



ISSUE 21

GDM

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From the Editor

ADRIAN COLLINS

Well, the last three months since you read an issue of *Grimdark Magazine* sure as hell escalated! I hope you and yours are all safe and healthy (or, at the very least, recovering well).

I know there are plenty of you hurting as the global economy tanks and shifts are cut, people are laid off, and businesses close their doors. So, in case you don't follow us on our social channels, I will make the same offer to you as I made to everyone. If you're stuck in isolation or quarantine, if you've lost your job (or your significant other has) due to the virus, and you're tightening the purse strings to keep a roof over your head and food in your bellies, please go to the GdM catalogue and pick three issues of GdM and either *Evil is a Matter of Perspective* or *Knee-Deep in Grit* and send me an email or a message. I will email you those books in mobi format.

These times are hard, maybe our stories will help you get through, just a little.

Adrian Collins
Founder

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The Blade's Edge

PETER MCLEAN

Times were hard in Ellinburg that summer, and for none more so than Harry the Rat. He inched his way down the alley in almost total darkness, muffled head to foot in a hooded cloak despite the mildness of the night. His pair of daggers were strapped to his left hip, and from the right side of his belt hung a stout wooden club. Behind him Red Mik was dressed the same, with his own club and a coil of good rope hidden under his cloak. Harry the Rat had run with the Ellinburg street gangs since he'd had barely nine years to him. Bad choices, maybe. He could have had an apprenticeship like the other boys from his streets, he supposed, learned a trade, but that had always looked like a lot of work. A pickpocket's boy earned more coin in a week than a carpenter's 'prentice did in a month and no mistake. He'd worked his way up the ladder of the street and been a sworn Blue Blood before the war, before he'd been conscripted and sent to Abington with every other man who could hold a spear and stand upright at the same time. That was done, though. He was a member of the Northern Sons now whether he liked it or not.

Truth be told he fucking hated it.

"Kidnap the whore and hold her at your place until I say different," the boss had told him, like it was as easy as that.

Harry shuddered just thinking about the boss. Bloodhands, they called him, on account of how he liked to flay people alive. Like he'd flayed Cocky Bill, boss of the Blue Bloods, and hung his wet, red corpse

from the west gate for all to see. That had been the end of the Blue Bloods, and the City Guard were so deep in the boss' pocket they had said nothing of it. Those of the Blue Bloods as were left had been forced to join the Northern Sons: Harry the Rat and Red Mik and half a dozen others, their wives and children held hostage to ensure their loyalty. That was how Bloodhands ran his gang.

Kidnap the whore. How in the name of Our Lady was he supposed to do that, and with only him and Mik to do it?

The boss' spies had found out that the devil Tomas Piety was gone from Ellinburg on business, and had taken his pet witch with him. With Piety and the demon child both gone, the Pious Men were at a disadvantage. They were the scum of the earth, every Blue Blood knew that. The Pious Men were extortionists and drug dealers from the east of the city, where decent folk didn't go, and the devil Tomas Piety and his mad brother ruled the Stink and the Wheels like petty Emperors. With him gone though, that left his second in charge, and it was well known that Piety's second was a woman.

Harry shook his head at the thought of it. What sort of man would name a *woman* his second? What sort woman could control a gang in a place like Ellinburg? It seemed that he and Bloodhands were of one mind about that, if little enough else, and the boss had decided to strike while the chance presented itself.

"Shhh," Harry said, as Red Mik's foot overturned a loose cobble in the darkness.

Mik muttered something under his breath but otherwise held his peace. The end of the alley was in sight, the dim light of the single lantern that burned in the courtyard on Chandler's Narrow outlining the entrance with a faint glow.

Chandler's Narrow, now there was a place. This was Pious Men territory and they had to be fucking

careful, but the boarding house in the courtyard was the best stew in Ellinburg and everyone knew it. The Sons ran street scrubs of their own, of course they did, but in the house on Chandler's Narrow all the girls wore the bawd's knot. That meant they were licensed, and licensed whores didn't grow on trees. The knot had to be earned and paid for, after all, with all the city ordinances and bureaucracy that entailed. The place was run by a fellow called Will the Wencher, and he knew what he was about. His girls were clean and they dressed fine, and none of them had the pox. You couldn't say that about any of the Sons' scrubs, Harry had to admit.

The thing was, Piety's second might be a woman but in a way she might as well not have been. She dressed like a man, cut her hair like a man, maybe even thought she was a man. None of that mattered, though. What mattered was that she lay with women like a man did, and her special woman was a whore called Rosie who worked out of the house on Chandler's Narrow. She was daft for her, so the spies reported, and that had given the boss an idea. With her woman as hostage, he reckoned, he could get this second of Piety's, this woman who called herself Bloody Anne, to do just about anything.

Harry the Rat had to admit that the boss was probably right about that.

As they neared the end of the alley Red Mik put a hand on Harry's shoulder to stay him.

"What?" Harry whispered.

"Are we absolutely fucking sure the Bloody Sergeant ain't going to be there?" he asked. "I know how little you think of women, Harry the Rat, but I've fucking seen her fight and I don't never want to see it again."

Harry spat on the cobbles by Mik's boot. Yellow Mik, he ought to be called for what a coward he was

sometimes. Scared of a fucking woman, it was ridiculous. Some gangster he was.

“She ain’t there, she’s in the Tanner’s Arms like she’s supposed to be, in the Stink where she belongs,” he said. “Our lad in the Pious Men made sure of that. And her name’s Bloody Anne. She’s no sergeant anymore.”

“Maybe not,” Mik said, “but she was. I heard tales of her, back in the war, how she ate men’s balls with her breakfast beer and didn’t think nothing of it.”

“Shut up with that,” Harry snapped. “She’s only a woman, and a fucking ugly one at that.”

“So long as you’re sure,” Mik said, but he didn’t look happy about it.

“There’s only going to be Will the Wencher and a couple of beardless boys on duty tonight,” Harry assured him, “and Will ain’t much of a fighter from what I hear. Whoremongers usually ain’t when they’re facing proper men and not just slapping tarts around. It’ll be a piece of piss, and you can mark me on that, Red Mik.”

To take her, maybe, but to keep her? No, probably not. To keep her hidden in a city full of eyes and ears and no mistake but the boss had his little son as hostage so what the fuck could he do? Nothing but what he was told. When it came right down to the blade’s edge his son’s life was all that mattered. He didn’t give a fuck about some whore he’d never even met. The result of a lifetime of bad choices, perhaps, but that was the way life was lived in the Northern Sons.

“Aye, let’s get it done then,” Mik said at last.

The two men stepped out into the courtyard beside the closed chandler’s shop that gave the narrow its name, and crossed to the door of the boarding house. Harry pushed the door open and they stepped into a clean-swept hall where a pale, skinny lad in a white linen shirt and red woollen doublet was lounging behind the counter with a mug of beer in his hand.

“Help you fellows?” he asked. “Looking for a room? Looking for a girl?”

Harry and Mik ranked low in the Sons, they both knew that. They weren’t known faces like Cocky Bill had been, which was why the boss had chosen them for this job. The lad had no idea who they were.

Harry the Rat nodded and gave the boy a sly wink.

“Looking for a girl,” he said.

“Loretta’s working tonight,” the lad said. “Nice blonde lass. Nineteen years to her and tits like she’s got five babes to feed. Or there’s Punam, if you fancy a bit of Alarian.”

“I want Rosie,” Harry said, naming Bloody Anne’s woman. “Heard she’s the best you’ve got.”

“Aye well, might be she is, I wouldn’t know,” the lad said. “Rosie only sees one client these days. She’s on what you might call a retainer, and not open to the public no more.”

“I can pay,” Harry assured him, hefting the bag of coin the boss had given him.

“Nah,” the lad said. “Rosie only sees Bloody Anne.”

“I can pay *silver*,” Harry said, and opened his cloak to show the boy his daggers and his club. “Or I can pay in steel.”

The boy sucked his teeth for a moment. Just when Harry was sure he was going to say yes, he reached under the counter, grabbed a handbell, and rang it fit to raise the gods.

“You little cunt!” Red Mik snarled.

He swung his club into the side of the lad’s head, dropping him and sending the bell flying from his hand in a cacophony of brass.

Boots thundered down the stairs and an older man came into view, a scarred veteran with straggly hair falling over his face and a soldier’s mace in his hand. Another lad scurried behind him clutching a drawn dagger and looking nervous.

“Oi!” the older man bellowed, and he swung for Mik even as his boots hit the floor below the bottom step. This was Will the Wencher, Harry was sure of that.

Red Mik ducked and cracked his club against the man’s knee, staggering him. Harry the Rat pulled his own club and smashed it across the back of Will the Wencher’s head, dropping him like a sack of turnips. The lad with the blade faltered, and Harry glared at him.

“The men are talking, boy,” he said. “We’re only here for Rosie. Now fuck off, or grow some balls fast.”

The lad didn’t look like he had even started shaving yet. Harry didn’t want to kill him if he could possibly avoid it, a lifetime of bad choices notwithstanding. The boy looked from him to Red Mik and back, and swallowed. A moment later he was out the door and running.

That was when it all went to shit.

Something thumped behind him, loud in the confined space. Red Mik flew off his feet backwards across the room as though hit by an invisible cannonball. It was only when he crashed to the boards in a pool of blood that Harry saw the crossbow bolt sticking out of his throat. He turned to see a redheaded whore standing in the doorway behind the counter frantically cranking a ratchet to reload her weapon, three other girls clustered behind her with red-painted mouths open in panic. The redhead wore the bawd’s knot proudly displayed on her shoulder in yellow cord, but that had been a shot worthy of a professional killer. He knew who this must be.

Harry did the only thing he could think of. He charged her. Lifetime of bad decisions, perhaps.

He crashed into the woman, realising that this was this Rosie, and slammed her into the wall violently enough that the crossbow fell from her hands. She kned him in the balls so hard he puked right in her face.

Harry had been a soldier, though, and he had been through the horrors of Messia and of Abington and had lived to tell the tale of it. He backhanded her into submission without hesitation or remorse, the blow splattering the yellow bile of his puke from her jaw. The other girls screamed. Harry took out his club and brandished it, and they fled away into the house, disappearing up the back stairs and into bedrooms. He hit Rosie again, dazing her. When she was stunned on the ground he fetched the rope from Red Mik's corpse and set about tying her up. Carrying her back to his place over his shoulder alone was going to be a bugger of a job, but on the whole he reckoned the night had gone well.

Red Mik weren't any great loss, after all.

* * *

"I'm sorry," the terrified lad said for the sixth time. "I couldn't fight them both, not on me own, and with Will down I reckoned it was better that you knew than not. Please don't kill me, Bloody Anne. I've only got fourteen years to me, and I'm no soldier."

He was standing before her in the back room of the Tanner's Arms looking pure ready to soil his britches, and so he might. Bloody Anne was in a cold fury, and few men saw *that* and lived to tell of it. She drew a sharp breath, the long, puckered scar on her cheek twisting as she fought the urge to stab him.

What would Tomas do? she asked herself. *Better to know a thing has happened than not, Tomas would say. There's no shame in not doing the impossible, that's what Tomas would tell him, and he'd make the boy feel good for the part he had played and for coming to tell us so we know the lay of things. He'd have the boy's loyalty forever more after that.*

"I won't kill you," she said instead, in a gravely voice roughened by too many years of blasting powder and shouting orders. "Who the fuck were they?"

Anne, after all, was not Tomas Piety. Not by then she wasn't, anyway.

"Northern Sons, I reckon," Mika said from his seat at the table. "Or rather Blue Bloods pressed into the Northern Sons, more like. From what the lad said, I reckon he's described Harry the Rat. I don't know the other one, but it stands to reason that they run together."

"They've got my Rosie," Anne said. Her tone was flat and murderous, and in that, at least, perhaps her and the devil Tomas Piety had something in common. "I want her back."

"Aye boss, course you do," Mika said. "I ain't Fat Luka but I've got my little eyes and ears too, and I reckon I know where most of them Northern Sons of bitches live, over in the west of the city. I know where Harry the Rat lays his head of a night, anyway. Might be Rosie's with him and might be not, but even if not he'll know where she is. If he'll talk, of course."

Bloody Anne fixed Mika with a flinty stare. "He'll talk," she promised him. "They always do, in the end. Get me Jochan."

Mika swallowed. "You sure about that, boss?"

"I'm sure," Anne said, and she turned away to make that an end to it.

Jochan was Tomas Piety's brother, and for the last three months he had been confined to their aunt's coal cellar. Back in the winter Jochan had lost his mind to the battleshock that Abington had left him with. In a streetfight with the Alarian Kings he had torn out a man's throat with his teeth and eaten it. After that, even Tomas had judged him too mad to be allowed to walk free. A man could lose his soul in the eyes of Our Lady for an act like that. He was a rabid dog of war, a barely controllable berserker. Men feared him, and rightly so.

