a fop absorbed in a game of sting-face back in Linkensterne. For all he knew, the Creep might brain him the next time his back was turned, so no sense putting off what might be his final smoke. After lighting his bowl of resinous latakiss tubāq stretched out with savory seaweed, he obligingly cupped his hand and scalded his fingertips lighting the Creep’s templewarden. The rising wind snatched away their smoke, pressganging the vapors into its brewing storm.

“I’ll remember your kindness,” said the Creep, her wicker mask blowing an oily, incense-scented cloud into Kang-ho’s face. “When the time comes, I’ll make it quick for you.”

“I’m sure that’s what all your whores hope for,” said Kang-ho, winking at the Creep. “But I command so high a price you’ll want to make it last as long as you’re able.”

Was the Creep smiling behind her mask? No telling. But Kang-ho decided to believe she was. He was charitable like that.

They caught up with the captain at the crest of the barren headland. From this vantage Kang-ho saw that the interior of Ito Cay was just as bleak as the beach, nary shrub nor moss preserving the modesty of the naked landscape. The captain stood atop one of the grey boulders that speckled the rolling moors, puffing his black blowfish pipe and watching the bad weather build behind them. Posed against the desolate backdrop with a smoky halo, he looked every bit the

portrait of a grizzled sea captain... or a Chainite nutter right before someone martyred his ass, take your pick.

Kang-ho and the Creep caught their breath and spent it on their pipes as the ox carts slowly climbed up after them. Once Missus Sweetbreads and the first wagon reached the summit, the captain gave Kang-ho a nod and he plodded ahead, his wicker-faced shadow dogging him as he settled into a pace beside the bosun.

“First time in the Isles?” he asked Missus Sweetbreads as raindrops began to mingle with the sweat streaming down their faces.

“And last,” she said, her thick fingers making a series of contortions that he could only read as an obscene gesture. The only alternative was she that was making some religious finger-prayer and he held out hope that they weren’t really cultists.

“It’s beautiful,” said the Creep, and again Kang-ho reluctantly agreed—the moors of the headlands opened into a vast bowl in the earth, and on the far end stood Myo’tab Castle. The terraced roofs of the ancient keep looked black as old blood in the dimming light, and between the pilgrims and their goal stretched countless tiny rectangular lakes. Beautiful, as the Creep said, but knowing what they were Kang-ho clung to the warmth of his dying pipe.

As the twisting path brought them down into the valley and the surfaces of the little pools dimpled in the rain, Missus Sweetbreads launched into a variation of the region’s history that was new to Kang-ho but no closer to the truth than the version he’d spun for the Creep and the captain on the shore.

“I heard this place was once the burial ground for all the Immaculate Isles. A vast churchyard in the middle of the sea, with no sign of human habitation—only gravestones as far as the eye could see. But then the people of a distant isle rebelled, and the Empress decreed that its leader and her followers be banished

to this land of the dead. They were marooned on the beach back there, with nary a crumb of food to eat and no shelter from the constant storms.”

Lightning crackled overhead, because of course it fucking did, and a thousand pools lit up all around them, reflecting the bolt.

“But the mistress of the revolution refused to let the Empress get the better of her,” the bosun went on. “So she led her subjects to this hallowed ground, where all the Immaculate dead lay sleeping beneath their glorious monuments. They dug up their ancestors like pirates retrieving caches of gold and silver, supping on the spoiled meat. Some grew sick and died from the gruesome feast, but others gained the unholy vigor of ghouls, and their mistress harnessed their strength to erect a fortress from stolen gravestones. By the time they constructed Myo’tab Castle, every crypt was empty of meat and stripped of stone, and they waited in their lair for the Empress to return so they might exact their vengeance.

“But she never did, and one by one the ghouls succumbed to starvation, eating those who died until only their mistress remained to gnaw the bones in her gravestone castle.”

Another blast of lightning lit up the ruins on the hillside high overhead, and even knowing the bosun’s story to be pure fabrication, Kang-ho shivered in the cold rain. Definitely a song he would steal. Assuming he lived long enough to sing it.

“That’s not how it went down,” muttered the Creep, so low Kang-ho wondered if it was just for his benefit. He didn’t rise to the bait, and since the bosun evidently hadn’t heard, the challenge went unanswered by all but the howling west wind who came riding down on them from the rim of the valley, and who was to say the gale wasn’t agreeing with the Creep? Not Kang-ho—only a believer would think they could wrest the meaning from a storm.

“And lo, I came upon a land beset with countless wells,” intoned the captain, coming out of the thickening dark behind them like an ivory-skinned goatshark churning up from the deep. “And in turn I drank each one dry, yet none would slack my thirst. Against the odds and against the gods, we’ve truly come to the end of the earth, my children.”

That settled that—definitely a moon-touched cult leader. Kang-ho should have asked more questions before taking the job. Gods damn him for the greedy crow who ate itself fat on Othean’s rubies, thinking them cherries, only to plummet into the sea and drown when he tried to fly away. If he had any sense at all he’d wander off right now on the pretext of copping a squat and then run clear to the northern bay where Eldamar had better be waiting with the boat—the fat pouch in his pocket and an intact skull were ample pay for time wasted on Outlander fanatics.

