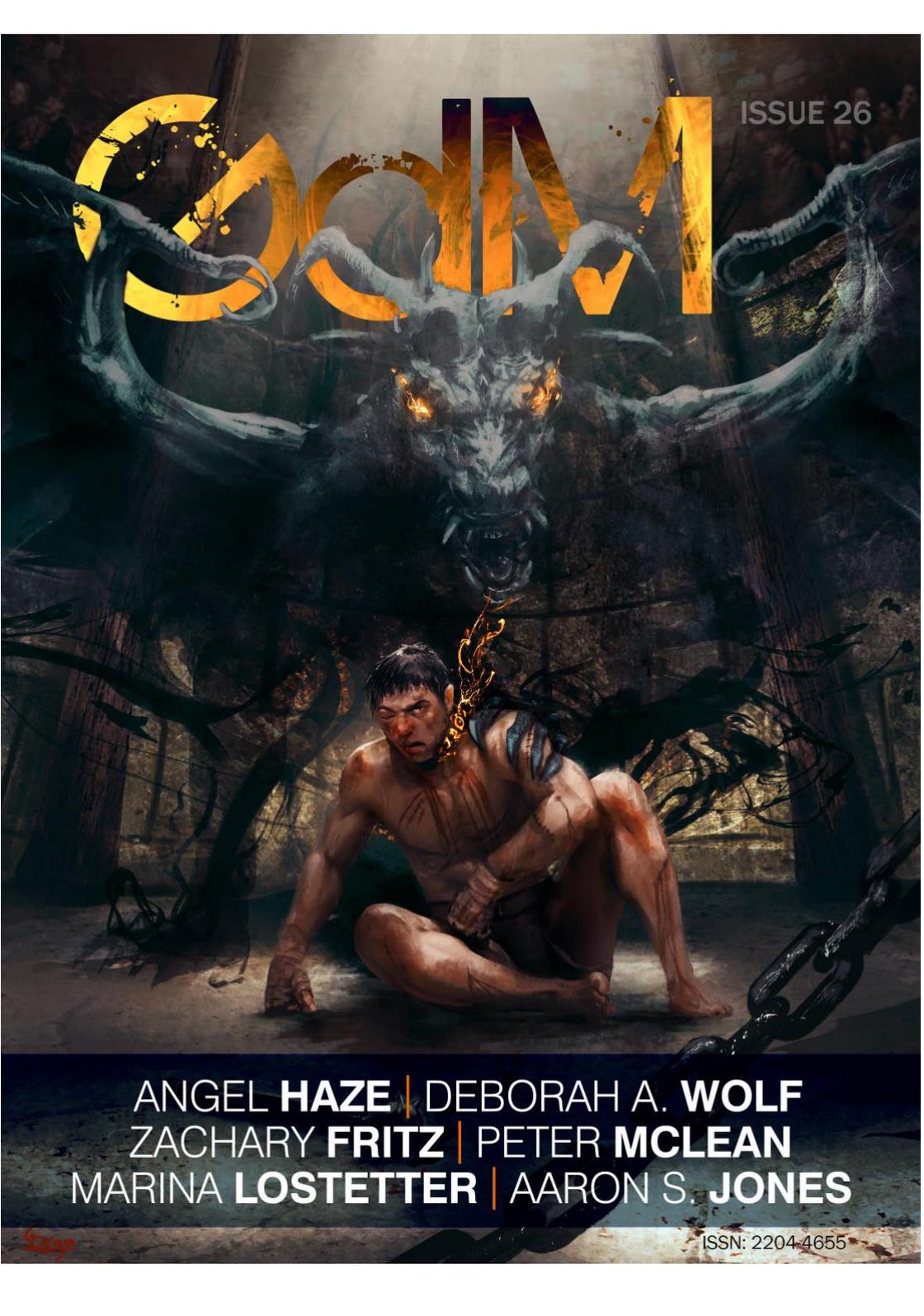


ISSUE 26



ANGEL HAZE | DEBORAH A. WOLF  
ZACHARY FRITZ | PETER MCLEAN  
MARINA LOSTETTER | AARON S. JONES

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# Contents

## **From the Editor**

Adrian Collins

## **Wretched**

Deborah A. Wolf

## **An Interview with Peter McLean**

Tom Smith

## **Review: The Last Watch**

Author: J.S. Dewes

Review by malrubius

## **Morality Aside**

Zachary Fritz

## **The Future is Grimdark**

Aaron S. Jones

## **An Interview with Marina Lostetter**

Beth Tabler

## **Monster Within**

Angel Haze

# From the Editor

ADRIAN COLLINS

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As Australia shifts from fire, to plague, to flood, and apparently now just waits for famine to drop its six pack into the esky and join the apocalypse party, I am so happy to bring you the 26th issue of *Grimdark Magazine*. This quarter's issue is full of exclusive short stories, a tall stack of interviews, and an article on the future being grimdark (not that we have a biased opinion on that, or anything).