He was exactly what Anne needed now.

* * *

“Shut up, bitch,” Harry the Rat growled as he tied Rosie to a chair in his damp, squalid little house close to the western wall of the city.

Rosie hadn't come quietly and that was speaking lightly of it. He'd had to hit her again, maybe more than once, and still she had raged into the gag he had stuffed into her mouth and tied with a length of rough hemp cord. Now he had her back at his place and ungagged, he found she reminded him strangely of his wife. She had been a sharp, shrill harridan of a woman much like this whore was, for all that she had given him the son he doted on. She died of the plague while he was at war, and though he didn't miss *her* as such, he missed certain other things. He grinned as he bent down and lifted the skirt of Rosie's kirtle up over her thighs.

She headbutted him, and his nose exploded in a spray of blood and snot.

“You touch me,” Rosie snarled, “and you don't want to fucking *know* what Anne will do to you.”

Harry shoved a hand up between her legs anyway and hurt her because he could, but his lusts had deserted him all the same. Red Mik had obviously been terrified of this Bloody Anne, and for all that he'd been a coward, maybe he'd had a point. Anyway, Harry reasoned, she wasn't *that* pretty when you really looked at her. And she had his crusted puke stuck to her face, which didn't improve things any. No, maybe he didn't want Rosie from Chandler's Narrow in that way. Maybe that would be a bad choice too far, even for him.

She spat on him as he took his hand away, and he looked down at his boots with something that was almost shame. This wasn't him, he knew it wasn't. This was what the Northern Sons expected of a foot soldier, but he had been a Blue Blood. Cocky Bill hadn't held with rape and he hadn't allowed it in his crew any more than Piety was said to in his.

“Sorry,” he muttered, surprising himself. “I didn’t ought to have done that.”

Rosie snorted. “Tell that to Anne,” she said. “If she gives you the fucking chance.”

“No one knows where you are,” Harry said, and he drew himself a mug of beer from the short barrel he kept in the corner of his room before he paused to wipe the blood from his nose. “There’s no rescue coming, if that’s what you’re thinking. You’re Bloodhands’ hostage now, and that means you belong to him and the Northern Sons. We’ll see how strong your precious Anne is when he takes his flaying knives to you. Reckon that will break her, and no mistake.”

The beer was poor stuff, a quarter river water at best, and he grimaced at its oily taste. It was what he could afford, though, and it was better than nothing. The Pious Men lived better than this, he was sure they did. He knew fucking well that Bloodhands did. Something was bothering Harry, but he supposed it was a bit late to be growing a conscience now. Might be a man had to take his joy in life where he could, he figured. He gulped the beer and poured himself another, and found himself looking at Rosie again. Perhaps...

An axe smashed through the front door, almost taking it off its hinges. A man’s savage roar followed in its wake. Harry the Rat dropped his mug, spilling beer across the bare boards of his filthy floor. He grabbed for his club.

He was far, far too late.

The man crashed into his room howling with bloodlust, eyes ablaze and wild hair in disarray. Three hard-faced fellows barged in behind him. Beyond them stood a tall woman dressed like a man, with short hair and a scarred face.

“You’ll put that down, if you’re wise,” she said.

The axeman bellowed in his face and Harry felt his club tumble from numb fingers. It seemed to him then

that perhaps a lifetime of bad choices had just caught up with him.

* * *

Bloody Anne strode into the room like a conquering empress. She put a steadying hand on Jochan's shoulder. Her blood felt like winter, felt like justice and vengeance and the wrath of Our Lady. She felt like the devil Tomas Piety in that moment.

"Hold, Jochan," she said, and her voice was as flat and cold as Tomas' would have been. "Cutter, see to Rosie."

The lean, bearded man she addressed stepped forward and drew two small knives. He sliced Rosie's bonds like they were made of spider silk.

"Hello, love," Rosie said, smiling up at Anne with her split lips. "I knew you'd come."

Anne looked down at her woman, at her bruised face and her black eye. She looked at Harry the Rat's broken nose, and she nodded in respect. Rosie had obviously given a good account of herself. She was in her arms a moment later.

Anne kissed Rosie as gently as she could, held her to her as Jochan and Cutter and Black Billy shoved Harry the Rat up against the wall and held him pinned there.

"How bad did he hurt you?" Anne asked softly.

Rosie shrugged. "He slapped me about some, but no worse than I'm used to," she said. "He stuck his hand up my skirt once, and that's when I broke his face."

"Aye," Anne said. "You might be used to that too, my love, but here's the thing. I'm not."

She looked at Harry the Rat, and she drew her daggers.

What would Tomas do? Oh, she knew very well what Tomas would have done. She had caught Tomas Piety torturing a man to death in that house on Chandler's Narrow last year, a man called Gregor, who

had got two of their girls killed by not passing on information when he should have. That was perhaps one thing, but this was very much another. This man, this *rat*, had laid harsh hands on her Rosie. Anne wasn't going to let that pass. She could do harsh justice too, when it was required. She realised then that, if she was ever going to be taken seriously as a boss in her own right, Ellinburg needed to see that.

"There's a thing you have to understand," she said to Harry the Rat, "and I don't think that you do. You might serve Bloodhands, willingly or not, but I am Bloody Anne. He likes to skin people alive and I don't, but that doesn't mean I don't know how it's done."

Harry the Rat began to scream.

He didn't stop for a very long time.

Peter Mclean is the author of the fantasy gangster thrillers *Priest of Bones* and *Priest of Lies*, published by Jo Fletcher Books and Ace/Roc. His first novels, the Burned Man series, are noir urban fantasy. He has also worked on game tie-in short fiction for various franchises including Warhammer. He lives in Norwich, England, with his wife Diane.

An Interview with Alicia Wanstall-Burke

TOM SMITH

G'day Grimmies! I'm here today with one of my favorite aussies—Alicia Wanstall-Burke.

Now, if you aren't familiar with Alicia's work—it's ok. She is still fairly new to the scene; however, she has been stirring more than a little buzz with her book *Blood of Heirs* which is a current SPFBO (Self Published Fantasy Blog Off) finalist. Book two (which until recently I thought was called *Legacy of Goats*, I kid, I kid—oops, did it again. OK, I'm done) *Legacy of Ghosts* was just recently released and has been well reviewed.

[TS] Alicia, thanks for stopping by!

[AWB] Hey mate! No worries!

[TS] First off, congrats on making the finals of the SPFBO. I think the last few years the Aussie women have been really making their mark on the fantasy scene. I've been a big fan of Lian Hearn (*Across the Nightingale Floor*) since like forever, but I've enjoyed watching the likes of you, Sam Hawke, and Devin Madson lighting up the scene.

Do you think that living in the unique environment that Australia offers lends itself to the kind of thinking necessary to write darker fantasy, and why or why not?

[AWB] Short answer—yes, absolutely! Australia is inherently terrifying, even to people who live there. We also get a bit of a kick out of scaring the pants off our foreign friends, but that’s how you know we love you! I’d say the worst thing about the place is the isolation. No one can hear you scream out there. Then there’s the landscape, the animals, the weather—all completely uncontrollable and untamable. They almost become a character of their own in the narrative of home. The other thing is, there isn’t a great deal of fantasy in the mainstream (that I know of) that uses Australia as the foundation for its worldbuilding, so it tends to stand out as strange and otherworldly, which again can be scary in and of itself. I haven’t even mentioned the spider and the drop bears and the snakes yet...

[TS] As you recently moved to the UK, I have to ask: How does the writing scene differ from Australia to England? And what is the craziest thing that you have encountered that you are having trouble wrapping your head around?

[AWB] Writers in Australia are horribly isolated 90% of the time, which is probably a good thing. Large concentrations of Australian writers tend to cause damage to the fabric of space-time. I lived in Central Queensland, in a town about two hours drive from the nearest coast, 12 hours drive from the nearest capital city, and that’s not even *that* isolated compared to where some people live. What it means is that we hang out with other Aussie authors on social media, then end up meeting in, I don’t know, Dublin at a WorldCon (hey, Sam and Devin!). Industry contacts tend to be based in the US and the UK too, and for self-publishers there are all sorts of bullshit restrictions within Amazon that we have to navigate.

As for completely mental things in the UK, I've almost mastered driving here (these people are deadly behind the wheel), but the fucking seagulls here are HUGE! And vicious! I've met sharks that are more polite than these pale, hook-beaked Pteranodons.

[TS] What would you say is the most influential fantasy book written in the last 10 years, and why?

[AWB] Depends if you're looking at global impact or just within our little genre pocket. I'm going to go with a cliché and say that *A Song of Ice and Fire* is my pick, but let me try and explain. The books are one thing (some of them falling outside the ten-year time frame), but the show was something else entirely. Say what you will about the creative choices made there and the long release periods between books, but the series as a whole took our genre and shoved it all the way down the mainstream's throat.

For the longest time, I could only describe my books as being 'like' *The Lord of the Rings*—it was the only fantasy most people I knew could relate to and it wasn't a very accurate comparison. Every now and then I would meet someone who had read an author I knew, but in my world that was rare. Meeting someone who read for fun was rare! But now we've got fantasy and sci-fi stepping out of the dungeon and into the light; comic book heroes, dragon riding queens and sword-wielding witches are now part and parcel of the everyday. I could go to work and talk about the latest ep of *The Expanse* or *Altered Carbon*. Ten or twenty years ago, that just wasn't a thing, and for me, the real ground swell began when *Game of Thrones* broke down the door, and *that* meant SFF books became something a wider audience was interested in.

[TS] Everyone has different reasons for writing, and the writers' goals vary just as much. What writing goals have you set for yourself?

[AWB] I'd like to get this trilogy done and dusted by the end of 2020! I'm really excited about the projects I have lined up after that, starting with *The Smuggler's Daughter*. I love stepping out and doing something I haven't tried before, but I *have* to finish one project before I can start another! My brain will collapse into a steaming pile of goop otherwise.

[TS] In *Blood of Heirs*, you have established some pretty young protagonists—12 year old Lidan and mid-teens Ran. Was your intent all along to write a coming of age type of story or did it just work out that way?

Do you feel that the use of child-age characters taps into the reader's own perceived vulnerabilities?

[AWB] I knew this was going to be a story about young people who are on one path only to find themselves crashing down to another, but the question was where to start telling it. I could have kicked off where *Legacy of Ghosts* starts, but I would have spent half the book in backstory, explaining things that happened four years before, and that wasn't what I wanted to do. So, we ended up with *Blood of Heirs* telling the story from the beginning, with two reasonably young characters in some rather adult situations.

I've had people tell me Lidan and Ran seem too old for their numerical age, but I could easily point to examples of young protagonists in more well-known books who seem older than their age. Expectations and ideas of childhood have changed vastly in the past century or so, and what a medieval teenager would have dealt with is vastly different to what we expect of teens now. The very concept of the 'teenager' didn't even come into existence until the first half of the 20th

century—before that you were a child, then you were an adult, and history is littered with examples of young people doing extraordinary things. Fantasy straddles this divide between what was and what is, and we need to accept that this will make us question what we are comfortable with, especially for those of us with kids ourselves!

[TS] In *Blood of Heirs*, you use separate storylines for the two main characters and maintain separation between the two for pretty much the whole story. How do you feel that adds to the story, and do you think it takes anything away from it, whether intentionally or unintentionally?

[AWB] Ah see this is tricky, because it shows where my planning went in the bin and the story took over! The ending of *Blood of Heirs* was supposed to be its halfway point, but the story needed more time. So, I set fire to the plan (mostly) and I let it be what it needed to be. Some people have baulked at the parallel POV story lines, but it gives the characters time to grow before they are drawn together by time and circumstances in *Legacy of Ghosts*.

[TS] What direction do you see the fantasy scene going to in the near future? Which way would you like to see it go?

[AWB] I'm really enjoying the move away from Euro-centric, northern hemisphere settings and the growth of character diversity. I grew up reading stories where female characters were either non-existent, a love interest holding a male character back from his destiny, or a seductress the male hero had to escape. Female-centered fantasy was usually overly romantic, which I lost interest in during my twenties. Now I get to read fantasy with a diverse array of genders, backgrounds,

relationships and cultures in the cast, and this is a *good thing!*

I'm also loving the changes in the way traditional and indie publishing interact. Not so long ago, self-publishing meant you had signed your own professional death warrant. You were never going to be taken seriously, and your book would be forever consigned to the swamp reserved for vanity publications. These days readers, agents and publishers are paying attention to the indie scene more and more, accepting that indie titles aren't merely the 'leftovers', but a place where some real gems lay hidden. If we can keep this up, continuing to bring the two sides of the industry together, then I think publishing has an exciting future!