But did Kang-ho have any sense at all? A fair question, one he often posed to himself on dark and stormy nights like this one, surrounded by crazies and killers and crazy killers, and sticking it out just a little longer to see if he might yet rub a few more coins together come the dawn. Optimism killed you quick as any arrow; he’d seen that firsthand...

But as the trail began to climb the steep slope to Myo’tab Castle, Kang-ho decided to push his luck a little further. Whether he ran now or later, he fully expected the Creep to come slinking after him in the wet night. Might as well postpone that miserable chase long enough see if these wagons held trash or treasure. Experience had taught Kang-ho that the heavier his pockets, the lighter his feet.

“I give thanks... you chose... to join us,” the captain told Kang-ho as they huffed their way up the slippery road. The captain might play the wise prophet with his crew, but Kang-ho took heart that he panted his way up a hill the same as any slobby skeptic. “Tis right... tis

proper... that an heir... to the Isles... bear witness... to what miracle... births... from your... profane soil.”

“Ugh,” groaned Kang-ho, thankful that the climb gave him pretext to loose his bottled displeasure at being roped into a maniac pilgrimage. Kang-ho amended his previous thought—there was something more dangerous than optimism, and that was religion. But really, now, that was two ways of saying the same thing, wasn’t it?

“I don’t... expect... you... believe... yet,” said the captain, lightning flashing so close the thunder made Kang-ho’s ears ring. “Just believe... / believe... and soon... you shall... too.”

“Pay enough,” wheezed Kang-ho. “And I’ll... I’ll believe... you’re the... Empress herself.”

“Good man,” the captain managed. Then he laughed, a rough sound like the borking of a seal. “Bad man... rather... don’t deny it... I know your heart... but so are... so are we... so are we all... but not... for long.”

Gods damned cultists. Never steal from a church, that was the first rule—not because it was bad luck, that was dummy-talk, but because holy-headed goons would chase you to the ends of the Star for some piddling saint’s finger that wasn’t worth its weight as bone meal. That was the whole reason Kang-ho hadn’t let himself get too attached to that lovely Usban piece he’d wooed; boy might be sweet as his pretty sutras, but he was a cleric of the Ten True Gods of Trve, and that meant he was as disconnected from the real world as the deranged captain.

All the same, as the wind drilled rain into his ear and murdered the ember of his pipe, Kang-ho reflected that at present he’d much prefer the dry wit of his Usban playmate to these soggy new friends. It was all a question of degrees, and say what you will about believers, at least the Trvians weren’t big on proselytizing. That, and the little cleric had the gift of

transmuting any fluid to beer as soon as it passed his lips—Kang-ho had experienced that firsthand, snowballing the lad at a tidy little orgy they'd thrown together back in Lawless Linkensterne, before Kang-ho had swapped out his fun and friendly fundamentalist for these miserable mendicants. Hindsight was a devil to be sure.

“Behold!” the captain cried. “Our final trial! And you! Our guide! Through traps! And snares! Of the enemy!”

Lightning again sundered the impenetrable fortress of the night, and in its ruinous glare Kang-ho was confronted with two hard facts: they had reached the summit of their climb, and at least one of the legends of Ito Cay was true. Between them and the high walls of the still-distant castle sprawled a labyrinth, as you would find guarding many an Immaculate keep. But unlike the stone puzzle-paths built to slow the approach of invading armies, this one was raised of human remains, the contents of all those countless graves in the valley below exhumed and arrayed here in a jagged maze of woven bones.

“The songs say the mistress of Myo'tab built the labyrinth backwards, walling herself in with her ancestors,” said the Creep, apparently the only one of their scouting party not out of breath from the hike. “And as she went, she planted basilisk roses cultivated by the bloom-chemists of Thao, so upon this grim trellis flourished brilliant thorn bushes. A single scratch would cement your blood in its veins, and the roses grew so thick not even a squirrel could safely walk the overgrown avenues.”

“Once, perhaps, but long ago,” said Kang-ho, his own breath returning. Even in the renewed dark of the storm his eyes echoed with the sight of yellow bones. “Basilisk roses must be fed with blood, and when the Empress chose to let Myo'tab's challenge go unanswered, this garden went unwatered. The mistress of the castle claimed communion with dark

powers, received unspeakable gifts, but without an enemy to loose them upon, her revolution came to naught. The Empress won the war by refusing to fight it. From that day forward no Immaculate was permitted to set a toe on this isle, and Othean's patrols ensured none could escape its shores. In time every single traitor starved to death, and the rebellion met the same fate as the roses that once blossomed on these bones."

"You sing the song the Empress taught all her children," said the captain. "But there's a thorn hidden there as well—the Empress learned the song from her enemy, reciting the lie that would be Othean's undoing as if it were her own wisdom."

That was another thing Kang-ho hated about believers, be they Trvian, Chainite, or some hedgecult like this one—all the damn riddles. "I'm afraid I don't follow your meaning."