With so much happening in the world, I once again invite you to grab your favourite beverage, kick your feet up on the corpse of your vanquished enemy (or friend that got in the way), tell your bannerman he has your colours at the wrong angle, and take a couple hours out of your day to enjoy some damned fine fiction.

Happy reading, champions. Stay safe.

Adrian Collins  
Founder

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# Wretched

DEBORAH A. WOLF

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“Wretched child!”

I ducked, an’ the heavy iron pot tumbled through the air above my head to bang into the wall, spraying hot burnt porritch across the room like pig’s brains. Missed me by a fair bit, it did, because lucky for me Da was in his cups an’ his aim was turrible.

His temper was worse’n his aim, though, an’ I dint want my brains splatterin the wall with all the other stains, so I slipped out the door quicks a shadow an’ pretended I dint hear Da hollerin for me to get my arse back in there.

I’d sneak back in later an’ clean up the mess once he was asleep. Maybe find some roots ‘n grain ‘n such for more porritch an’ maybe that would be enough to put him in a better mood.

Or maybe I’d just keep running this time, all the way through the woods an’ over the mountains, all the way to the sea.

I blinked in the sunshine, surprised that the world can be ugly on the inside an’ pretty on the outside. The day whooshed out all round me like a sheet shaken free of bedbugs ‘n lice, all fresh ‘n clean.

Goose hist at me an’ I hist back meaner, angry because Da had scared me an’ because I was hungry. I wisht I’d a eaten the porritch before he thrown it, burnt ‘n all.

“I could eat *you*,” I told Goose, but he just hist at me again an’ flapped his wings to say he was the boss of me. He was, too, an’ I had the bruises on my arse to show it. But someday I’d be bigger’n him, an’ *then* we’d

see who scairt who. *Then* we'd see who was the wretched one.

I skettled away on account of Da might come after me, an' besides if I helped Daisy with the big chores maybe I'd save my arse a whuppin. Prolly not, but it was worth a throw an' anyhow Daisy was always so sweet when I helped. So sweet her name shoulda been Honey. So sweet I couldn't even hate her.

She warnt in the chicken yard or the pighouse, an' she warnt with our cow Lessa neither, but they all been fed so I knew she been there. She musta got up early an' snuck out on accounta Da bein in his cups. I wisht I'da done the same thing stead of putting on the porritch. I never even got to eat any an' now nobody would 'cept maybe the rats.

I like rats. You kin pop them little shits inna porritch with the barley an' perk it right up.

Since Daisy's chores were all done an' I couldn't see her anywhere, I figured she musta gone round the backaway to the old orchard. It was too early in the year for apples yet, but it was too far for Da to bother lookin lest he was real mad, an' the river curlt most of the way 'round the orchard deep an' killin' cold so nunna them town folks kin sneak up on you there.

The only other place Daisy coulda gone was the village, an' I dint think she gone there. Lately them village boys been bothering her on accounta her pretty hair an' other stuff, so she been stayin home. Me, I never liked them village boys anyway acuss they calt me a bastid an' threw rocks an' then I'd get in trouble bad for cussen em out. I got beat bad for cussen on accounta Da said I was a witch bastid an' I had the Evil Eye, sames Old Witch Willer downta way. My cussen might come true, he said.

Sometimes I wisht it would.

Da allus said he was gonna sell me ta Old Woman Willer like a sucklin pig. I wisht he would, but I knew he was lyin. If I'da gone he'da had to burn his own porritch.

Da was as lazy as he were wicked, I heard Marten the innkeeper say so when we brought im some salt pork for pies, an' he warnt lyin.

So I let mesself out the crickety little gate past the chickens an' went thata way toward the old orchard. I was cold, but my wrap was inna house an' no way was I goin back in there till Da past out again. Better to be cold than get my brain splattered all over the wall. When you're dead, you're never warm.

Down ta path, through the willers an' over the crick, what was still little enough to jump over because the mountain snows hant melt yet, through the willers on the other side an' then I come out into the meadow.

The old apple orchard was the prettiest place I known. The sun always shined there, least that's how it seemed to me, even when it rained. Daisies an' lady's lace an' merry-golds far's the eye could see, an' old apple trees like grey gaffers all bent down tryinta see their toes. It lookt like the baby quilt my Gammer had made for me when I was a wee little thing, afore she died.

I wisht I still had that quilt.

I wisht I still had my Gammer. She used to yell at Da when he'd hit me, an' make him stop. She called me her Little Bird an' whispered that someday when I was all big I could fly away anywhere I liked, past the forest an' over the mountains, all the way to the sea.

"Posey!"

I stopped all a sudden like a scared rabbit. My heart went *dum dum dum* an' my eyes felt near big as my head. I could hear Daisy, but I couldn't see her, an' I thought she were a ghost. Maybe Da got to her last night, when he come home an' I was still sleepin, an' done for her like he done for our dog Hambone.

"Posey! You silly little piggy, over here!"