[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?

[AWB] I love it! I know it's not everyone's bag, and it's not easily defined, but that's ok. And it frustrates some people that it's hard to put a finger on exactly what grimdark is. One person's grim and dark might be vanilla ice cream to someone else, and it's about the same with horror. I can get creeped out watching an episode of *Doctor Who*, while my friends will happily sit through hours of horror movies or books. On the flipside I've seen reviews for grimdark books that warn off people who may have a delicate constitution, while I'm left wondering if we're reading the same thing! At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if you 'get' what grimdark is or not. If you like it, read it. If you don't, go find your jam. We don't need to understand something or have defined boundaries on it to enjoy it.

[TS] Have you written a character that you would consider the most like you as a person? Also, if you

lived in that world what do you think you would be doing there?

[AWB] Each of my characters has a part of me in them—sometimes the parts I dislike the most, and other times parts of me I wish were stronger or more present. Lidán's mother comes from a very dark part of my soul, a place of desperation and rage. Lidán and Ran's anxieties and insecurities are born of my own, but they also show resilience and strength in ways I wish I could. For one thing, both of their bodies work properly! Mine is in need of a full refit, a new hardware install and the software is getting well out of date.

[TS] What can we expect in the future from you?

[AWB] I mentioned before that after the release of *Empire of Shadows* I'll be working on the first book of *Salt and Stone*, *The Smuggler's Daughter*, and I'm really looking forward to where that story will go. It's anyone's guess when pirates, spies, single mums, war-mongering empresses, and criminal kingpins are at each other's throats for control of the Syod Archipelago and the future of the Free Nations of Coraidin.

[TS] Alicia, thanks so much for taking the time to talk!

[AWB] Thanks for having me around and letting me ramble!

Review: The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected in Water

MALRUBIUS

The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected in Water is the new fantasy novella from British Fantasy Award and Hugo winner, Zen Cho. The story follows a small gang of “roving contractors” (aka bandits) as they attempt to hawk extremely valuable stolen—or perhaps preserved—goods. When the gang is forced to adopt a former nun turned coffee-shop waitress into their band, dissension, mystery, lust, violence, and bad cooking ensue.

The story is perfectly adapted to the novella format. It features only a few main characters, and we become intimate with them. It is told in the point of view of Tet Sang, the second to bandit leader Lau Fung Cheung. Tet Sang is a quiet, somewhat sullen bandit in tattered robes that seem to show fallen luxury. He is also a wuxia master. He often has to lead the gang because its actual leader, Lau Fung Cheung, is too beautiful to appear in public in most situations. He attracts too much attention. People can’t stop staring at him, and that’s not good since he is a wanted bandit. So “clay-faced” Tet Sang must perform much of the bandits’ public duties, such as trying to fence the stolen goods. Guet Imm is a nun who joins them, much to the chagrin of the other members of the all-male gang, after she is fired for causing a ruckus at the coffee shop. She is very smart, beautiful, and still dedicated to the temple.

She has lived much of her life in the Temple of the Pure Moon and has no family. She has nowhere else to go, so she joins Fung Cheung's gang. But there is something keeping her there beyond just her need to find something to do. These three main characters have a unifying drive to find better lives, or at least survive, in the war-torn southern peninsula, but it is the tension between them that creates such an entertaining story. They are bandits, but they don't commit "bad crimes," so they are caught in a kind of limbo between the tyrannical Protectorate, which is clamping down on bandits and reformists, and the actual bad bandits, who will steal their stuff and kill them.

The secondary characters are also excellent. Ah Boon is a bit of a healer. He helps the bandits with their wounds. He is the only one who is eager for Guet Imm to join the men, but when he finds out she won't fuck them because she is a nun, he gets extremely angry. Ah Hin is a bit of a drunkard and a secret zealot. He is angry that they took in a woman who can't even cook, and after a short experiment in inedible food, he must resume the duties.

I loved all these characters for their flaws as much as their good characteristics. However, as happens in the best (dare I say 'literary') fantasy, the characters' relationships are what really shine here. What attracts Guet Imm to the bandits? Why is Fung Cheung so faithful to his second, Tet Sang? What keeps Ah Hin in the gang? All the questions arise from the fabric of the gang's relationships and develop beautifully throughout the novella, right up to the inevitable but shocking ending.

On the surface, *The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected on Water* is a pretty grim tale about hapless, hungry bandits trying to survive amid poverty, war, and tyranny. In this sense, it is like a lot of grimdark novels and novellas and is pretty much standard grimdark

fare. But Zen Cho is so fucking funny that the story becomes as darkly humorous as it is grim and pathetic. It's rare balance that I've found only a few times in the likes of Rob Hayes's *Never Die*, Mark Lawrence's *Red Queen's War*, and several of Abercrombie's novels. Not only is the narrator subtly humorous, but the characters are freaking hilarious, mostly unintentionally, often delightfully crudely.

Although *The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected on Water* is not brimming with violence—there are fights and killings, etc., just not in every chapter—the story sits right in the morally grey area of the best grimdark. We genuinely care about these characters even though they are armed bandits who are attempting to fence stolen goods. They want top dollar for their stolen goods, and will do almost anything to get it. But they are also practically hopeless. There is nothing else they can really do. War and strife have torn their country apart, and poverty is rampant. They are on the Protectorate's wanted list of bandits, and even the other bandits want to kill them. They must do what it takes to survive.

Usually, when I finish a good book, I feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Not so with *The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected on Water*. I did not want this book to end. I wanted to follow these characters wherever they went next. I felt attached to them. The ending itself, in a sort of post-modern way, leaves most of the big, surface questions unanswered, which I happen to love. *No Country for Old Men* is one of my favourite movies for just this reason. But just like *No Country for Old Men*, when I finished *The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected on Water*, I realized that, despite many unanswered questions, this story had ended, and it was not the story I thought I was reading. It was a beautiful realization. I hope that makes some sense.

Anyhow, *The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected in Water* is a brilliant novella. It provides all the entertainment, action, surprises, and hilarity one could want from 33,000 words, but in the end, it makes you think about people, their lives, their relationships, their motivations, and their futures. I most highly recommend this book to discerning readers of grim fantasy as well as to 'literary'-type folks who enjoy books like Alix E. Harrow's also-brilliant *The Ten Thousand Days of January*. And even though there are so many more new books to review, I think I'm going to have to dive into Zen Cho's back catalogue for a bit first. 10/10.

The Order of The Pure Moon Reflected in Water is scheduled to be released by Tor.com on June 23, 2020. Do yourself a favour and read it.

Starting and Running an Ezine in a Few Simple, Soul-destroying Steps

ADRIAN COLLINS

So, you want to start a SFF e-zine? Part publisher, part genre commentator, e-zines are as hard to start as they are fun to run. When I first mapped out *Grimdark Magazine* as a company, I was specifically told by two well-known e-zine managers that it would be a brutal black hole of time, creative attention, and money, and the chances of achieving financial success were about the same as me opening the bowling for Australia. I thanked them for their time and advice, closed my laptop, and pulled out pad, pen, and beer, and decided I was going to show those defeatist bastards how it was done.

That was the start of *Grimdark Magazine*. That was the start of four years of hard slog, of epic highs I thought I'd never come down from and merciless lows I thought would never end. It was the start of friendships, nearly ended my relationship, created financial hardship, and let me help shape some of the conversation around a new genre. It's been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, and I'd like to share a few tips with you, budding editor in chief who is mentally noting how wrong I am about the e-zine market and how you're going to show me how it's done.

Have a long-term plan for everything

Start with a plan for where you're going to be in a few years and it'll help make your early decisions clearer. For example, when I first started I knew I'd only be publishing an e-zine, but I knew I wanted those stories to end up in print. So, even though I didn't know how I wanted to do it at the time, I knew that I needed the right to reprint—in print—in the contracts I used to purchase fiction from the outset. And while it took four years, I finally managed to put out our first reprint collection. It dropped in 2018 and its name is the tagline I came up with when working out who my target market would be: *Knee-Deep in Grit*.

This same forward thinking needs to apply to everything. If your budget is 12,000 fiction words per issue at a pro-rate, then what will you do with 16,000 words? 20,000? At what point do you put in a pay-rise? Are you planning on selling in audio? At what point do you pay your team? Or yourself? How much do you need to scale your first reader team if your submissions inbox becomes a very popular destination for authors?

Know your target market

Know which market you're going to sell to and know the customers that will be in that market. Be specific. Understand it and love it and want to grow it. Know that you're going to push its boundaries and have a good ponder on how to do that. Your starting point has to be a market (eg. Grimdark SFF) and your avatar/s (eg. Adrian the 33-year-old male from Australia who loves reading Joe Abercombie, Mark Lawrence, and Anna Smith-Spark while drinking whiskey and having Netflix fantasy movies playing in the background).

Find your niche and the people in it and research the hell out of it: are you about a genre or a niche (like grimdark)? Is that genre waxing or waning at the moment? Are you doing or saying something different to the other e-zines out there? An important part of this process, I think, and there are likely examples where

I'll be proven wrong here, is finding a niche that isn't yet saturated with competing voices—e-zines, podcasts, websites, etc—so people can come to your media publications to read something new that they haven't already got a rock-solid opinion on. Essentially, find a gap in the market and get going like the Bloody Nine killing Logen's friends trying to fill it.

Finally, keep an eye on that market and avatar as you grow. One of the things we tried to do as an e-zine is drive the discussion on what defines grimdark. Well, that didn't go too well, and there are now more definitions of grimdark than points-of-view in a George Martin novel. We've done our best to keep up with how customers define it, but we certainly lost our grip on directing that horse a long time ago.

Have multiple streams of income, but know where your bread and butter is coming from, and understand that you will very likely not make money

Okay, this one is the stinger. You aren't going to make money straight away. Probably not for a while (years). If at all. The payment heirarchy of your business goes like this:

- (1) author/artist;
- (2) vendors;
- (3) staff;
- (4) international money transfers;
- (5) incidental business costs;
- (6) taxes;
- (7) and then, finally, you.

Get used to it and accept that you're going to feed money into this beast and not see much in the way of financial return. In fact, based on the advice given to me, and on the experience I've had over the years since we opened, if your goal is to make money out of

a small business fast, go sell lemonade or something. E-zine publishing is purely for the love of it for a long while, and it takes a lot of effort and commitment to get to a level where you're living from it—like a *Clarkesworld*, for example.

Having said all that and put a bit of a dampener on your reading experience, there are a few platforms I've tried out in our four years, but the four that I'd like to focus on are:

- **Patreon:** This is what I'm currently structuring *Grimdark Magazine* on. When used as a subscription service and then also for exclusive subscriber content, it's an excellent way to have a pretty good idea of the money you have coming in and when, and allows some forward planning. It's still fairly new in the non-serial publishing game, but with our current uptake I'm confident it's going to be a solid platform going forward. As an added bonus it's also the platform that takes one of the lowest cuts of your income when compared to the other major distributors.

- **Kindle Direct Publishing:** This one is a no-brainer. Largest book market on the planet. If you're not on it, get on it. For *Grimdark Magazine*, this plugs the gaps between our Patreon income and our minimum running expense requirement.

- **Kickstarter:** This is where you get to play at the big end of town. Done right, a Kickstarter can pull in some serious cash and let you create products you previously wouldn't have had the capital for. It allowed us to create our 2017 Stabby Award-winning anthology *Evil is a Matter of Perspective* and benefit from the post Kickstarter sales. If you want to read up some more on using Kickstarter, *SFF World* has an excellent article on it. While the rewards are great, the flip side of Kickstarter is that you're no longer playing with a few hundred dollars—you're in the tens

of thousands of dollars and when things go wrong they go wrong at the ball/ovary-punch level. I'm a prime example of this, which you can see through one of our Kickstarter posts from last year where I ended up sinking thousands of my own money into the project to make up for a contractor that went broke.

- **Affiliate marketing:** Get your website to pay for itself by using affiliate marketing. You know that book link you clicked on at the bottom of one of our reviews, or that Tor.com "Best five ..." article you bought a game from? Amazon paid the publisher a small commission on that purchase. Get enough posts up that engage people to buy products and you can create a nifty little passive stream of income to cover off some or all of the hundreds of dollars a year it costs to have a website up. Do a little better, and it could cover some financial shortfalls elsewhere in your business model. Do even better than that, and you should be thinking about how you can get some money to the people who write your reviews or articles.

There are plenty of other platforms you can try, and I'm sure other publishers have better models than I do, but this is what's working for us in the current market.