"I mean the wisest philosophers in the Star will look upon a winter field and say life has left the earth, but a humble gardener kens the difference twixt death and dormancy," said the captain, tamping another layer of bullshit atop his inscrutable seed. As if sensing Kang-ho's annoyance at being kept in the dark, he said, "Let's shine some light on the situation, shall we Missus Sweetbreads?"

The bosun lit a storm lantern with her coalstick. In the spectral glow the captain withdrew his thermos of hot kaldi, the Creep passed around her flask of canefire, and Missus Sweetbreads produced four rocks of hardtack wrapped in a kerchief. Kang-ho wasn't hungry but wolfed down his wormcastle all the same, a swig of kaldi turning the sandy hardtack into warm mud. Bitter kaldi, rancid butter, dried fish flakes, and over-salted, undercooked flour. Delicious.

Rain stabbed Kang-ho's face, and he denied the ghost of his father an audience. He *did* have more

sense than a greedy pelican drunk on spoiled cod. He would *not* come to a bad end.

As they finished their impromptu picnic at the edge of the bone-maze, Kang-ho greedily pulled on the flask of sweet canefire. Gods willing, he'd be tapping into the cask Eldamar kept on the boat err the storm cleared. *There* was a toasty thought for a cold, wet night.

"Out hour is at hand." The Creep pocketed her flask and advanced to the edge of the labyrinth, hoisting her mace in both hands. Looking back at the captain, she said, "Permission to show this Immaculate how we savages solve the riddle of a puzzle-path?"

"Aye," said the captain, glancing back to where the first of the wagons came wheel-squealing up the rain-lashed rise. "In this doomed world our path is only as clear as we make it. I see no deadly traps for you to disarm, Master Daebak, so I suggest you prove your usefulness by aiding our work."

"Of course," said Kang-ho, cursing himself for not running off into the storm when he'd had the chance—he could've been back at the boat with Eldamar by now, sailing to safety with a heavy purse, but instead he found himself kicking over rickety fences of the dead in the freezing rain. As the petrified bones clattered apart beneath boot and mace, he noticed fresher remains strewn through the mud and tangled in the woven walls of the labyrinth—more gulls and terns and even a few owlbats, their sodden feathers oily in the lantern light. Nothing ominous about that.

"I wonder about you, Master Daebak," the Creep said as they worked, wagon wheels crunching over bones in their wake. "Are you very brave and very crafty, or are you very greedy and very foolish?"

"I wonder, too," said Kang-ho, choosing to steady his boot against an old skull instead of a fresh gull. Bad luck to step on a seabird. "But who's to say I can't be both?"

“A crafty answer,” said the Creep, her mace blasting through another human hedgerow.

“Or a foolish one,” grumbled Kang-ho, and as another flash lit up the castle ahead he paused in his work. The outer walls looked normal enough, listing with age and neglect but not, so far as he could tell, built of gravestones. What caught his attention was something he’d never heard in any of the songs of Myo’tab—at the center of castle, rising above the buckling terraced roofs, a shaggy treetop swayed back and forth.

All the heat he’d earned plowing through the gravemaze departed Kang-ho, as if the lightning bolt had sucked it from his flesh, leaving him cold and shivering in the scant light of the bosun’s lantern. Just some overgrown legacy of an ornamental garden, he told himself, but something about that leafy silhouette dancing above the ruins of Myo’tab Castle froze the bile in his gut.

He never should have come here. It was time to go, to scurry out of the bobbing light like the covetous crab he was and not stop scuttling down the rocks until he gained the boat... but it was awfully curious, wasn’t it, the way that tree had cooled his blood?

Curiosity. Eldamar always said it was the first devil every thief must master if they had any hope of living a prosperous life. The same devil that had brought Kang-ho to this cursed isle, where no other Immaculate would ever dream of trespassing. The same devil that goaded him to kick aside a few more bones as he advanced, not even glancing over his shoulder to see if the wagons were lagging enough for him to make a run for the shadows.

“Now there’s a sight to warm the blood on a cold night,” said the Creep, and looking up from his work Kang-ho saw they had nearly reached the first wall, its open gate creaking though he no longer felt the wind. “Our herald has cleared another potential trap for you,

Master Daebak. I wonder if we'll find any use for you at all."

"And I wonder why you bothered hiring me in the first place, if you had a scout who knew the way to Ito Cay and through Myo'tab's many snares?" said Kang-ho, not liking the aftertaste the question left on his lips. Now he glanced over his shoulder, but it was too late, the captain and the bosun right behind him and the wagons not far behind. No chance to run now, the wet path they'd cleared through the ruined labyrinth gleaming with lantern light, the gaping mouth of Myo'tab Castle dark and hungry before him.

"That's the beauty of faith, my heretical little friend, it provides answers to all life's more troubling questions," said the Creep, her mace dripping rain onto a dead pelican at their feet. Hard as the storm had driven them up the slope, it had stopped at some point in their labors, not a puff of wind blowing through the ruined labyrinth as the captain and Missus Sweetbreads joined them. This time there was no *against the odds and against the gods*, the captain's wizened face a mask of pure rapture as he strode past them, through the open gate.