Then I saw her, sittin down with her skirt all spread our round her like the soft cloth on the innkeeper's tables, hair as gold as sunshine an' a pile of flowers in

her lap. She was makin daisy chains, that was all, sittin in the sunshine makin daisy chains sweet as pie an' waitin for Da to sober up so she could come home an' set things right.

"Daisy!" I shouted, an' my voice came out like a squeak, I'd been so skairt. I skipped over an' sat in the dirt next to her, feeling like a popper sittin next to a princess.

Daisy lookt me up 'n down, frownin a bit. "You okay? You look skairt."

I dint tell her I thought she was dead. I never had a mama to show me nice manners, but even I knowed that'd be rude. "I'm okay. Da threw the porritch at me but I ducked."

"You burnt it again?"

"Yeah."

Daisy sighed an' slit a daisy's throat so she could push another stem into the chain. "You really are wretched, aren't you? How many times I gotta tell you not to build the fire up so hot? You have to learn, Posey. Be good, an' he won't beat you so much."

"Yeah he will," I said all miserable, snuggling in close to her like a kittn. "Acause I'm a bastid."

She sighed even more deeply, an' a frown drooped her face. "But you have to try. I won't be here forever to keep you safe, an' you'll have to see to yourself when I'm gone."

"You won't leave me," I said, sure as I said it that it was so. I had a way of Knowing when a thing was true, like the funny feeling in your gut when you let go the rope swing an' hang in the air just before you fall *p/lop* into the lake. Like that.

But I couldn't say so, because then Daisy'd say I was a witch too. A bastid witch like my real da.

"I will, though," she said, an' her hands went real still. She looked down at her hands real sad-like. "I will be leaving, Posey, real soon. I'm gonna marry Calem."

Calem. The innkeeper's handsome yaller-headed son what been hanging round since last Harvestide like a hongry pup, sniffin' at Daisy's skirts. Calem. That snotty bastid what threw stones at me if'n I came to the village by mesself. Allus put'n on airs like the muds on his boots was better'n the mud on everyone else's. *Calem.*

I got mad. Real, real mad. Then I stuffed it down quick, like stuffing burnt porritch down yer throat afore the taste hit, because when I got mad I skairt mesself. Mad was a Feeling, like Knowing, all murky an' dangerous like bubbles come up from the bottom of a slimy old well. You knowed sommat was down there, but you dint really wanna know what.

"Awww, Wretch, it'll be okay," Daisy said. She gave me a one-arm hug with the chain of flowers still in her hand.

"No it won't," I said all sulky like, pushing her arm away. Stupid flowers. Stupid, pretty flowers. "Yer gonna go away an' live with Calem in the inn like a princess, an' I'll still be here living with Da like a popper. An' don't call me Wretch."

"I'm sorry." She put her hands in her lap an' sat fiddlin with the flowers. I could see now she was braiding into a bride's crown. "Maybe Da will let you come live with us, me'n Calem, after we're married an' all."

"He won't," I said, an' I was so mad it got stuck in my throat. "Da won't let me go because he hates me an' wants me to be miserble, an' a he's too lazy to do the chores but I'm too little ta feed the pigs an' I'll fall inna sty with Clover an' get et an' it's all your fault!"

Then I started bawlin like a baby, I couldn't help it, an' when I tried to wipe my face on my sleeve I just smeared tears n snot round my face. I never been so miserble in all my life. It was good I haint eaten the porritch cause I'da throwed it up, I was that wretched.

“Aw, Posey,” Daisy said, an’ her face squinched up like she was gonna cry too. “Aw, sweetie, it will be okay. You’ll see. I’ll come visit you lots, I promise, an’ Calem’s ma said I could have some of their flour-sacks to make you some pretty new dresses. It’ll be okay, I promise it will.”

Her eyes were beggin me to say *yes, everything will be sweet as peaches*, but I was still tryinta stuff the angry lump down my throat so I just nodded an’ scooched a lil closer.

It warnt okay, atall. First time Daisy was gone an’ Da got in his cups, like as not he’d beat me to death an’ throw me in the shit-pit like he done for Hambone. But I dint want Daisy to cry so I wiped the tears n snot as best I could an’ started in on braiding daisies.

“You gonna do it at Beltane?” Purt’ near everyone got married then, acuss of planting an’ babies an’ all that.

“Yes.” She smiled then, a quick little thing like a fox runnin cross the chicken yard, there an’ gone, an’ a Knowing came into my heart—Daisy dint just get traded off like most girls, she *wanted* to marry Calem.

“*Daisy!*” She blusht when I said her name, so I knowed I was right. “Do you *like* him?”

She shrugged an’ blusht redder. “Calem’s okay.” She peeked at me from under her long lashes an’ started laughin. “You goose! It’s okay to like the man yer gonna marry, silly Wretch.”