Know your strengths; recruit to cover your weaknesses

This can be hard for people to do, but you're going to (a) do some self-reflection on what you excel at and what you don't, and (b) trust people to do jobs better than you can. For example, I know I'm an okay line editor, but I recognise my strengths lie elsewhere in the running of *Grimdark Magazine*. Mike Myers is a fucking genius editor, and consistently delivers excellent editing jobs to top-tier authors accustomed to working with the best from the big publishing houses. He does

it better than I could even if I trained for a decade to do it. And that's okay. We work well as a team because of it.

Once you've done that and identified the roles you need to fill, it's time to put the call-out for people to jump on board and become a part of your team. Be open and up front about what you're offering. GdM team members are all volunteers, and they've known that from the outset. They receive ARCs, free books, and whatever GdM puts out and I can scrounge for them, but from day dot they've known there isn't a pay check. It's something I'll deal with further down, but never bullshit your team. They are also your customers (spending their time and passion to support you), and they are passionate fans of whatever you're publishing. They are your advocates and they deserve the best of you.

Finally, get the right people on board. Ask questions. Ask them to do test pieces, or reads, or marketing posts, or whatever it is. You want people who are as passionate as you are about what you're doing because that passion is reflected to the market in every interaction—slush pile rejections, social media comments from their personal profiles, discussions with randoms in the pub. Everything.

Customer service

This, I cannot stress enough. Customer service and the customer experience is the spine of any company. If your customers would rather stick their head in a bag of sweaty dicks than deal with you, then you're going to struggle to build a positive brand, and the authors you want aren't going to touch you with a barge-pole.

In addition, remember that customers are not just those people who pay for your e-zine. Your team are your customers. The authors and artists you buy from are customers, too. How you interact with these people matters, and can be the making or breaking of your

online reputation in just the same way that your e-zine purchasing customer base can be. You look after them in any way you can, and I guarantee you they'll do their best to help you succeed faster than you could by yourself.

Shoot for the fucking stars

When starting *Grimdark Magazine* I wrote a list some 50 authors long of all of the names in grimdark / dark SFF I wanted to publish. I put them in order of how much I loved their work and how badly I wanted to publish them. The top three were George RR Martin, Joe Abercrombie, and Mark Lawrence. From there, I wrote a pitch email. Now, I'm a bid manager by trade, so when I spoke earlier about focussing on your strengths—this bit *is* my jam.

There are probably a stack of resources you can Google to find information on best practice for pitch emails, but in short, put yourself in the recipient's shoes and for every sentence you write ask yourself these questions:

- (1) Why do I give a shit about that?
- (2) Why should I trust this person?

Write a pitch email that answers those two questions in a clear and concise way with no bullshit, no vagueness, a clear message, and fair commercials, and you're off to a flying start.

For *Grimdark Magazine*, that pitch email netted us a “No, thank you” from George, “how about an interview instead” from Joe, and a “Tell me more” from Mark. Mark Lawrence then headlined our first issue with a story about Red Kent, one of my favourite characters from the magnificent Broken Empire series. Honestly, whether it was my email, or he just had a story burning a hole in his pocket and we were the only pro-paying market to put up our hands at the time, I

don't know, but a solid pitch email gives you a good base to work from for years to come and if you can get that right author on board you can set the tone and very quickly build trust within the community.

Know when to pull back and maybe call it a day

This is the hardest part. Sometimes, you need to be able to look at your business—your pride, your happiness, your self-torture instrument, the hole you poured thousands of hours and dollars into—and say, “righto gents, let's hang up the boots, have a pint, and move on.”

I can't tell you when this moment is. I can't tell you how to plan for it because fuck knows I've stood on the curb and watched those moments drive on passed. I probably waved at them and gave them a knowing nod as I reached into the back pocket and pulled out my credit card. But, and pay attention because it matters, apart from once with our Kickstarter I have never put more into *Grimdark Magazine* financially than I have been willing—and more importantly, *able*—to lose and never see again. So, if you have a financial line, just like when you go have a gamble on the pokies or at the footy, you're going to need to find the fortitude to understand when you're on the verge of plunging into a hole you're going to struggle to get out of, and pull the plug.

What I can advise you on is, if you're like me and when you get obsessed in something you forget there is a world around you, listen to people when they say you're on your phone or laptop too much, or your present. Find a way to recognise when you are spinning your wheels and not achieving anything (even when you have a million things to manage this week and an inbox fifty unread emails deep). For me, it was saying to my (now, fortunately) wife, “I need you to grab my arm and pull me up when I get that way. I need a reality check.” In the end *Grimdark Magazine*, even if it

achieves glory, can't replace a loved one I'd lose by giving her only ten minutes of my time a day. Does that mean I'll never be the Elon Musk of the publishing world? Yeah. Does that matter? No. Remember, we aren't in this for the money—it's supposed to be fun.

Now get out there and kick some arse

If the two editors who were kind enough to give me their advice all those years ago read this, I tip my glass to you, gents. I thought I could show you, and I've fallen short. But I've loved it, and I'll keep loving it as I run out of mistakes to make. Finally, if the literary gods smile on us and we continue to deliver engaging content, and our fans keep supporting us, maybe we can even make a dime or two doing what I've happily paid to do for so long.

You too, can be a part of this glory. Go on. Start an e-zine.

A version of this article was originally published on The Fantasy Hive.

Flesh and Coin

ANNA STEPHENS

They called her Stoneheart. And they didn't smile when they said it. Didn't mean it as a joke or a mock. They Named her in the old way and there was nothing she could do about it. Can't argue getting a Name, but of all the Names she'd hoped for herself as she made her way into the ranks of mercenaries, as she climbed those ranks like ladders, Stoneheart wasn't one of them. Quickstrike, Spearfast, Steelwill, those were Names she could be proud of, Names she could wear like a badge, carry like a banner. Not Stoneheart. Not cold and hard and without mercy or regret.

Stoneheart. But what could she do other than smile, big and bold and mocking, chin up and a challenge in a cocked eyebrow. Stoneheart, aye? Sure you want to find out just how stony?

But right now Syl Stoneheart had more pressing concerns. She crouched with her company on the western slope of the ravine, scrunched in among the boulders and scree, two dozen women and men in scuffed leather and ragged shirts, chainmail muffled under jerkins, spears and bucklers plain and functional. Nothing fancy. Nothing shiny or noisy. Just quiet, grim-faced folk in a quiet, grim ravine on the road to Talannest.

Syl hated ambushes more than she hated stupid fucking Names. Too many things to go wrong. Too many unknowns. And worst, too much time sitting, waiting, thinking about all the things to go wrong. The boulder was cold beneath her cheek as she rolled her head up to peer around it. She could see a quarter-mile

before the twisting road vanished around an outcrop. Every stride of that quarter-mile was empty. Empty as her purse until after this job was done.

A guarded wagon will traverse the ravine an hour before noon. Bring me its contents and I'll give you a bag of gold.

The Tinker's words echoed in her head. She'd asked him what size bag of gold; on reflection she should've asked what size guard. Still, she'd the numbers to see this through, and another tale to add to the Stoneheart's glory.

The company opposite was silent and invisible. Or gone, she supposed, quelling the urge to spit. Wouldn't surprise her if Garn Spineless had lived up to his Name and fled with his fighters. She'd have to be the Stoneheart if he had. Have to be ruthless if she was to get this done with only half an ambush team.

And done it had to be. Her belly was emptier than her purse, and her company, while not yet muttering, had taken to exchanging meaningful looks when they thought she wasn't looking. A crew that did that was a crew days away from meaningful words with their commander, and after that there was nothing for it but meaningful fists and terminal knives. The Iron Blades were a good company; she'd no desire to be gutted by them. Or forced to do the gutting herself.

There was a clatter of stone behind her, a muffled curse, and Syl reached back an open palm in question. Renn slid to her side, well down on his belly where he was hidden. 'Rock scorpion,' he breathed. 'Dealt with.'

Syl stuck up a thumb, eyes fixed on the path. Still empty. She let out a soft breath and sat back, checking her crew for the twentieth time. Rock scorpions. Just what they bloody needed. Syl had seen men die from rock scorpion stings, black and screaming as their skin split from the swelling. Like watching someone get turned inside out.

Spineless cawed like a dying rook and Syl's fists clenched as she looked to the road. There. She reached back again and found a part of Renn, shoulder or knee, squeezed twice, paused, then once more. He shifted from beneath her hand, back to the others to pass warning.

Long minutes crawled by, longer than a slow death, before the clop of hooves and creak of harness echoed up the ravine. They were cautious now, alive to danger, archers on the flanks, the wagon in their midst. Syl cursed silently when she identified the guards – the Bleeding Eyes, led by none other than Etta Scarlet herself. *Just what I fucking need. Still, had to happen sometime, I suppose. Old scores and all that.*

Whatever was in those barrels stacked so ostentatiously on top of the wagon, Syl knew it wasn't what they'd been hired to steal. They were close now and Syl could see the unease in the guards, the distinctive red makeup across their eyelids and noses highlighting the flickering of their eyes as they scanned the high scree and rock walls hemming them in. Etta didn't hire fools, and if she did, word had it she killed them herself. They all knew this was ambush territory, Syl could see it in every taut line, every horse's snort, every jerky twist of the head. It was also the only decent road to Talannest.

Garn's dying rook called again and straight away the Eyes reacted, half closing in around the wagon, the rest in squads of three, bows drawn and aiming for the rocks on both sides.

Come on, Spineless. Now would be good. Garn had the better eyeline, so it was his decision when to trigger the ambush. Soften them up with volleys, then pelt down the slope and take it hand to hand with the survivors. Chances were the Eyes would press forward rather than try and manoeuvre the wagon around to flee back the way they'd come. Soon as they started running down the ravine, they'd run slap into the third

company that Syl had insisted on recruiting, never mind that it would reduce their cut of the takings.

All rested on Spineless moving his fucking arse, though, and so far Spineless didn't seem inclined to do so. Syl didn't want to have to take on the Eyes alone, but the Stoneheart had a Name and a reputation to uphold, and coin to earn to fill an empty purse. The Stoneheart would give the order even if Syl wouldn't. That's how it worked with Names.

The quarry was deep into the ambush zone now, moving at a trot, keen to be out the other side. And still nothing. Not an arrow, not a war cry, not so much as a fart on the wind. *Spineless, toothless, cockless old bastard. Fucking loose.*

Syl ground her teeth together. The front-riding Eyes were almost out the other end of the ambush site. Much further and they'd have ridden straight past Lobb and his squad as well, and the lot of 'em would be left hiding in the rocks and stroking their cocks. Those who had them.

Not today, Spineless.

'Arrows,' Syl hissed, low and urgent and her dozen archers slithered into position. 'Now,' she added, not bothering to wait, not giving Garn another second or the Eyes any more time to exit the ambush. Arrows arced up to kiss the sky and fall humming, whining, screaming to find marks in seven Eyes, one horse, the wagon itself and one entirely innocent rock by the side of the trail.

More in the air, and more, and arrows coming back the other way now, random, without targets. Just loosing and hoping, trying to disrupt the Iron Blades' rhythm. Still nothing from Garn, though, and Syl wondered if she'd been listening to a dying rook after all.

She thought about abandoning it, running the way Garn must've, but it was too late. Besides, she was a

mercenary and a damn good one, her crew too. She was the fucking Stoneheart.

‘We go,’ she said, low. ‘Count of twenty. Archers, keep their heads down. One. Two. Three.’

The wagon had stopped and a couple of Eyes were rolling barrels off the top, the others hunkered down in whatever protection they could find, behind boulders or shields or the wagon itself, loosing back where they could, mostly just hiding. With arrow shot only coming from one side, it wasn’t that difficult to avoid. Piss and vinegar, but they looked a sloppy crew of amateurs in front of Etta.

‘Take the loot,’ an Eye called, gesturing at the barrels. Syl huffed a laugh through her teeth – eleven, twelve, thirteen – but it faded when the barrels came rolling in their direction, all the way to the edge of the road. Her gaze wandered the path and she noted that now all of the Eyes were huddled behind the wagon with their horses, as far from the barrels as they could get. And that one was standing, smoke and yellow streaming from a fire arrow.

Syl’s eyes darted back to the barrels. ‘Get that fucking archer now!’ she screeched, not bothering with quiet, and three arrows arced into the air, but the one on fire was already flying in the opposite direction, trailing smoke and spitting malice. ‘Down!’

Syl hunched small and panicked behind her boulder, knees by her ears, arms over her head. The explosion rocked the ravine, shook the ground and started several small avalanches of loose scree and pebbles. A shockwave of burning barrel splinters and rock shrapnel burst up the slope, and something laid open the back of Syl’s hand, stung her ear sharper than a wasp.