"If you'll excuse me, I fear that last slug of kaldi is demanding an audience," said Kang-ho, rubbing his belly as he casually turned to stroll away from the keep. Curiosity was fine and good, but he'd decided it wasn't as fine and good as breathing.

"I'm sure we can find you a lordly chamber pot within," said the Creep, offering a little bow and motioning the way forward with her mace.

"Bad luck to hold it," Kang-ho said brightly, but when the Creep straightened up and took a step toward him Kang-ho held up his palms in surrender. "But then I'm not the superstitious sort. As you say, I'm sure we'll find a pot inside."

And they did. The ornate jar lay cracked to pieces at the end of the corridor opening onto Myo'tab's grand

courtyard, beside a crumpled corpse. But as Kang-ho, the Creep, and the bosun followed the captain through the dark portal in the inner wall and stepped into the overgrown square, something far more impressive than a broken body or a broken pot commanded their attention.

No locks had slowed their march into the heart of Myo'tab. Every gate hung wide, and nary a trap had threatened their path through the abandoned castle... but gazing up at the enormous black tree whose trunk filled half the weed-choked courtyard, Kang-ho didn't feel like a clever thief who'd safely snuck into a ruined keep. He felt like a stupid lobster that had just waltzed into a pot.

Thin branches thick with leaves the shape and size of human hands eclipsed the open sky, rendering the courtyard as dark as the wide passageways through the castle walls. Unlike the rest of the ruins, the inner walls of this windowless courtyard bore no resemblance to typical Immaculate architecture—the blank, black walls bowed out as they rose, as if the interlopers stood in the bottom of an inverted bell.

The tree and its skirt of weeds were the only the vegetation on Ito Cay, and given the shadows they cast over the courtyard, he would've preferred the isle remain utterly barren.

“Behold...” Kang-ho could barely make out the captain's reverential whisper over the rasping of the leaves in the wind, those countless shadow hands rubbing together overhead. The old man fell to his knees in the shards of crockery beside the corpse, lifting his hands toward the tree as if his comrades might have somehow missed it. “Behold. The miracle.”

Kang-ho beheld, and as far as miracles went it left a lot to be desired. So it was a great big spooky tree erupting out of a field of weeds, like Okja or Hwabun or one of the other posh isles that jutted up hundreds of feet to tower over the open sea. So what? Dozens of

massive knotholes that bore an uncanny resemblance to screaming faces? Big deal. The only miracle here was that the captain had become distracted by the corpse beside him, and both the Creep and the bosun were still staring up at the tree—nobody was paying Kang-ho the slightest mind. This was his chance to slink back through the castle, before the wagons clogged the passageways.

But as Kang-ho turned to make his getaway, something else hooked his eye. It wasn't the captain, who still knelt over the body stroking something it clutched in its pale hands as though it were a kitten. It wasn't the bosun nor the Creep, who both stood still as guardian devils carved into the lintel of a crypt, their faces upturned at the mighty tree. It was the body itself.

Kang-ho waded through the thick weeds, leaves rasping against his legs as he approached the captain and the corpse, and he found himself missing the cool rain as his skin burned hot and his heart pounded fast as a seawolf hunting razor squid. Those hobnail boots splayed amidst the swaying vegetation, that heavy oilcloth cape, the silver-trimmed tricorn hat fallen upside down and pooled with rainwater beside the back of the ponytailed head... it couldn't be.

It couldn't.

But then Kang-ho stepped closer, and he saw that it was. Nothing less satisfying than curiosity. Just like Eldamar always said.

"Our herald," said Missus Sweetbreads, at last turning away from the tree to shine her lantern upon the corpse.

"Your herald," gulped Kang-ho, staring down at his partner's wracked face, Eldamar's features shadowed by the thick streams of blood that had coursed from her ears.

"Our herald," breathed the captain, peeling the dead woman's fingers off her prize and cradling it to his chest like a babe. He rose and turned to them, and in

the solemn silence of the crypt-castle of Myo'tab, Kang-ho laughed. Couldn't help himself. For what the captain crushed to his sodden breast looked for all the world like an enormous daikon, a thick-leafed stalk hanging from the end.

Then the bosun's lantern shone fully on the enormous root in the captain's arms, and Kang-ho's surprised laughter died in his throat. It wasn't a radish. It was a babe, its limp arms and legs clumped with blood-dark earth, its mouth frozen in a mirror scream of Eldamar's. And from the crown of its skull grew the wavering frond of dark leaves, leaves identical to the weeds cropping up all around them... leaves like little grasping hands.

The black earth tilted beneath Kang-ho's boots, as though he were back on the barge and they'd just been rocked by a massive wave. None of the others seemed to feel it, but Kang-ho crouched down to keep himself from tumbling over... which just brought him into closer contact with the weeds... the weeds that bent back and forth all around him as if a stern breeze blew through the courtyard though the air was as still as a dead thief's heart.