“Don’t call me Wretch.” It was more habit than anything. I been called Wretch my whole life, proolly afore I was called Posey. I closed my mouth an’ tried to smooth the frown from my face, but my feelins were runnin all over like chickens stirred up by that fox.

Acourse I knowed Daisy would marry. Alla girls married, mostly they was traded away by their Da for pigs er goats er such. It was a Thing You Do, like bein borned an’ growin’ outta your dresses an’ dyin. But I’d never thought of her bein’ happy.

Happy was one of them powerful words like Knowing an' Angry, 'cept it was like fresh meat or soft bread. Something everyone else got to eat while I watched, cold an' hungry. An' now Daisy was gonna go off with Calem an' live like a princess an' be Happy, while I stayed home with Da an' live in the mud with the pigs, an' be Wretched.

"Posey!" Daisy snatched the daisy chain from my hands. "What have you done?"

When she frowned, she looked like Da.

"I'm sorry." I hugged mesself a little an' rocked back an' forth. I wisht all those bad feelings would just go away. "Don't be mad."

Daisy sighed an' patted my knee.

"I won't be mad," she said, "If you promise not to be mad at me for leaving. That's just the way the world is, Posey, an' there's nothin you 'n me can do about it."

"Aw, Daisy, I ain't mad." I reached up to her face, surprising us both, an' patted her cheek. Her skin was pale an' soft as petals. "I want you to be happy, I really do, smilin' an' wearin' nice dresses an' livin' in that big ole inn house like a princess. I just wisht—" my fingers left a dirt smear on her pretty face, an' the more I rubbed at it the worst it got "—I wisht you could stay right here with me, for ever'n ever. Just like this, sittin inna flowers an' sunshine."

"Aw." She reacht up to touch my hand but froze alla sudden, lookin at my face like I skairt her. Her mouth was half open like she was gonna say my name, but she never did.

An' now I guess she never will.

Her cheek where I'd touched it got kinda dark an' a first I thought she was blushin, but her face kept getting darker an' kinda yaller. She jumped up like she was gonna run but then just stood there, fists by her side, kinda odd an' straight-like an' her face was round, round an' yaller as the harvest moon, her hair went white like Old Witch Willer's, an' then she shrankt all in

on herself an' shrankt an' changed an' shrankt an' *poof*, she was a daisy for real, standin' there in the field with all the other daisies an' not goin' anywhere.

Just like I wisht.

I was breathin' real fast, like I been runnin a long time, an' my whole body tingled all over. It felt good, real good, an' then I felt bad for feelin' good because now Daisy warnt gonna get married an' be a happy princess livin in the big house with handsome Calem. She been turnt into a *flower* an' I was the one what done it.

"I'm sorry, Daisy," I whispered, an' tried to be sorry in my heart. I squinched my eyes shut an' wisht real hard that my sister would be a girl again but when I peeped em open there she was, still a flower.

I was a witch, just like Da allus said, an' if anyone found out they'd—

*Oh!* I thought. *A witch!*

I hopped a little, I was that excited, an' clapped my hands. "Daisy!" I said. "I'ma go straightaway an' get Old Witch Willer. She'll know what to do. She'll put you to right, sure she will." I just hoped that when she was a girl again Daisy would keep her mouth shut about what I done, because I dint wanna get burnt or hanged or drowned fer bein a witch.

I piled the daisy chain round the bottom of Daisy's stem, what woulda been her feet, on accounta she looked just like alla other daisies an' I'd wanna know which one was my sister when I came back with Old Witch Willer. Then I turned an' ran fer home fast as I could.

My mind was runnin' fast, too. If you went to Old Witch Willer for a poppet or whatnot, you best bring her some eggs or butter or a bit of cloth. I dint know how much it'd cost to turn a flower back into a sister, but prolly a lot more than eggs. Clover had a litter of sucklin pigs bout ready to come offa teat, an' Da was fixinta

take em to the market afore Beltane, so I thought I'd take one a them to pay the witch.

But in all my thinkins I'd forgotten about Da. An' that was dangerous.

I ran alla way up the path, cross the crick an through the woods, jumpin' over logs an' such like I was a deer bein chased by hound dogs. Through the rickety fence, chickens flappin' an' yellin' at me ever which way, an burst through the door into the pigs barn—

--*wham!* into Da.

He fell right on his arse, an' I stood there on my toes whirlin' my arms round like a windmill, tryin' not to fall atop of him.

I never seen Da surprised before. I seen him laugh, I seen him so far in his cups he pist hisself, I seen him killin mad, but I never seen him surprised. My stupid self picked the wrong time to think it was funny, my Da knocked on his arse with his mouth hangin open like a idiot, an' the laugh bust outta me afore I could stop it.

Da moved real fast for a man in his cups.

Afore I could get outta his way he was on his feet an' had ahold of the fronta my shirt, shakin me like a pig with a rat. My head whipped back an' forth like I was tryina say *no, no, no* an' *yes yes yes* all at once.