Horses screamed and careered madly down the trail and there were shrieks as Blades were caught in the blast, and one deep, ululating wail that spoke of injuries that Syl couldn’t cure out in the wastes, and

probably not even if she'd been a surgeon in Talannest. Hooves faded into the distance, most of the screaming stopped, and a sort of quiet fell.

'Still alive, Stoneheart?' came the deep, amused voice of Etta Scarlet, bane of Syl's former existence. The voice that still made her cringe inside. 'That you making that sweet music?'

'Alive. Armed. Pissed,' Syl yelled back, checking as many of the Iron Blades as she could without giving away her position or letting any part of her body show past the protection of her rock. Her hand was bleeding good, hot and sticky, the fingers slow to respond.

'On a job, as it happens,' she shouted, 'and I know the real cargo's under the awning, so how about you drag it out and leave it with us? No more fighting, no more killing. You can be about your day with no hard feelings.' She squinted up at the early sun. 'Isn't it past time you were passed out drunk somewhere?'

'That sounds like a plan, Syl. A real good plan, and aye, I've got a thirst brewing. Just one problem, you don't count that most of our horses have bolted.'

Syl's guts tightened. 'Yeah? What's that?' she called, peering up the ravine for Lobb and his fighters. Plan or not, you hear fire barrels go up and you come running. Friends need you. Hells, even acquaintances, even people who were mostly enemies, needed you when fire barrels were in play.

'Me and Spineless and Lobb don't want you to have it.'

The words dragged Syl's full and disbelieving attention back to Etta standing concealed at the edge of the wagon. They wouldn't. They fucking had.

'Etta, Etta,' Syl yelled after a long pause, 'the drink's made you a fool. You really think they'll honour the bargain? You should know better than to trust scum like them.' Silence answered her and Syl took the reprieve to pass her orders with a series of simple gestures.

‘You’re saying they double-crossed me?’ Etta called eventually.

‘Why not? They have me. Probably just waiting for us to wipe each other out, then claim the booty for themselves.’

‘They wouldn’t,’ Etta said, but there was doubt in her voice now. Doubt was dangerous on a battlefield. Doubt was deadly.

Syl laughed and held up three fingers to her Blades. ‘Wouldn’t they?’ Two fingers. She rolled onto her hands and toes. ‘So where are they then? Haven’t killed us, aren’t aiding you.’ One finger. ‘They’re on your side, why aren’t I dead?’

She didn’t wait for an answer, instead bunched her fist and her archers loosed, three quick volleys to keep their heads down and kill the wagon horses – *best hope the cargo’s lightweight* – and Syl was up and running, dodging boulders, skidding through scree, using the butt of her spear to leap over rocks, mouth stretched and a howl tearing its way out of her throat.

The Iron Blades were with her, as always. Whatever their opinion of the situation, when the Stoneheart called the attack, the Blades attacked. There looked to be a second of genuine surprise from the Bleeding Eyes, but then they were racing into a ragged line.

A savage grin split Syl’s face as she vaulted the last rocks down to the road, landing in a spray of dirt and shrapnel and punching her spear tip into the groin of the closest Eye. She felt the blade lodge in and then skitter off the bone, dragging, cutting deeper, and wrenched, twisting as she did. The Eye shrieked and flailed a longsword at her, but Syl was way out of reach of the blade and the woman’s leg was already buckling. She punched it in again, gut this time, and left her to bleed, scanning the battleground for Etta.

*Is it finally time for that reckoning, Etta Scarlet?
Finally time to see who’s got the bigger Name?*

There. Backing slowly away from the wagon, two Blades hunting her. She was about to tell them Etta was hers when a man charged her, looking ridiculous and embarrassed with red paint on his face, caked into eyebrows that were a weapon in themselves, though the sword he swung was no joke. Syl batted it aside but he was quick, so she ducked back out of range, skipped sideways when he followed, whipping the spear around her so fast it did the job of a shield, then stabbing out with the butt and crunching it into his sternum. Blow like that didn't need a blade on the end; she heard his chest crack and he crumpled, wheezing, sword drooping and free hand pressed to his chest. His mouth gaped for air his lungs wouldn't take.

Syl readied the death stroke, paused at the call of a sick crow. 'You fucking wouldn't,' she breathed. But Spineless fucking would. He was. Arrows rose into the sky, humming like massive, pissed-off bees, and fell indiscriminately among Iron Blade and Bleeding Eye alike. Syl ducked beneath the big man as he slumped, felt the impact as three arrows took him in the back. Those had most definitely been aimed at her.

'You traitorous bastard dog!' she screamed in Garn's direction. She crawled from beneath the corpse, found Etta, raised her chin.

Etta scowled, nodded. 'Deal.'

'Archers. Volleys!' Syl spat. 'Stand with the Eyes,' she added and the Iron Blades disengaged and formed up alongside the men and women they'd been trying to kill a second before. The Eyes moved just as swiftly, as though it'd all been rehearsed.

Oh, aye, if this'd been rehearsed I wouldn't have seven crew dead that I can see from here. And Garn would've been spitted on my spear arsehole first a long stretch of day ago.

'You coming out, Garn, or do we need to come in there and drag you out?' Her shout was all bravado – chances of anyone climbing into that mess of scree

and boulder with the intention of coming out with captives was slimmer than a starving snake – but it was worth a try.

‘I think not, little girl,’ Garn yelled and Syl’s eyes narrowed. ‘Not unless you’re thinking of dropping those trousers and giving me a seeing to.’

Syl sighed. ‘Yeah, that one never gets old.’ She raised her voice. ‘How about you drop yours first and I ram my spear up your shitter?’ Instead of a reply there were arrows, and the Blades and Eyes scattered for cover.

Syl snared Renn’s gaze. A flick of the fingers and a jerk of the head, and the man grabbed two more Blades and slid behind the wagon, then ducked into the rocks on Garn’s side of the ravine.

‘They’re keeping us here,’ Syl whispered at Etta as they crouched together behind the dubious shelter of a dead horse. ‘Waiting for Lobb’s crew is my guess. I’ve sent Renn to scout, but a perimeter’d be a fine idea about now, aye?’

‘You’re a back-stabbing, crooked-dealing little bitch, Syl Stoneheart,’ Etta said, and the line of her shoulders spoke of her defeat. ‘This a double double-cross? Knew of Garn’s deal with me, did you, then offered him a sweeter purse to kill me?’

Syl’s mouth was hanging open. ‘Aye, and get my own killed alongside yours? Gods, but the drink’s rotted your brain, Mother. This isn’t a double-cross. Whatever we’ve done, no matter the blood in our past, I wouldn’t set you up to fall in front of your crew. I’m Stoneheart, aye, but I’m not a cold heart. Or a cunt,’ she added.

More arrows killed the conversation. Syl’s stomach was churning. Etta really thought her capable of that? They hadn’t spoken much in recent years, true enough, and the words they had said had been bitter and full of sharp edges, but still... Etta was her mother.

She chanced a glance over the saddle. There were men picking their way out of the rocks on the opposite side of the ravine, now. Garn and his crew coming to end it.

‘Pity,’ Etta said.

‘What is?’

‘This’d hurt me less if you had betrayed me.’ Etta’s knife took her in the gut, the point penetrating the jerkin, sticking in the chainmail, and then, mostly because Etta was hammering on the hilt with the heel of her other hand, sliding-squealing-grating through into flesh.

Syl gasped in a breath and found both her hands on Etta’s, straining away even as Etta strained in. ‘What?’ she managed and then groaned, the sound as long and protracted as the blade’s slow path through her flesh.

‘You really thought I’d forgiven what you did, girl?’ Etta grunted. ‘You killed Dyran. You killed him and then you walked away like you’d saved the world.’ Her breath was liquor-rank. ‘Had this coming a long time.’

It was a long knife, and a lot of it was inside Syl now, hot and cold and sharp and liquid and pain, dead gods, the pain. Fire chased ice chased molten steel in her gut and Syl’s strong hands were so weak, slipping from her mother’s, implacable, unstoppable.

She wanted to remind Etta that Dyran had been a flesh-peddler, snatching and ransoming important people’s children. That he’d deserved every hour of the death she’d given him when she’d seen what he did to those whose families couldn’t pay. But the knife had taken her voice, just as surely as it was taking her life, and the words stuck in her chest.

‘I have a reputation, little girl, forged from my years with Dyran’ Etta hissed. ‘And the Bleeding Eyes have a reputation. So expect no mercy, daughter mine, expect no leniency for your crew. They all die here.’

With you.' Etta snorted and a faint smile crossed her face. 'I'm a poet.'

'Poet, is it?' Syl groaned. 'Then rhyme this.' The last of her strength went into ramming her knife up under Etta's chin and into her spine. Missed the joint that would've killed her instantly, but caused a fair amount of surprise so she at least stopped pushing the dagger into Syl's gut. Etta's hands rose to her throat and a look of pure panic crossed her face. Jugular. Red, gushing death. Only Syl had missed that too, on account of being skewered like a rabbit so the blow, while serious, hadn't yet killed her.

'Can't be having that,' Syl grunted, slapped Etta's hands away and waggled the hilt of the knife, sawing the blade left and right, hoping something inside would snap and kill the old bitch. Something snapped and Syl was coated in hot, sticky red.

Shouting, the pounding of feet, clash of weapons and grunts of pain as the Iron Blades and the Bleeding Eyes started up killing one another again in response to the bloody tableau of mother and daughter and dead horse and red. Lots of red.

And then Renn was there, planting himself over Syl and kicking Etta square in the face, sending her over onto her back. 'Blades!' he roared, 'protect the Stoneheart.'

More arrows, a shriek of pain from close, so close, and the edges of Syl's world turning black. She clutched Renn's leg, tugged on his trousers. 'What?' he snarled.

'What's ... cargo?' she panted as a horrible emptiness found her.

'Fuck should I know?'

'Show ... me,' she demanded. Her hand fell limp. Opposite, in a tangle of smeared red makeup and greying hair and bubbling pink froth, Etta watched her with dead eyes in a dying face. She seemed oddly triumphant.

* * *

When it was over, when Spineless's crew had fled and Lobb's had been cut down to a man and the Bleeding Eyes had thrown down their weapons for mercy the Blades didn't much feel like giving them, Renn opened the hidden door in the side of the wagon. He peered into the gloom, knife held tight in his fist.

'Gold?' Syl coughed, still hoping even now.

'Not exactly.' Renn's hand trembled and he sheathed the knife. 'Come to me,' he said, 'and I promise you won't be hurt.' There was movement, a shift of material, a whimper, and the girl wrapped her arms and legs around him as he lifted her out. He looked to Syl.

'Tinker's not having her,' Syl managed. Her gaze wobbled across the kneeling Eyes. 'This what you do now?' she panted. 'This how you line your pockets?'

'We ain't pure and principled,' a grizzled woman shouted back. 'Gotta eat.'

'Us too. But the Tinker's still not having her. Children are not currency.'

Renn's eyes were cold. 'Then it looks like we need us a new leader,' he said. 'And as I'm carrying the cargo, guess that makes it me. Three days to Tinker's hideout and the gold, lads and lasses. Or you can stay with the dying.'

The Iron Blades looked between the two, Renn standing tall, Syl lying in a pool of her own blood. As one they moved to Renn's side. The Bleeding Eyes scrubbed the paint off their faces and followed.

'Bye then, Stoneheart,' Renn said.

Syl waved a bloody hand. 'Shit,' she said.

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A literature graduate, Anna loves all things SFF, from DnD to Doctor Who to classic Hammer and Universal horror films.

As a practitioner of 14th century Italian longsword, and a second Dan black belt in Shotokan Karate, she's no stranger to the feeling of being hit in the face, which is more help than you would expect when writing fight scenes.

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What to Expect When You're Expecting

GARETH RYDER HANRAHAN

You've done it. You've forged your magic sword in the fires of self-loathing and late-night writing sessions, quenched it in the black coffee of early mornings. You've trained under the wily old trickster, hired him as your literary agent, and he got you into the forbidden fortress of Traditional Publishing, where lo! there are still fabled Lunches With Editors, and you know well the famous names that have walked these halls before you. At the last, you contended with the dire dark lord and won the ultimate prize—a publishing contract! Victory is yours!

So, what's next?

First off—getting a publishing contract won't transform your life instantly. Your Twitter may be buzzing with congratulatory messages, but few people in the real world care about the publishing industry. Your friends and family might be pleased for you, but they'll be fuzzy about what exactly a book deal entails. It doesn't help that Traditional

Publishing

Operates

On

A

Schedule

That

Feels

Absolutely

Positively

Glacial

At times. There'll be a delay of months, even *years* between signing that contract and actually seeing printed pages with your words on them. Fortunately, you'll have plenty to do in that gap. Editing, for example—just because the publishers liked your manuscript enough to buy it doesn't necessarily mean it's finished. At the very least, there'll be some rewriting and polishing to do, and if you haven't worked extensively with an editor before, now's the time to make the mental shift. It's still your book, but now someone else is in there with you, crawling around in the guts of the story and making suggestions for changes.