Kang-ho lurched to his full height, slapped away the leaves caressing his breeches as he staggered away, away, anywhere but here, into the passageway, where he fell against the cold, slimy wall, closing his eyes and trying to catch his breath. Eldamar was dead, but she'd beaten them here, just as planned, the boat must be anchored in the north bay, just as planned, Kang-ho still had a chance, if he could just—

"Be so kind as to slip your hands into these manacles," the Creep hissed in his ear. "Pray forgive our caution, but the last Immaculate we trusted with our mysteries evidently sought to betray our confidence to her advantage."

Kang-ho opened his eyes. Behind the Creep stood the bosun, her lips frowning along with the tattoo that

masked her face but her naked cutlass grinning in the lantern light. He numbly allowed the Creep to slide the iron bracelets around his wrists. The only jewelry in all the Star he didn't covet, yet the matching pair he kept scoring.

"A misunderstanding, I'm sure," said Kang-ho, his nimble tongue continuing the ruse even if his numb brain had already given up the game.

"I'm sure," agreed the Creep. "In exchange for providing us with a guide to Ito Cay, we told her of the value of the mandrake root native to this isle. We may have even let slip that the ancient mistress of the castle intended to replant one in a pot to deliver to the Empress, a peace offering beyond price. A pity she was not patient enough to await our arrival before claiming her prize, as we instructed, or she need not have become our herald."

"Mandrake?" said Kang-ho as they led him back into the courtyard where the weeds swayed though there was no wind... just as the tree swayed overhead, though the storm had passed. That was what had chilled him back in the labyrinth, though he'd been too distracted to even realize the source of his animal fear—the tree danced on, even without a wind to lead it.

"As particular a plant as the basilisk rose," said the captain, "and what it lacks in bloom it makes up for in thorn." He still cradled the vegetal fetus to his breast. "They only grow in gravedirt, and when they're pulled up they loose a shriek of such concentrated sorrow it proves fatal to any beast or bird within hearing."

"Beast or bird," repeated Kang-ho, remembering the horde of rotting seals in the bay and all the dead gulls they'd trod on the road inland. "But we're leagues from the shore, leagues, how could it... how could it possibly..."

"We stand in an amphitheater grand enough to bring our message to the very gods," proclaimed the

captain. “Look around you, Immaculate! The lies of Othean may have clogged your ears, but even if you can’t hear the gospel, you still have eyes to witness the truth, do you not?”

The slanted walls of the courtyard. Not leaning from age, he saw now, but by design, a great stone horn tilted to the heavens... a horn built of stacked gravestones. Kang-ho had been so distracted by the imposing tree and everything else wrong about this place that he hadn’t noticed before, but chasing the bosun’s lantern beam as it arced around the walls he saw the faded names of the dead in the weathered stones, the occasional flourish of script or bas-relief set in the antique markers.

Bones to build the labyrinth. Earth to feed the mandrake field. And gravestones carefully formed to amplify their screams so loudly they would echo out even to the farthest bay of this cursed island. Say one thing for the mad mistress of Myo’tab, she hadn’t let her fertile cemetery lie fallow.

“She could have conquered the Star,” said the Creep, as if she really could hear Kang-ho’s thoughts. “A single deaf soldier uprooting a potted mandrake in the battlefield would do more damage than any war machine. And had the Empress brought her armies here? Well. History would be very different.”

“Explains why she didn’t,” said Kang-ho, the revelation a welcome distraction from his current predicament. “The whole song about her not deigning to recognize the challenge of Myo’tab lest she legitimize the rebellion never really washed with me—she must’ve been tipped off and kept her fleet at a safe distance, sinking any ships that tried to leave the isle instead of risking a siege. Crafty.”

“Devils are crafty,” said the captain, “but that does not mean we should venerate them.” He gently returned the mandrake root to the shallow hole that Eldamar had wrenched it from. “By refusing to meet

Myo'tab in honest battle she sowed the seed of the Star's end. The seed that seals the fate of all her descendants, just and unjust alike. The seed that became a tree, the tree that now bears fruit."

"The tree..." Kang-ho stared in wonder at the enormous tree that overshadowed the courtyard. The greedy empress of mandrakes, who had asserted her dominance over Myo'tab, hoarding the nutrients of the corpse-rich soil for herself so only she could prosper while her little subjects remained stunted and feeble... Like the one Eldamar had sought to steal. So small, and yet with a scream powerful enough to kill every animal on the isle, even the birds winging through the heavens above.

Kang-ho understood. Even before the first wagon lurched out of the wide passageway and delivered its hidden treasure to the captain. When the masked driver jumped into the bed and threw off the tarp to reveal the heaped coils of spidersilk rope it only confirmed the plot... but there were only a few dozen of the loonies, and surely a tree of such prodigious stature would rebuke the pull of even a hundred stout mortals.

As more wagons clattered through the castle entrance and the cultists began winding their ropes around the trunk, the Creep lifted the final veil.

"Sorcerers of old used the mandrake in their rituals," the Creep said as they watched the work. "But harvesting the root presented a challenge, so they blocked their ears with enchanted wax. And lest that not be enough protection, they harnessed a dog or pig to the root, coaxing it from a safe distance. Their familiar would pay the price when the root screamed, and they would reap the bounty."