"Stupid shit bastid!" He kept shakin an shakin me. "Stupid shit bastid!" Then he throwed me away from him, an' my head hit the edge of the open door. I hist through my teeth at the pain an' blinked back tears.

"The shit you doin in here, stupid shit bastid?" he askt. He was pantin an' his eyes were big 'n white alla way round an' he stood straight with his hands in big fists at his side, like Daisy done afore I turnt her to a flower. "You know bettern' to come in here an' get your filthy bad luck near my pigs. You'll pay for this, you little shit." He raised his fists up an shook em at me so I shrank back, tryinta disappear mesself into the wall.

"But that'll wait. I got better things to do than waste my time on a stupid shit bastid today. Where's your

sister? Where's Daisy?" he asked. "I need her ta help me count the pigs. That high-nose Marten is gonna buy all my sucklins fer th' inn on account of his son gonna marry my Daisy, an' I need t' make sure he don't cheat. He's payin real silver." He rubbed his hands together, eyes glintin at the thought of coin money in his purse. "Real silver," he said again.

I dunno if it was cause Da scairt me, or the thought of not having a sucklin pig to give Old Witch Willer ta pay her fer magics, or acuss I'd hit my head so hard on the door, but I opened my mouth an the words fell right out. "I turnt her into a flower."

Fer a minute Da lookt like a pig looks when it been hit between the eyes with an axe but dunt know it's dead yet.

"Ya whut now?"

Ida gived a lot to take them words back, but they was out now. I stood up an' faced him square, lookin right into his eyes. They was bloodshot an bleary an dim as a tallow candle. When I looked at them I knowed that I was just done puttin up with his shit.

"I dint mean to, it was a accident. I was just thinkin how pretty she was, like a daisy fer real, an' how I dint want her to leave us, an' *poof* she turnt into a flower. I know which one she is though, an' I need a sucklin pig to give to Old Witch Willer so she'll turn Daisy back inta Daisy an not a flower."

I'm pretty sure those was the most words I ever said to my Da in one go, an' they lookt to be my last. As they ran outta my mouth Da's face was gettin whiter an' whiter, like pig meat boilin inna pot. I was gettin that funny feelin in my gut again, an' my heart was poundin *dum dum dum* like a runaway horse.

"You lie," he said. "You *lie!*"

I dint say nothin then. We both knowed I warnt lyin. Me an Da just stood there a bit in the stinky pighouse, both of us with our fists clenched, waitin for sommat to happen.

An' then Clover squealed an' set him off.

"Witch!" Da hollered, an' his face was turrible. His eyes bugged out an' his skin was all red like the demons Father Turrow was allus goin on about. "Witch bastid! Witch bastid!" He grabbed up the axe what he used fer killin pigs an' came at me, howlin mad. "I'll kill you!"

An' then that feelin in my chest bust open like a flower bloomin all at once, an' it was the most beautiful thing. I felt like I was huge, like I was a angel with gold wings that could fly me up to Heaven where my mama was. Everything went bright, an' real slow, an' I warnt skairt atall. I lookt at my Da with his devil face an' his pig-killin axe, froze in the air with his mouth hangin open, an' I laughed. I raised my hand up slow's you please an' pointed one finger at him.

"Yer not either gonna kill me," I told him, calm as cold water. "Yer not gonna touch me ever again. Yer not my Da, yer nothin' but a *pig*."

An' *poof*, he was.

Da's axe hit the floor an' Da just stood there blinkin up at me. He made a nice lil pig, black-n-white spotted with a sweet pink nose, not much bigger'n Clover's sucklins. Quick's a whistle I grabbed a sack an' popped it over him, catchin him up before he could get away. I tied that sack up good an' heaved it into a empty pen.

"You wait right there, Da!" I said, an' giggled. It seemed to me that I could trade him to Old Witch Willer instead of one a Clover's sucklins, an' ask her to help me turn Daisy back into a girl again.

Or.

Or I could... not. Anyway, I had as much time as I wisht to think about it.

When I stepped out of the stinky pighouse an' into the bright sun I was surprised to see that it was mornin still, as fine a day as anyone coulda wisht for, sweet an' crisp as apples.

Daisy was a daisy, an' Da was a pig, an' I dint feel wretched about any of it, not one bit.

**Deborah A. Wolf** is the author of the epic trilogy *The Dragon's Legacy* (*The Dragon's Legacy*, *The Forbidden City*, and *The Seared Lands*) and *Split Feather*, a contemporary work of speculative fiction which explores the wildest side of Alaska.

Her books have been acclaimed as outstanding literary fantasy and shortlisted for such notable honors as the Gemmell award.

Deborah currently lives in northern Michigan. She has four kids (three of whom are grown and all of whom are exceptional), an assortment of dogs and horses, and two cats, one of whom she suspects is possessed by a demon.

Deborah is represented by Mark Gottlieb of Trident Media Group.