And they're usually right, damn them.

Around the same time, discussions about the cover start. If you're anything like me, you've got as much aptitude for visual art as a bat, so you just sit on your wings—er, hands, and let the professionals argue about composition and colour palettes and fonts. It's still a thrill, though, to see your ideas translated into a different medium.

After editing comes the joy of copy-edits, where you read your manuscript a thousand times until it becomes a greasy mess of text, and all you can see is the way you overused some word like 'cerulean' in your descriptions. Oh, and the ancient rule of copy-editing

is that no matter how many times you check, there'll still be at least one error left in the text, and you will find that error the moment you open your freshly published book for the very first time—but that's still months away in this hypothetical calendar.

There's a gap, now. A lacuna, between the final text getting locked down, and anything more happening. Oh, things are happening in the great machinery of publishing—they're talking to buyers, and getting print quotes, and having marketing meetings, and the like, all the things that are done *for* you when you're traditionally published—but you're unaware of them. You may feel forgotten, as your editors move onto the next books on their schedules and the buzz of that acquisition announcement moves onto the next author.

Don't just sit there staring at yourself in the mirror wondering if your legions of readers would prefer you to have a writerly beard or perhaps a fancy hat. Fill that gap with writing. If, as is quite common these days, your contract was for two or three books, then you've got a *deadline* to hit. Writing is your *job* now, so get to work! Book 2 in your epic trilogy might not be out for another 18 months, but that deadline's approaching quick, so hammer that keyboard. Faster! You're in the word mines now.

There'll be a few emails to leaven the void. Blurbs from other authors. Questions from marketing. Introductory emails, as the great armature of the publishing house locks into place around you.

(Oh, with my dewy-eyed focus on the magic of publishing, I've skipped over the bit where you actually get *paid*. Here's how it works in my experience; your mileage may vary. If you sell your book for, say, \$30,000, then you'll get a third of that when you sign your contract, another third when the manuscript's accepted, and the final third on publication. Your agent's percentage comes out of that. Now, all that money is an advance on sales—whenever a copy of

your book is sold, your portion of that sale goes to the publisher to pay back your advance. If you're lucky enough to sell well enough to 'earn out'—pay back your entire advance—then you start getting quarterly payments. Many books *don't* earn out their advance—publishing is like the movie industry, where one big hit for a studio compensates for several other films that don't do as well.)

And then... then it all starts happening. One day, a big padded envelope arrives, and inside are your ARCs—advanced reading copies that get sent out to reviewers. It's... it's a book. A real book with pages and a cover and words inside that you wrote. A book that you can put on your shelves next to *The Lord of the Rings*. A book that you can open up and read... and, with a sickening jolt, you realise that it's a book that *anyone* will soon be able to open up and read.

Too late to back out now. There are ARCs in the wild already, in the hands of reviewers and early readers and authors. It feels like you're walking around with your brain exposed, all your thoughts and dreams suddenly revealed to the world. What was a personal, immensely private project is suddenly public, and lots of people are talking about it, asking questions about it, interviewing you, podcasting you, getting you to write 1,000-word pieces on what it's like to be traditionally published.

At the same time, those early reviews and buzz are likely going to determine how well your book does, and it's completely out of your hands now. Luck's as big a part of the equation as talent—did your book find a reviewer who likes your approach? Can you catch the mood of the zeitgeist? Maybe it's possible to avoid obsessing about your book's reception, but I certainly couldn't—I endlessly refreshed Goodreads and Netgalley and Amazon, which definitely wasn't healthy.

And then... then the wave washes out again. The voracious blogosphere moves onto the next hot

release, and you're no longer the brand-new debut author. And that's fine, because you can't lose sight of what got you to this point, of what will keep you going forwards no matter how your career waxes or wanes. It's all about the stories, the words, the craft.

That, I think, is what I really cherish about traditional publishing—the feeling that you're part of something greater. Not just the team working on this one book, but a part of a tradition, a line of fellow writers who've trod this path before. Writing can be a lonely profession, and it's good to know that you're not the only soul who's wrestled with the keyboard in the dark hours of the night.

Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan's three month break from computer programming has now lasted seventeen years and counting. He's written more gaming books than he can readily recall, by virtue of the alchemical transformation of tea and guilt into words. He lives in Ireland with his wife, twin sons and a marauding toddler. Find him online at garhanrahan.com or on twitter @mytholder

An Interview with Dyrk Ashton

TOM SMITH

Hail grimplings! This issue I finally caught up with that wily rapsCALLION Dyrk Ashton.

If you don't know Dyrk's work, he is currently working on finishing his Paternus series—books 1 and 2 are already out and book 3 will be released June 23, 2020. These books are heavy on various global mythologies and very entertaining to read. Definitely one of my favorite series in recent years for the page turnability.

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

[DA] Thank you for having me, Lord Smith!

[TS] I have to say right out of the gate that one of the most entertaining parts of this series so far is the way that you linked together various mythological characters from different regions based on their similarities and made them the same entity. What inspired you to take that route?

[DA] I've been a myth freak since I was a kid. As I grew older and started reading more myths, legends and fables from around the world, I began to see similarities in more than just archetypes and story structure. I began reading up on the idea of mythemes—core stories or real events and people from which many myths could have derived—and became fascinated by

the idea of coming up with a story that could explain the mythemes themselves. It was a hell of a lot of fun to finally get to do that with Paternus.

[TS] You demonstrate a clear love of the world's mythologies in your storytelling. Where did you get your start in reading mythology and was there a clear-cut favorite for you?

[DA] It started of course with Greek and Norse mythology and Arthurian legend. Simple readings for kids. I loved that as much as the fantasy I was reading. It then spread to Roman and Irish, then Hindu and Mesoamerican, and just pretty much spread everywhere from there. Early on I read all of Campbell's works too. I'm as enthralled by storytelling and mythmaking now as I am by the myths themselves. I couldn't say I have a clear favorite, I love them all, but I guess I still have a deep fondness of Arthurian and Norse from my youth, though the ancient Hindu stories are really thrilling and bizarre.

[TS] Your books so far are usually classed as Urban Fantasy, yet you are pretty active online in the grimdark community and in other fantasy subgenres, have you ever considered writing something in the vein of grimdark?

[DA] Interesting you bring that up. I got involved with the grimdark bunch because several of my early readers felt Paternus had serious grimdark elements. I had also recently read Joe Abercrombie's First Law series and loved it, so I also became a fan of the genre. I don't see myself trying specifically to write in any genre, which is kind of weird and probably not very smart as far as marketing goes. I mostly just write what I want to read, and it just kind of falls into certain categories. I wasn't even sure if Paternus was Urban

Fantasy early on and didn't actually describe it that way until quite a few months after the release of book one. Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* is often classified as Mythic Fiction and *Paternus* is similar in subject matter so I went with that for awhile, but then found there are so few books classified like that it really didn't help. A number of readers have taken to calling it Epic Urban Fantasy, which I think fits great, even if it isn't a real thing.

[TS] Many people who encounter you online are probably not aware of your insanely impressive and diverse resume. A college professor, a Hollywood actor just to name a couple. If you had your way, what would you really prefer to be doing career wise right now?

[DA] It feels like I've lived several different lives. I often shake my head when looking back and think, "Did I really do all that?" To be honest, I love this writing thing. And not just writing, but the community, travel to cons, and the like. It's really what I want to be doing right now and for the foreseeable future. Ideally, while a boy is dreaming, I'd like to be able to support myself full time by writing—and while I'm REALLY dreaming, get to hang out on the set while something I wrote is adapted for film or television.

[TS] Have you ever considered writing in an already established shared universe, or collaborating with another writer for a book or series? If so, which or who?

[DA] I don't know enough about the established shared universes to really say, but I've definitely had flights of fancy about collaborating on something. Under the right circumstances, it would be amazing to work with Nicholas Eames, Joe Abercrombie, or Mike (M.R.) Carey.

[TS] What works (books, movies, comics, etc) originally sparked your interest in fantasy?

[DA] Oh boy. I'd have to say it goes all the way back to Dr. Seuss and E.B. White. Then Tolkien (of course), Robert E. Howard, and Zelazny. I read *Conan* comics for awhile, and absolutely loved those crazy old movies like *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*.

[TS] What is your favorite book that you've read in recent years that you would recommend to others?

[DA] Oh man that's a tough one. I'll go with the ones that just pop into my head first. *The Girl with All the Gifts* by M.R. Carey, *Beyond Redemption* by Michael R. Fletcher, *Twilight of the Gods* by Scott Oden, *Three Parts Dead* by Max Gladstone, *The Library at Mount Char* by Scott Hawkins... jeesh there are so many great ones. Oh, I thoroughly enjoyed Quenby Olsen's *The Half-Killed* and got addicted to *God of Gnomes* by Demi Harper (Laura M. Hughes). And I just finished *A Little Hatred* by Joe Abercrombie and absolutely loved it.

[TS] I've seen online that you like to travel, what other activities to you like to pursue when not writing?

[DA] Egad. Unfortunately, since I started writing, I don't do much else other than work and write. I don't get to nearly as many movies as I'd like. I do play poker with some old pals every couple of months. I love the new TV series that are coming out lately, but I have to be careful because I get addicted and need to put them all in my eyes right now, so I have to stay away as much as possible.

[TS] Globally, we seem to be going through some darker times (what with natural disasters, military aggressions and an evershifting political landscape). Do you see that translating over into our various art mediums—TV, Film, Books, etc? And if so, how?

[DA] It would naïve of me to say it doesn't affect what I do, but I don't attempt to be purposefully political in my writing. I have feelings and beliefs about things, of course, and they do seep into my stories, but I don't set out to write "message" stories.

[TS] What will we see from you in the near future?

[DA] Good question, which I might actually have an answer to. Once book three of The Paternus Trilogy comes out, I'm planning a four to six book series that takes place in the world of Paternus, but approximately twenty years earlier. They can be read entirely separately from the trilogy, and vice versa, though there is a lot of cross-over with characters from the trilogy and lead-up to the trilogy. These will be much shorter than the trilogy books and more traditional Urban Fantasy, following the adventures of an anonymous demon-hunter-type known only as Rival. I want to make them very fast-paced and kind of crazy. Tentatively the series will be called Chronicles of a Wretched Knight.

After that, I'd love to do another trilogy in the same world, but 16 or 17 years after the original trilogy ends. That's about all I can say about it without spoiling some things in book three, though.

[TS] Dyrk, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk to us today.

[DA] Thank you for the great questions! It's been a pleasure.

Scardevil

JEFF SALYARDS

Some people foolishly insist that a walk in the woods is a lovely thing, a pleasurable thing, even an affirming thing. Which, I concede, could all be possible. Provided you aren't mauled by four-legged predators or murdered or raped by the two-legged variety, the weather isn't punishing in one of a hundred ways, you have a sturdy pair of shoes that neither leak nor pinch, and you have a high tolerance for stinging nettles and bloated blood flies and every other manner of thing that might attempt to impede, wound, or poison you.

Which is to say that in my experience a walk in the woods is almost always terrible, but never more so than when accompanied by an unstoppable girl of thirteen summers.

Having once been a young girl, I know that such creatures are routinely impossible, and that alone would have convinced me not to share a journey of more than four strides with one. But the lass beside me was beyond anxious, all jittery twitches and fearful looks as she led me nowhere I wanted to go quicker than I wanted to get there.

Still, my purse was as empty as my stomach, and the promise of coin makes idiots of us all. So, I pulled my cloak tight, grit my teeth, and walked through the damp woods alongside the bothersome girl.

She glanced at me for the thousandth time, face riddled with more freckles than any other three people combined. "You sure you can do this?"

"No," I said, nearly tripping over a mossy log hidden in the undergrowth of what she insisted was a path,

despite all evidence to the contrary. “Certainty is the province of fools and the dead.”

She wide-eyed one of the scars that was slowly slithering across my cheek. Most people couldn’t help looking, especially if one surfaced or slipped under my skin right in front of them, but they generally tried to disguise their revolted fascination. Not so young girls, having not yet mastered perfidy. “But you’re a . . . mender, ain’t you?”

I touched one of the roving scars. “I would have thought that much obvious, girl. Unless you neglected to mention that you’re blind, in which case you’re doing a remarkable job navigating this impassable goat track.”

She pulled her eyes away just in time to duck under a dripping branch. “But you’re a *good* mender, I mean. Heard tell you was good. And cheap.”