"The captain's whale," said Kang-ho as masked acolytes atop the northern rim of the gravestone wall lowered a towrope to bring up the spidersilk cords now tethered to the tree. That's why they'd needed

wagonsful of the strongest rope on the Star—it had to stretch from the center of Myo'tab Castle clear down the cliffs to the wild waters of the northern bay. They were harnessing it to the seabeast that had towed their scow all the way from the bordershores.

Kang-ho laughed at the absurdity of it all, that his humble enterprise had made him party to such Star-shaking ambitions. He was still laughing when the captain strode back to them through the wavering mandrakes.

“Turn the Immaculate loose,” he told the Creep, his voice hoarse with emotion and his cheeks shining with tears in the lantern light.

“We can't trust him, captain,” the Creep said. “Better not to take any chances, keep him tethered like the pig he is until—”

“After all we've accomplished, do mortal fears still rule your heart?” the captain asked incredulously. “Her birth-cry shall echo out from this holy shrine, reverberating through all the Arms of the Star to strike down every last sinner, slaying even the cruel gods who eavesdrop from above and below, thinking themselves safe from our petty miseries. In what little time remains this lowly Immaculate will either join the ranks of the saved or perish with the damned, but it will be of his own free will. He's earned the choice. Turn him loose, I say.”

“Aye, captain,” the Creep said, and unlocked Kang-ho's manacles.

Before the cold iron hit the weed-wreathed ground he was away, a desperate tuna slipping free of the net. Praise the idiotic hubris of true believers! Kang-ho was still laughing at his good fortune and rubbing the feeling back into his sore wrists when he made the wreckage of the bone labyrinth and saw the cold stars burning overhead. The storm had moved on, but its legacy played hell with his boots, the wet mud tripping him up as he ran for Eldamar's boat. Racing pell-mell across

the wagon ruts, he slipped and went down hard in a berm of old bones and dead birds.

“What are you doing?” he asked himself as he lay panting in the mud, meeting the vacant gaze of a skull. “What are you doing? What are you doing?”

Running away, of course, the only sensible thing—running away, but since there was no way of telling how long it would take for them to hitch their spidersilk to the whale, he scooped up a handful of wet earth and pressed it into his ear. Couldn’t be too cautious, not with a mandrake as tall as the towers of Othean’s Autumn Palace about to emerge screaming into the world!

But what if it wasn’t enough? Kang-ho paused, ears popping from the mud he’d pressed into them. What if it took them all night to uproot the tree, what if he made the boat and was isles away before the scream echoed up out of Myo’tab Castle, but despite the distance and the muck in his ears a faint whisper still penetrated his brain? He’d die in agony, just as Eldamar had.

Impossible. Such a thing simply wasn’t possible.

Yet he’d seen the dead birds on the far shore, the dead seals on that remote bay, and that had just been one little root—how far would the tree’s scream reach?

Just the crazy belief of crazy cultists. You can’t believe their shit or you’ll go crazy, too. But he’d never believed the Trvian sutras, yet at that orgy with his Usban chum, he’d tasted for himself that little miracles could come true, so why not big ones? Why not great, big terrible ones that could snuff out every soul in the Star before the sun next rose? No matter how far he sailed, no matter how much crap he stuffed in his ears, was his staunch belief in running away from certain death more powerful than whatever these loons were about to unleash?

“What are you doing?” he asked himself as he scrambled out of the mud and began running back to the castle. “What are you doing?!”

He didn't know. It wasn't as if one man who was passing good with a knife could take on dozens of well-armed cultists. But he did know this: spidersilk might be the strongest fiber known to mortals, but that shit burned like a beedi dipped in saam oil. He was still laughing at his half-baked plot when he skidded to a halt at the mouth of the courtyard.

The mandrake field rippled like the Golden Cauldron in a tempest, all the gloom of this ancient tomb banished by the dozens of lanterns the cultists had lit. Kang-ho just needed one to set the spidersilk ropes alight, but between him and the tree were the captain and all his crew. The cultists knelt in the dancing mandrakes, masks pressed to the earth, the captain standing in front of them with his back to Kang-ho. This was his chance. Slice the old man's throat, grab a lantern, and set the spidersilk aflame before they realized the seawolf was amidst the pod. Kang-ho drew his curved dagger, ready to make his play, but then he paused—there was Missus Sweetbreads, in the front row of the devout, but where was the Creep?

Curiosity beget hesitation.

And hesitation beget the oh-so-familiar and oh-so-unwelcome sensation of cold, sharp metal against his warm, soft throat.

"This is no place for a non-believer," the Creep breathed in his ear.

"Maybe I'm ready to convert," gulped Kang-ho.

"I hope not," said the Creep, so close he could smell the wet wicker of her mask. "Your last words will echo forever, so think carefully before you speak... and speak low. Will you help me stop this?"

Wait, what?

A trap? Obviously a trap! And yet another echo reverberated through the mud he'd packed in his ears, mud that obviously wasn't up to the task of muting a Creep's whisper or a chiding memory.