# An Interview with Peter McLean

TOM SMITH

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Greetings grimlings! This issue I join you from a dingy bar in Ellinburg where I have finally cornered Peter McLean for a chin wag. In case you are unfamiliar, Peter is the author of the fantastic series *The War for the Rose Throne* which started with *Priest of Bones*. If you haven't read this series (which still has two more installments coming), I highly recommend rectifying that situation posthaste!

Peter, thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule and welcome!

**[PM]** I'll allow that you've found me. Pull up a stool, pour yourself a brandy, and let's talk business.

**[GdM]** Let's start off with your leading man—Tomas Piety. He is an interesting contradiction of a man. A priest from the army who basically came from being a small-town mob boss and then returned back to it after playing preacher in the war. What inspired such a complex character for you?

**[PM]** Ah, Tomas is a reflection of the archetypical gangster transposed into a fantasy world. He's the abused working-class kid who worked his way up from petty crime in the slums to organised crime in the big city, and built a criminal empire with his younger brother. The whole priest thing was a strange development. I had the title "Priest of Bones" written on

a post-it note on my desk long before I had the faintest idea what it meant. It was just one of those shower thoughts, you know? I thought, “That would be cool”, but at the time I had no coherent idea what “that” actually was. Once I had put together the Elizabethan-but-sort-of-post-WWI vibe I wanted, the idea of Our Lady of Eternal Sorrows just came to me. She is the death goddess that the conscript soldiers worship in a desperate attempt to persuade Her not to take their life today. When their company’s priest falls in battle Tomas, being the only other soldier with any leadership experience, is chosen as his natural successor. He’s not a religious man in the slightest, but he has an innate ability to make people want to confide in him, to say their confessions.

And of course, the war had a huge effect on him as it did everyone else who fought. I was really going for the Great War experience with his memories of Abingon, the horrors he lived through that he will never forget. So much fantasy focusses on epic wars, but there is often little acknowledgement of the legacy that war leaves in its wake. That is something I’ve been trying to redress throughout this series.

**[GdM]** Now onto Tomas’ second—Bloody Anne. I have to say that as far as supporting casts go, she is one of my favorites. Loyal as hell to Tomas and a hard-nosed, badass in her own right. We all see constant criticisms online when men write strong female characters. Was it hard as a man writing Bloody Anne? Also, was she inspired by anyone you know?

**[PM]** Oh gods I absolutely adore Bloody Anne. I basically wrote her as the best mate I wish I had, in the same way I have always wanted Druss the Legend to be my dad (no, I’m not all that much younger than Druss now, shut up). Was it hard to write her as a woman? No, I don’t think so. I have met a fair number

of women in my 48 years of life, and am actually married to a real live one. Women aren't a different species, and I've never really understood the perceived problem with this. Anne is, I hope, a living breathing person in *War for the Rose Throne* like anyone else is.

**[GdM]** We've seen Tomas evolve as the series moves on and he matures. Without spoiling too much, recent installments of this series have shown his role even as a crime boss drastically change due to what I—in the interest of remaining spoiler free for the readers will call—outside pressure. Will we be seeing Mr. Piety expand his operation into a bigger arena in future stories?

**[PM]** Oh, and then some. The archetypical gangster's story arc can only go in a few directions. He dies, he turns snitch, or he goes into politics. Again, trying to avoid spoilers, but bear in mind we have the fantasy equivalent of the CIA/MI6/Gestapo involved in this and... yeah. Tomas' life gets a *lot* more complicated after *Priest of Lies*.

**[GdM]** One thing I really liked about the Rose Throne setting is it focuses more on the gritty underbelly of the world and the magic system doesn't overpower the story. It is used sparingly and not a tool to drive the plot forward. What was your thought process like when building this world in your head?

**[PM]** I write the sort of books that R.J. Barker so wonderfully described as “historical fiction but if a wizard had been there”. Some people call that grimdark but as absolutely no one can agree what that actually means I'm a bit over the term, to be honest. But gritty underbelly, definitely. This is a semi-industrial world where the working classes in the cities toil in

factories and mills, and many people can't read or write. The City Guard (police) are corrupt as all hell, and the people actually in charge aren't who everyone thinks they are. So, nothing like the modern world whatsoever...

I wanted to have magic, because it's ultimately a fantasy series, but I wanted magic to be an uncommon thing, feared and mistrusted. Even those few cunning folk who can work magic don't necessarily know how they do it, or fully understand what using their powers is actually doing to them. That's something you see a lot more of in *Priest of Gallows*.

**[GdM]** Let's shift gears for a moment. Something we've bonded over online besides fantasy books—a mutual love of martial arts. For the readers, what is your background in martial arts and how does that influence your writing of fight scenes?

**[PM]** I haven't trained for years now but when I was younger I studied a system based on Chinese Wudang kung fu. I got up to black sash level and taught for a few years, but eventually found I didn't have the time to do everything I wanted to do. Something had to go if I wanted to work and write as well, so I dropped the martial arts in the end. I think the main thing I learned, that has definitely carried over into my writing, is that real fights are brutal and extremely short!