“Ahh, good and cheap—qualities that so rarely sit well together.”

She didn’t know what to do with that. “My da’, he’s in a bad way. Real bad. Told you as much.”

“So, you did,” I said, sidestepping a sinkhole. “Earnestly. Repeatedly. It’s why I am accompanying you, after all.”

Well, that and the coin.

Her chin trembled and her eyes were full of the worst kind of wet longing. “I need to know you can fix him is all. Need to know you can *do* it.” She sniffed and wiped her face with the back of a ragged sleeve, surely angry for losing what little composure she had. “Are you going to make him right again or ain’t you?”

I took a deep breath and instantly regretted it, nearly swallowing a cloud of gnats. If it had just been her feelings to consider I would have lied. Instantly. But it was also a question of managing expectations, and my livelihood (and quite possibly life) depended on that.

“I’ve been severing or mending flesh and bone for two of your lifetimes, girl, and I’m possessed of

considerable healcraft when I have a mind to, at least when not dulled by drink or indifference,” I said. “So I know what I speak of when I say I can’t promise to do this thing before seeing him because it would be either empty or cruel, neither better than the other.” The girl’s face fell further, so I laid a hand on her shoulder. “But I will do my level best to mend your father, that much I can pro—”

“Yeah, well,” she jerked free like I’d branded her, flushing around the freckles, mouth twisting into an ugly curve, “your level best ain’t getting you no kind of nothing, just so we’re clear, not unless you heal him. You get payment *after* you fix my da’ up. Then and only then. You hear me, *witch?*”

There it was. Truth laid bare. Almost refreshing.

She hurried into the overgrown brush.

As walks in the woods went it was exactly as awful as expected. Only twice as long.

We exited the trees and approached the girl’s hamlet—a cluster of longhouses huddled together like frightened herd animals seeking protection where there was none to be found. A few old barns around the outskirts, a ramshackle stable, some hardscrabble patches of peas and beans and maybe barley, a half-completed temple tower at the edge of a sluggish stream, and a sheep pen housing far too few of the woolly critters (the rest no doubt killed by wolves or disease or some other misfortune, villages like these being nexuses of calamity, after all).

It was uncomfortably similar to the settlement I’d been driven out of when I was the girl’s age, my shirt shredded open, fresh lashes on my back, my own mother howling for my blood at the head of the makeshift mob once they learned what I was capable of.

Ahh, sweet memories.

We headed down the dirt track through the middle of the village, and the girl picked up the pace, pausing only occasionally to look back at me, pinched and irritated, impatiently waving me on.

I'd hoped to slip into the hamlet unnoticed, but of course that was the height of foolishness. A man returning from the woods pushing a wobbly cart of firewood saw me, stopped, stared for a few moments, then shook his head quickly before hurrying away, not bothering to pick up the logs he'd dropped behind. Two women in mud-spattered tunics were ushering some hogs out to root, noticed the scarred stranger heading for them, and immediately prodded their squealing charges in the opposite direction.

It was the same reception I encountered in most places—some morbid curiosity perhaps, but mostly revulsion, distrust, hostility, and fear. Especially fear. Especially among hill people.

I wanted to assure them the feelings were quite mutual.

The girl stopped in front of a longhouse much like the one I'd grown up in, uncomfortably so. Seventy paces long, a door on either end, pole framed and covered in cedar bark shingles, a rounded roof with a few smoke holes. The longhouse was big enough to house a few families or one really extended one. The fine makings of another mob if things didn't go well. I steeled myself and stepped inside, one hand never far from the dagger on my hip.

There were no windows to speak of and the smoke holes were covered after the last big rain or anticipating the next, so it was feeble lantern light alone to guide us.

The girl led me among the wooden columns and shifting shadows and various screens and hanging felt mats and deerskin flaps. There were no rooms in a longhouse, but that didn't stop people from trying to establish a bit of privacy. I said nothing to the wide-

eyed inhabitants we passed on the benches or sectioned alcoves on either side—a woman suckling a newborn, an oldborn woman with so few teeth she might be reduced to suckling herself soon sitting and weaving a mat, a man perched on a chest whittling something with a long knife. He watched me go the whole way before cursing under his breath.

Obviously, they expected my arrival—in a village this size, someone didn't fall from a great height and nearly die without everyone knowing about it almost immediately, and likewise ware of any efforts to save him, even those they heartily disapproved of.

Which meant the village was full of whispers and mutters and rumormongering about all the atrocities my kind was capable of. Some earned, some not. Well, in truth, most earned.

We stepped around the central fire pit, our shoes leaving prints in the ashes strewn about the dirt floor, and a woman rushed over to us. Her dark hair was interrupted by the odd gray strand, all of it coiled and held in place by bone pins and an amber comb. She had a lean, haggard face and dark rings under her eyes that spoke of a pronounced lack of sleep. Still handsome in her way, if hard looking. The overabundant freckles sealed the resemblance.

I tried not to think of my own unyielding mother. Quite unsuccessfully.

The woman grabbed her daughter by the shoulders. "Are you alright, Tildy?"

I'd intentionally not asked for names, but there it was, unavoidable now. Tildy. Others would probably follow.

The girl nodded quickly and the mother glared at me as if surprised I hadn't murdered the chatty thing on the way here. "You sure?"

"Yeah, ma'. Fine. Said I was fine." She hadn't of course, but it seemed a poor time to point it out.

Tildy glanced at me, then back to her mother. “Brought her. Just like you asked. She’s got to see da’ now though. Right now. She—”

“Yes.” The woman released her daughter and faced me, locking eyes to avoid taking in the scar wiggling across my neck just then. She adjusted her shawl and ran her nervous hands down her woolen pinafore to give them something to do before folding them together in front of her. “I should. . . I owe you thanks. For coming all this way.”

That wasn’t the same as truly offering them but that seemed another thing better left unsaid. “You owe me nothing yet. Show me to your husband and I’ll see what I can do about earning your gratitude.”

And coin. Let’s not forget that, please.

The mother gave me a curt nod and the pair led me farther inside the longhouse. She pushed a woven mat aside and showed me her husband lying on a pallet.

He was pale, his dark hair slicked back with sweat, a wheezy rattle in his chest as he struggled to breath. The skins under him were red-black with blood both new and old.

I looked at the mother and she bit her lip and nodded, so I knelt alongside him, pulled the sheepskin blanket back. He was bare chested and recoiled when he felt the chilly air, his belly bound in a bloodstained bandage.

“Tildy likely told you,” the woman said, crossing her arms over her chest, “but he fell. The old fool fell from that bloody temple. I told him not to go up there, especially after a hard rain. He’s got a bad back, he does, and I told him more than once to keep his feet planted on the earth, sodden or otherwise, but the stubborn goat ignored me like he always does. Then he fell and impaled himself, just like that. Bloody fool.” She wiped away tears.

“Weren’t his fault,” Tildy said, face flushed again, voice rising. “Don’t you go blaming him, ma’. You want

to blame someone, blame old Mundo. It was him that urged them up there so soon after the storm. Or Uncle Veynish, drinking overmuch. Probably him that failed to steady the ladder.”

The wounded man opened his mouth, coughed once. Pink spit bubbles popped on his lip. Apparently he had some thoughts on the matter as well.

I drew a dagger. The girl gasped and I looked up at the two of them. “I need to inspect him. You understand?”

The mother grabbed Tildy, pulled her back into her chest, wrapped her arms around her. “Do what needs doing, mender.”

It was *mender* now, but it would turn to *witch* or worse if I couldn’t save this man. Odds were good I’d be driven from yet another village or hung from the nearest tree.

Perhaps fed to the hogs—they looked thin.

I sliced through the bandages and pulled them back. The man groaned and writhed as I peeled the stuck cloth from his deep wound.

“Tildy,” I said, “Be a lamb and fetch a lamp, would you.”

She did, running this way and that, which seemed just another invitation to calamity that was remarkably unanswered.

The light was weak and wavering but better than none at all. I examined her father more closely. The left side of his body was a map of deep bruises from the fall, red and purple and blue, and there was a sizable puncture wound high on his abdomen just south of his lungs (though based on his rattling, it might have taken a bite out of one—there was fluid in there for certain). The hole started to weep some fresh blood before I put pressure back on, but no pus that I could see and it didn’t smell sour.

That was good. For him and me. I could work with a broad sucking hole but rot would have likely doomed us both.

Someone behind me bellowed, “A scardevil? By the gods, you actually brought a scardevil here? I heard but didn’t believe. Wouldn’t.”

I looked over my shoulder. The bellower was a head taller than any of the others, bald, with a mustache and a beard of many braids bleached saffron yellow. Beneath bloodshot eyes, he had an old scar of his own splitting his nose, though it wouldn’t be shifting around or disappearing like mine. I smelled the cloying mead wafting out of him even from a few feet away.

The mother put a protective hand in front of her daughter. “We had no choice, Veynish.”

Veynish pivoted towards her a bit unsteadily, leaning dangerously. “Ain’t no carver touching my brother, you hear me?”

“He’s my husband as well as your brother, and a father besides. This is mine to say. And I’m saying we have no other choice and there’s an end to it.”

“Ain’t an end to nothing, woman. Get that carver out of here. Now.”

Tildy wasn’t one to hide behind her mother’s skirts—she shook free and said, “The herbalist is drunker than you and an old husk besides! Hasn’t had his wits in years and couldn’t have done nothing to help da’ even if he had, and there’s no other healer for miles. We need the carver. Anybody’s going now, it ought to be you!”

Veynish took a step forward, voice low and warbling with drink and rage. “You best tell your whelp to mind her tongue, Girta.”

This was spiraling quickly, and not at all in a good direction. Plus, I had yet another name to keep track of. I said, “I was invited here to save a man. Which I intend to do. But I need to act quickly, so—”

He wheeled back to me. “Shut your mouth, scardevil bitch.”

“There is no mistaking what I am,” I replied, “though I do take a bit of offense at the name. Scardevil, I mean. Bitch is often accurate. Still,” I pointed to a scar crawling over the back of my hand, “most of these represent someone I healed and—”

“Or slaughtered,” Veynish said with what seemed like a sneer, though his bushy mustache covered most of it.

“Or *healed*—let’s focus on that, shall we? Because that is precisely what I’m attempting to do here. Heal your brother. Though I’m rapidly running out of time to do so.”

Veynish’s hand settled on the axe slung on his belt—there was no mistaking the reception I was getting from this bastard. “I know your butchering kind, carver. Got conscripted, fought battles that weren’t none of mine. Four years running, in the swamps, in the lowlands, skirmishes, pitched battles, the lot. Fighting for those bloody bastards. Ask anyone, go on and ask.” He ran a broad thumb down the split flesh of his nose. “Got this as a souvenir and more like it besides. So, I been on campaigns, and I seen what you scardevils do. You can close flesh up alright, but only to sever twice as much. Butchers, all!”

He nodded three times as he glared at me, working himself to a lather. “The scardevil in our company, he got a taste for it, couldn’t stop himself. Liked destruction too much. Killed half our battalion. That what happened to you, carver? That why you’re out here, preying on the poor and misbegotten now? Like the bloodletting too much? Lose control and get kicked out or run? That it, you butcher whore?”

I held the dagger next to my thigh as he ranted, kept the blade trained against my flesh. It would be easy enough to strike him down if needed. But I suspected

that wouldn't lead to a full purse no matter how much his family disliked the drunken fool.

I looked at Girta. "His threats and curses won't prevent me from doing my work—he is right on that score, I have performed on more battlefields than I care to remember and can suffer distractions—but I am here by choice and will depart by choice, and just now I'm leaning toward the latter."

Girta whispered something to Tildy who whipped the hanging woven mat aside and ran through the longhouse. Then Girta gave the uncle a level stare. "Veynish, I know you mean well, but you need to leave. It's my decision. This is the law."

Veynish flinched when he heard *law* but she pressed on. "And I made my decision. This mender is healing Bornish. You don't have to approve, but you got to accept."

"Mender? She's nothing but a murderer, Girta," Veynish said, trying for wheedling but lacking the charm or intelligence to convince anyone other than himself. "A monster. That's what carvers do, that's all they know. They slaughter and destroy. Do you want that filth touching him, laying hands on him? She—"

"He'll die if we do nothing. That is what *I* know. Leave. Now."

Veynish was shaking his head when Tildy returned, two burly villagers in tow.

They ignored me, which was more than fine. The taller one with a birthmark on his cheek like an oversized radish said, "Time to go, Vey. You got to go."

Veynish turned to me, bloodshot eyes filled with hate. I thought he might pull the axe—I got ready to spring and roll away.

Then he shouted at Girta. "You'll regret this, the lot of you! I swear it, just see if you don't!"