“Faith isn’t about believing the impossible to be real,” that handsome Trvian had told Kang-ho in their musky room as they lay spent from another fine evening, plumbing the mysteries of life, as lovers are wont to do. “Faith is a matter of confronting the horrors of the world, choosing to hope that things might be better than they seem, and acting accordingly.”

Nonsense, of course. But staring out at a courtyard filled with cultists eager to end the world and feeling a knife against his neck, Kang-ho chose to believe he might actually make a difference for the first time in his miserable life.

“*I’m* stopping this, with or without your help,” said Kang-ho. He stabbed his curved knife back at the Creep’s gut, and his free hand flew to his neck—her last act would surely be to slit his throat, but he just needed to stanch the blood long enough to stagger to a lantern and hurl it into the ropes girding the mandrake tree.

But his blade cut nothing but air, and his free hand almost drove the Creep’s blade right into his own throat.

“Good,” said the Creep, shoving Kang-ho against the dark wall of the passage so fast and forcefully she might not have even noticed his questing knife. “Stay here in the shadows and follow my lead. We deal with the captain, we deal with the crew, and we deal with the tree—that order.”

And then the Creep was gone, striding through the brightly lit mandrake weeds as Kang-ho skulked in the passageway, picking wet dirt out of his ears and wondering just what in the Ten True Gods of Trve was happening here.

“We will sacrifice the Star along with its petty gods, and our offering will bring back all that was lost in the Age of Wonders!” the captain cried to his assembly, and as the Creep stepped beside him he too fell to his knees. “We alone shall inherit the Star, and our first

reward will be the return of what we gladly offer on this sacred night. Open your hearts as you open your ears, my children, and your glory shall be eternal!”

The Creep sheathed her knife, and from her belt she drew a platinum nail and a black hammer. Standing behind the kneeling captain, she placed the point of the nail in his left ear. As Kang-ho watched, she gave it a single firm tap.

“Ahhhh!” The captain cried, and numerous heads of his congregation rose as he clapped a hand to his ear, red streaming between his fingers. Much louder than before, he cried, “Aaaaah-alfway to salvation! Bow your heads, my children, bow your false-faces so you may raise true ones! Do not look, do not listen, and ye shall be saved—that is my promise! We shall not witness the unmaking of the Star, but we shall behold the glory that comes after! We shall not listen to the death rattle of the old world, but we shall hear the cradlesong of our new paradise!”

Missus Sweetbreads and the others lowered their masks again, and the Creep placed the nail in the captain’s right ear.

“Do it!” he cried, clasping his hands to his breast and letting the blood flow freely from his deafened ear. “Save me from this world! Save me! Save me!”

The Creep did as she was asked. But this time she raised her arm high, and instead of a careful tap she struck the platinum nail with her full might.

The captain didn’t cry out. He didn’t make a sound. He just toppled limply to the side, as Eldamar must have fallen when she uprooted the mandrake that she’d hoped would make her fortune.

Kang-ho was so surprised it took him a moment to realize the Creep was waving him over with her hammer. But once he saw her play he didn’t waste any time, wading into the wavering mandrakes and taking the hammer and nail she offered him.

Missus Sweetbreads was his first offering to his newfound faith in a better tomorrow, the nail gliding in so deep he had a devil of a time clawing it free from her leaking skull. The Creep took a less ceremonial approach, caving in the masked head of a kneeling cultist with her mace.

They were most of the way through the congregation before one of their victims bucked the captain's order to remain at prayer and looked up, perhaps second-guessing their devotion at this critical juncture, and while their cry raised the alarm it was too late—Kang-ho and the Creep murdered them all with hammer and mace before a single saber cleared leather.

"Good work," the Creep said, her mace dripping red on the swaying mandrake stalks. "Now we just need to—"

"Hrrrrf!" Kang-ho threw up on the shuddering frame of the woman he'd just hammered to death at the foot of the tree. He'd killed before, but never like this. They were evil, he told himself, they were trying to kill everybody in the world, but his crawl and his conscience evidently followed different compasses. His fist clenched the hammer as another hot gout freed itself from his gorge, and he hurled the bloody weapon away into the weeds. The ground bucked beneath his feet again, and Kang-ho fell to his knees

"Help!" The Creep cried. "Devils damn you, help!"

The earth surged upward, and through tear-blurred eyes Kang-ho realized it wasn't his swimming head that made the courtyard heave beneath him—it was the earth itself rising up like a wave.

"Fuck!" The Creep shouted, her dagger flying from her hand when she tried to hack through the taut spidersilk that stretched from the trunk over the northern wall of the castle. "Help!"

"Fire!" Kang-ho managed through sick-slick lips, but they were too late—the thick ropes scraped over the

top of the gravestone wall, damp earth flying as the mandrake tree began to rise from the courtyard. As the top of the rootball cleared the fracturing courtyard Kang-ho saw two massive pits in its center begin to flutter, dislodging more black dirt. Eyelids, impossibly broad eyelids blinking in the lantern light...

The lantern light. Kang-ho staggered to the nearest storm lantern and hurtled it against the spidersilk-tangled trunk. The glass shattered, and its light died with his hope...