**[GdM]** And you knew this one was coming. We both love good whisk(e)ys, you preferring scotch. Does it play any role in your creative process, or is it simply a reward for putting in good work?

**[PM]** You know the expression “creative juices”? Creative juice is a light amber colour and comes in a bottle with “Whisky” written on it.

**[GdM]** What kinds of things sparked your early love of fantasy? I feel like maybe there was a D&D influence in there somewhere.

**[PM]** I did used to play occasionally (AD&D 2e, I'm that old), I but was already a fantasy lover before I discovered it. I kinda grew up with it, really. My mother was an English Lit teacher and Tolkien scholar, and my dad was a big SF reader so I've always been surrounded by the genre.

Mum first read *The Hobbit* to me when I was about six or seven years old, and I loved it. I read *Lord of the Rings* myself when I was a bit older, and then went on to hunt down other things. This being the early 80s there was nothing like as much fantasy about as there is today but I devoured *Sword of Shannara* and then discovered Michael Moorcock and then David Gemmell, and didn't look back from there.

**[GdM]** Which part of the whole writing/publishing process do you find the most challenging? Which part is the most fun?

**[PM]** Honestly, I find writing the first draft the hardest thing. If revisions are like sculpting your statue, drafting is dragging the block of marble into the studio to start with. Hard work, but necessary. I think the most fun is working on developmental edits, once you have your editor's feedback. I've been fortunate enough to work with some of the best editors in the business, and having an experienced eye on your work is invaluable.

**[GdM]** When you complete this series, what is next for you? More books in the same setting or are you plotting something entirely new and different?

**[PM]** I've got something completely different in mind. Something much more "fantasy" than *War for the Rose*

*Throne*. Although I'll be sad to leave Tomas' world behind, his story is very much told by the end of the fourth book. Never rule out a spin-off though, I'd love to do one if there was enough interest.

**[GdM]** And finally, this is your chance to sell the audience on your up-and-coming wares. Tell us what you have coming out and when.

**[PM]** Well the third book of the *War for the Rose Throne* quartet is *Priest of Gallows*, which picks up where *Priest of Lies* ended. That's out May 27 this year, and will be followed by the fourth and final book *Priest of Crowns* in 2022.

For anyone who wants to keep up to date with what I'm up to, I'm @PeteMC666 on Twitter, or my website is at Talonwraith.com

**[GdM]** Peter, again, thank you so much for taking the time. Now, where do they keep the real whisky in this place?

**[PM]** Thanks for talking to me!

# Review: The Last Watch by J.S. Dewes

MALRUBIUS

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*The Last Watch* is the debut novel from author, cinematographer, and video editor J.S. Dewes and is the first book in a new series called, The Divide. It tells the story of the crew of *The Argus*, a spaceship at the edge of the universe, part of a fleet of Sentinels standing guard against the inevitable return of the enemy Viators from beyond the blackness. However, their problems begin without the Viators as they find that the universe is crashing in on them, and somehow they must stop it despite being alone on the far edge of space with no communications and no help from the empire. The story combines likeable rogue characters, interesting scientific speculation, and some subtly great, unpretentious writing into a very entertaining space opera. Although the publishers have humbly billed it as *Game of Thrones* meets *The Expanse*, what will come of the series remains to be seen, but it seems to be off to a great start.

Perhaps the most endearing aspect of *The Last Watch* is the story's characters. Dewes has smartly limited the cast of this sprawling novel to just a few very important characters, whom the reader will have a hard time not empathizing with. Perhaps it is not the first time that a cast of blackguards has been sent off into space for one reason or another, but the two main characters in this adventure, Cavalon Mercer and Adequin Rake, are very nicely drawn both deep and wide. Cavalon Mercer is the heir to the empire, which

he tries to keep secret because everyone else on board *The Argus* has been sent out to the edge of the universe for crimes against the empire of one sort or another. The story starts with Cavalon's imprisonment on the ship in lieu of a death sentence after he rebels against his grandfather, the emperor. He is quiet about his crime but eventually reveals what he's done, and as an example of the author's dexterity in plotting, his crime is intimately tied to the duty of *The Argus*, to keep Viators out of the human-dominated universe. Rake also has a past that she slowly reveals to Cavalon, and the stories they tell each other not only reveal their inner humanity and fallibility, but are also very successfully plotted into slower-paced sections of the story as a great contrast to the fast-paced action. Complicating their growing relationship is the return of Rake's beloved Griffith, whose ship seems to have been lost to the encroaching edge of the universe. But Rake has been keeping a secret from him that could throw their whole lives into hell and take several others down with them. It's a really well done, deep, and human problem, and it creeps out of the background to throw a spanner in the works.