One of the villagers tried to gently take Veynish by the elbow but he shrugged it off, pushed the other

aside, and stormed out. The men followed him, probably to be sure he wouldn't come back.

I recalled the bloodied, broken soldiers I'd saved on some horrible campaign or another, but far more vividly and frequently the many more I'd riven, struck down, slaughtered for all time. Veynish hadn't been wrong on that score either.

But that was an abandoned life and had nothing to do with the damaged man in front of me. I was a mender now.

Time to mend.

I turned to Tildy. "Fetch a hefty log or something else I can destroy. The bigger the better. I'd rather not bring your walls or roof crashing down."

She gulped, nodded, and ran off again. Always running, that one.

Girta looked at me, face strained, lips tight. She whispered, "Can you save him? Truly?"

"Remains to be seen. But I will certainly try. Step out of the light, please."

I didn't really need her to—I would be healing by feel rather than sight—but I never liked anyone looming. Loomers made me uncomfortable.

As she retreated a few steps, I pulled the bloody bandage back again and held my hand over her husband's wound again but didn't touch his body. Closing my eyes, I reached out with my mind, felt the sheared edges of skin, the lacerated muscle, the torn blood vessels, and going deeper, the punctured organ. They entirely removed whatever he'd been impaled on, no tiny pieces remained in the cavity, so that was good.

As terrible gaping holes in the torso went, it was relatively clean. He'd lost a lot of blood, three ribs were broken, his lung was damaged, and he likely had a small infection, but he was salvageable.

I tightened my focus, closed my hand in a fist, imagined his flesh pulling back together, reversing the violent impact that caused the wound in the first place.

His body responded, knitting itself back together as best as I could manage, and in the instances where I couldn't seal vessels perfectly again, I closed off any that might continue to bleed.

As I healed him, I drew his damage into my body, felt it building inside my own flesh. Not as a wound, not yet, but the horrible potential for one—a tight ball of tension roving around my gut that felt like it was tugging all my own organs after it and robbing me of breath. It was like a wild animal trapped in a cage, pacing, looking for a place to escape, growing larger and more furious with every pass. And it would be impossible to trap for long. My body would never contain it.

I held the damage inside while I continued healing the man in front of me, drawing his ribs back in place and mending them true, restoring flesh, closing off his wound, sealing his body.

When I finished, I opened my eyes and saw Tildy still cradling a huge log. "Put it down, girl! Step back! Now!" Tildy dropped the log and I aimed for the center, unleashing the stored damage in my body before it erupted inside me.

The log exploded as if it had been sundered by an invisible giant with a very large invisible axe, the separate pieces flying apart, slamming into the nearby wall, a few ricocheting off me.

I wiped the sweat off my brow, took a deep breath, and looked at the man. Bornish. Far too many names.

He sat up and opened his eyes. Wide, in fact, incredibly alert. He was staring right at me.

Girta dropped down, knelt alongside him, crying, laughing, holding him tight as she scolded him for climbing on the temple. Tildy was there too, arms wrapped around her father as she buried her head against his chest.

A leper stood a better chance of getting a hug than I did, but I still almost smiled.

Bornish would need a great deal of rest and would never win a foot race again (or perhaps climb too many ladders, all for the better), but when his scar showed up on my flesh in a day or two like a pale shark breaking the surface of the water, it would be because he was alive and not because he was someone else I slaughtered.

That was something.

I might have even felt good about the whole thing if it hadn't been for the man's haunted stare.

Bornish knew a carver had been inside him, manipulating his flesh, his body. Saving him, yes, but it was a very uncomfortable bit of knowledge for most. Tended to give the sweats or shivers.

I accepted my payment, some genuine if distant gratitude, and went on my way.

Walking back through the woods at dusk alone was only marginally better than walking toward the dreaded hamlet in the first place. I was repeatedly stung by vicious flies, nearly lost a shoe in the muck, and almost turned an ankle trying to retrieve it. The only consolation was no longer being accompanied by a yammering girl. (Even if I'd come to appreciate Tildy's verve. Somewhat.)

But the solitude and silence didn't last long.

Something snapped a wet branch off to my right. And there was rustling somewhere in the brush as well. As much as I hoped it was a wild hog, a fox, or simply my imagination, I knew none of those were likely.

I drew my dagger, took a deep breath, steadied myself, and then slashed my thigh three times.

The pain was blinding, scouring fire—I bit back a cry, my eyes welling up with tears as I forced myself to swipe the blade across my leg a final time. I might have collapsed right then had I not healed each of the wounds on the spot, reconnecting the muscle, sealing the flesh back together.

That was the easy part. Shallow wounds were much simpler than anything involving organs and bones and arteries.

Holding that damage inside myself—not releasing the backlash out into the world immediately—that was the difficult part. The longer I kept it trapped in my body, the more its potential for violence grew, the more deadly the actual release would be. And not knowing what I was up against, I wanted to be prepared to dole out as much destruction as possible.

So I held it tight, feeling it pounding in my chest, churning in my guts, the damage doubling, trebling, wanting to escape so badly but more than willing to turn back on me very soon if I didn't set it loose.

I'd seen it happen before—a carver at the siege of Ashfort healed a dozen comrades, held that damage inside himself too long after, hoping to take out a tower. But his back split open neck to belt, shattered ribs poking out every which way as his body turned inside out. He was dead before he hit the dirt.

Two scraggy bearded figures stepped out of the trees ten paces in front of me, one wielding a boar spear, the other a two-handed axe, though he shifted it back and forth as if he were uncertain about what he intended to do with it.

Would-be bandits, no doubt.

I could have struck the pair down on the spot, but I clenched my teeth, my whole-body vibrating, and tried another tack first. "You're from the village, yes? Then you know I have coin. But you also know what I'm capable of. Step aside." I stared them in the eyes, one and then the other. "Step aside and walk away. No coin is worth your dying over, especially the little in my purse."

They looked at each other, maybe startled at having been spoken to, and then turned back to me. The axe man cocked his head as if he were seeing me for the first time, or was trying to look through me.

No, not through me, *past* me for. . . a signal?

I was a fool.

They rushed me. I wanted to turn and face the threat behind me but fixed on the bastard with the boar spear instead, aimed for his chest, imagined shattering his sternum. I missed high but he toppled sideways just the same, his head caved in as if he'd been struck by an invisible maul.

I was about to release an explosion of violence into the axe man when I felt a terrible jolt of radiating pain in the small of my back. I pivoted, saw a man with a bow behind me on the trail reaching for another arrow in the quiver at his hip. Bald pate, braided saffron beard. That wretched uncle.

I threw stored damage his way, aiming wildly, panic welling up with the pain.

Veynish's kneecap exploded and he dropped to the loamy turf, screaming.

I tried to spin back around to face the axe man but my left leg gave out and I dropped to my knee halfway there. He raised the axe up high right above me, ready to chop and split me in twain, his forearms corded, his face a gruesome rictus.

I released everything I had left inside with a swipe of my hand, sure it was too late, sure it wouldn't be enough.

The axe man staggered back. He reached down to his neck with one hand, blood dribbling around his fingers and onto the front of his tunic as he touched the gurgling slit in his throat.

He took another few steps, dropped the axe, and fell into a bush.

The pain was everywhere, my whole torso aflame with it. Shaking, I looked down and saw what I feared. The arrowhead was jutting out of my side.

I suppose I should have been relieved it wasn't lodged in a bone or an organ.

My vision blurred, partly from the tears, partly from the gray splotches closing in around the edges.

Had to focus. I could heal this, just had to avoid blacking out, not succumb to the pain. Remove the arrow, heal myself, that was all.

I reached behind me with both hands, every small movement sending a fresh web of torment around my back and belly. I felt for the shaft, grabbed it tight with trembling fingers, my vision narrowing and teetering more.

I counted to three, tried to snap the shaft and failed, wailing as I nearly blacked out. It felt like a red-hot poker had been rammed through my guts and was slowly being twisted about.

I wanted nothing more than to roll onto my side, sink into the muck, and close my eyes. But I couldn't heal myself with that thing inside, and if I closed my eyes without healing, I might never open them again.

Tears streaming, breath ragged, and pain approaching unbearable, I reached back again, taking hold of the shaft once more.

I breathed out my nose in short bursts, used every bit of strength, and cracked the shaft in half. Then I fell forward, slamming my head on the wet ground but bracing myself so I didn't land on the arrow still sticking out of me. That would never do.

Reaching down, I took hold of the bloody arrowhead, my hand shaking so badly I could barely close my fingers around the shaft, whorls of bright light fighting the growing shadows in my vision. Then I bellowed like a wounded bear as I drew the remainder of the arrow out of me.

Crying and laughing, I dropped it in a puddle of blood and mud and healed the wound. The pain vanished as if it never existed as I bound my flesh together again, front to back.

I stood up on unsteady legs and was about to discharge the damage out into the woods to be rid of it when I heard a twang.

Another arrow buzzed past my shoulder, so close the fletching kissed my sleeve.

I spun, saw that bastard Veynish limping through the woods towards me, and drove the damage into him with as much fury as I could muster.

He flew back into a cedar, partly because he had only been balancing on one good leg, and partly from the force of the assault. Then he slid down the bark, a gushing hole in his stomach, his mouth open in shock.

The wound wasn't altogether different from the one his brother had. Which seemed fitting. Though Veynish's wound was more grievous for certain—through and through.

Blood welled around his hands as he tried in vain to staunch the flow, to keep his insides where they belonged. He looked around desperately for help. Finding none, he finally turned to me and croaked, "Mend me."

I nearly did so on impulse. I'd adopted the life of healer for many years despite the fact that I'd largely been reviled, feared, and persecuted for it. I'd convinced myself my days of rending flesh were over; I was only mending now, kept convincing myself, over and over until it stuck. Only a mender, only a mender.

It was a difficult thing to suddenly set aside. Even for a bastard who'd shot me in the back.

I walked over and stood in front of him, kicked the bow away from his hand. I watched the blood soak into his trousers, looked at his mangled kneecap, and counted the arrows that had fallen out of his quiver as I made my decision.

He shouted, "For the love of the gods, fix me, woman!"

"No," I replied. "No, I don't believe I will. I bear neither you nor the gods any love, and I'm quite sure

the feeling is mutual. Though I have to ask: why did you come after me? I saved your brother after all. Why hunt me?"

Veynish struggled to get up, roared, then fell back against the crooked cedar, his hand and forearm slick and sticky with red. "Told you already, you murdered half my battalion, my friends. Guttled and sliced and smashed them all."

"Hmmm. I've done many unsavory things in my life, but I'm confident you're confusing me with someone else."

"Your *kind!*" he spat. "You carvers. The same, all of you. And you all deserve to die like that. Like *this.*" Veynish looked in the direction of his dead comrades farther up the trail, then stared down at his terrible wound, bearded chin on his chest. He seemed disbelieving. Then he coughed and quietly said, "You... you killed the lot of us."

"So it appears. Though to be fair I just repaid in kind. Well, with a little augmentation perhaps."

He licked his lips and looked at me, eyes full of loathing. And fear. "You *murdered* me, you bitch!"

"Fine, have it your way. I murdered you. How are you dismayed? As you yourself astutely pointed out, I'm nothing but a carver. A butcher. A monster. Isn't that right? Those were your words, were they not? I'm not a mender, not a hated healer, I'm a *scardevil*. That is my nature, my lot." I looked at my bloodied hands. "I suppose I should thank you for reminding me what I do best. Though I won't. Wasted breath, after all."

"So, you made yourself my enemy and I killed you. And in a day or so I'll have a new scar to remember you by for it. More's the pity, too—I would much rather forget you entirely."

His next scream was likely intended to be a great rebuke or profound curse of some sort, but it fragmented into wordless agony as it left his mouth.

I nodded. “You should continue that impressive yowling for as long as you can—it might keep the predators away while you lie dying. Though it could attract them as well. Difficult to say, isn’t it?” Then I pointed at the dagger on his belt. “There is no shame in finishing yourself off before you get eaten, though. However, I should warn you, turning a blade on your own body is no easy thing. No, no easy thing at all.”

I left Veynish there and continued through the darkening wood.

His shrieking and howling followed me for a bit, growing weaker, finally dying off until even the echoes were no more.

The remainder of the walk was of course not lovely (no, never lovely, never that), but it was unexpectedly calm. Peaceful.

Affirming, even.

Jeff Salyards Growing up, Jeff wanted to be a jewel thief, a stuntman, or a writer. He eventually (and reluctantly) conceded that he was too clumsy to pull off the first two, but he continues cranking away at making the third a reality. He is the author of the Bloodsunder's Arc trilogy.

Jeff lives near Chicago with his wife and three daughters. He is hopelessly outnumbered.

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