But then returned in a gout of flame as a wind whipped through the courtyard, the ghost of the storm haunting them just long enough to feed the meager flame. The ropes were alight, burning cords lashing the mandrake tree as out in the northern bay the captain's whale pulled it from its moorings. The tree groaned as it pitched to the side, crashing against the gravestone wall, the ropes pulling it up, up, fully revealing the massive eyes of the mandrake, the twin caverns of its skeletal nostrils, and—

The burning spidersilk snapped, the broken ropes whipping over the top of the wall and vanishing into the night.

Kang-ho and the Creep froze, staring at the mandrake tree. It stared back, its massive yellow eyes blinking at them, broken earth churning at its base as it worked its dirt-stopped lips just beneath the surface.

"Fuck!" the Creep cried, tearing off her wicker mask and hurling it against the gravestone wall. As the hood of her cape fell back Kang-ho saw her short-cropped hair was dyed an even brighter blue than her eyes. "Fuck! Yeah!"

Pointing a bloodstained finger at the blinking tree, she shouted, "Fuck! You!"

"What?" That was about all Kang-ho could manage, flopping back on his ass. "What?"

"We just saved the Star, dumbshit, that's what!" cried the Creep, pulling out her templewarden and

lighting it on the frayed, burning spidersilk that still encircled the trunk of the mandrake tree. She greedily puffed on the pipe and let out a huge purple plume. The way she grinned reminded Kang-ho more of a kid who'd got his money's worth at a brothel than a traitorous cultist who'd just executed all of her friends.

"But... but you... you're the captain's right hand," Kang-ho managed.

"Uh-uh," said the Creep, shaking her head as she puffed her pipe. "Don't get it twisted. I only got in good with that moonfruit because I wanted to learn how to get a proper cult going. I wasn't about to let him murder the Star—no way it's getting off that easy—but when it came to getting ordinary folks to do whatever crazy shit he wanted, the captain was the best so I apprenticed myself. Same as pipe-making—I wanted to get good at carving pipes, so I found the best and made him teach me. And lo and fucking behold, I'm a wizard at that, too—see?"

She strode over to where Kang-ho sat in the swaying mandrakes and passed him her templewarden. He took a grateful pull on the briar, then held it up in the lantern light. It was a pretty nice pipe. She was clearly waiting for acknowledgment. "You made this?"

"Fucking right I did," she said, puffing out her chest. Gods below and gulls above, now that he had a good look at her this crazy fucker couldn't be more than twenty years old. She marched over to the captain's corpse as Kang-ho took a pull on the pipe, wincing from the sweetness of the red vergin tubāq—how long had it been since he could afford to smoke pure pipeweed that wasn't cut with kelp?

"So you planned this double-cross..." Kang-ho thought aloud. "But how'd you plan on getting off the isle afterward? Can you control the whale, too?"

"Fuck no," said the Creep, rifling through the captain's pockets and retrieving his bulbous pipe. A

ridge of smooth briar curved along its blasted flank like a lopsided smile. “Why’d you think I tried so hard to keep you from running off on us? Soon as I met you I knew you were a crafty one—too crafty to take us out to the middle of fucking nowhere without a back-up boat. I mean, you don’t look like a complete turnip.”

“Thanks?” said Kang-ho, offering her the templewarden as she came back over to where he sat.

“Keep it,” she said, ignoring her old pipe and inspecting the one she’d liberated from the captain. “Your first payment as my first hero.”

“Thanks?” He took another pull, trying very hard to focus on his new briar and not the scary fucking tree batting its eyes at him. “But, uh, what do you mean, first payment? First hero?”

“I mean now that I’ve got a handle on getting folks to do what I tell ’em, I’m ready to take on the Crimson fucking Empire,” she said, pocketing the captain’s pipe and extending a hand to help Kang-ho up. “But I’ll need the aid of some mad bastards to raise an army against King Kaldrut. You risked your neck to come back here and help save the Isles even after we cut you loose, so I reckon you’re just brave enough to be my first recruit.”

“Brave?” said Kang-ho, staring at her outstretched hand. “You had it right before, I’m foolish, not brave.”

“Even better!” She beamed. “We’ll make a great team. I’m Zosia, by the way, guessing Master Daebak isn’t your real name.”

He hesitated. But only for a moment. Faith? Maybe. Folly? Definitely. But Kang-ho’s Trvian boytoy was right—sometimes investing in hope paid a sizable dividend.

Besides, he could always betray her too-trusting ass tomorrow, and probably for a sizable profit. Yes, that was exactly what he’d do. The prospect of selling this loon out at the first opportunity gave him his own lopsided grin.

“Kang-ho,” he said, taking her warm, bloody hand.

“Crafty Kang-ho,” said Zosia, hauling him to his unsteady feet in the shadow of the half-birthered mandrake tree. “My first hero. Against the odds and against the gods, we’ll bring the Crimson Empire to its knees.”

And against the odds and against the gods, they did.

Alex Marshall is a pseudonym for Jesse Bullington, acclaimed author of several novels in different genres including *The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart* and *The Enterprise of Death*. He lives in the Pacific Northwest.

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