The other aspect of this novel that I enjoyed quite a bit was the author's use of scientific speculation. (I use the term specifically because this is not a hard science fiction book.) The science becomes the integral to the plot, which I think is missing in some science fiction. For example, this is not a gang crime story or a war that happens to be set in space. The universes is collapsing—big science problem. Equally important, though, is how Dewes uses the science to create a good ol' fashioned sense of wonder that harkens back to classic speculative fiction. As the edge of the universe creeps closer, time starts to slip a little, forward and backward, which Dewes deftly *shows* instead of having her narrator explain it in boring, abstract exposition. Likewise, the characters have

certain active tattoos embedded mostly on their arms, according to their class and rank and other societal categories. This idea leans more toward fantasy than science fiction, but it is beautifully done. The concept is intriguing at first, but when Dewes puts it into action, it is surprising and very well thought out. There are other science fiction tropes in the novel that readers of the genre will recognize such as abandoned spaceships, communications units that fail, characters that age differently according to where and how fast they travel, etc., and they all seem quite well done to me, especially when the characters get to the massive space buoy at the edge of the universe. Dewes does a fantastic job of immersing the reader in this giant mechanical construct, which I think many writers would find difficult to translate into words on the page.

And words on the page is really what swept me through this fine novel. The writing is completely unpretentious, sharp, occasionally witty, and everything comes through the characters, not the narrator. The third-person narrator facilitates the story in such a way the narration is nearly invisible, allowing the characters to always be in the forefront of the action and dialogue.

But is it grimdark? I always like to ask myself this question near the end of my reviews because we are, after all, *Grimdark Magazine*. However, when I come across a book that cannot be locked down to grimdark, I am still mostly concerned about whether or not I enjoyed the story. *The Last Watch* contains nice grim settings that show the desolation of outer space, with its space junk and abandoned ships. In this particular story, there has been a movement to retrieve personnel from the edges of the universe, but no one has told the rogues aboard *The Argus*, which is a pretty grim situation. The characters all have criminal or transgressive backgrounds that have led them to be outcast at the edge of the universe, which I enjoy in

grimdark fiction. Both Cavalon and Rake have made decision in their pasts that society has deemed morally wrong. So in that way, *The Last Watch* should be very appealing to grimdark readers. Overall, I am more inclined to think of *The Last Watch* as less a grimdark story than a story of unlikely heroes. Nevertheless, it is very well executed and beautifully written in a way that doesn't call attention to itself. I enjoyed it very much, and I highly recommend it to readers of space opera and other character-driven science fiction. I look forward to reading book two in The Divide Series, *The Exiled Fleet*, which is currently scheduled for August 2021.

*The Last Watch* is scheduled for release on 20 April 2021 in the US by Tor Books.

# Morality Aside

ZACHARY FRITZ

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Callan indulged his vices the night he allowed the crown prince's murder.

He drank. Drank himself world-spinning, tongue-lolling, eyes-drifting drunk. Not that he drank more than his fellow mercenaries, but that was the drawback of being the smallest man in the Nameless. One of the drawbacks, anyway.

He gambled. For someone with his ample intelligence and meager ethics, that meant cheating. His drunkenness inhibited his ability to pluck and hide and cut cards, but no one seemed to notice.

He whored. Well, he assumed the waif of a woman on his lap was a whore. If Anna—Ama? Alma? Something with an A—wanted to get laid for pleasure, the better endowed laps of at least five other mercenaries remained unoccupied. So whoring it was.

The soon-to-be-murdered Prince Reis outdid him at every turn.

Reis downed beer like a desert guzzles rain. The chords of muscle along his throat pulsed beneath a stylized beard as he gulped, gulped, gulped, a cheer erupting every time he slammed his empty cup against the table.

Reis won damn near every hand they played. The few he didn't were obvious concessions to Joy, one of the Nameless' two lieutenants and an utterly joyless woman. As if winning wasn't enough, he had to be chivalrous about it.

Reis balanced a beauty on each of his tree-trunk thighs. They fawned, puppy-like in their adoration. Only

they weren't puppies, they were the best and bustiest women the sleepy village of Oakton had to offer. Young and shapely with rosy red cheeks, nothing like the woman on Callan's lap.

"What's a tragedy?" Anna asked.

Callan cocked his head. "Hmm?"

"You said, 'This is a tragedy.'"

"Did I?"

"Mused it, really."

Callan tried to remember the tragedy. His hand? He checked his cards and found them perfectly acceptable. His drunkenness? Unfortunate but hardly tragic. Perhaps he'd been referring to his status as the only one in the Nameless afflicted by sanity. Or maybe he'd been ruminating on what a pompous bastard Prince Reis was.

"The tragedy," he said, groping for banter, "is that you're still wearing that dress."

"Is it? I figured you meant all that beer spilled down your chest."

Callan frowned at the splotches on his white shirt. *Damn.* "You're clever, aren't you? I've never had a clever whore. Does the wit cost extra?"

For a moment her brow dipped, as if something he'd said offended her. She recovered with a less-than-inviting smile. "It's not my wit you'll remember." The ensuing silence congealed, stickier than a beer-soaked table. Thankfully, the clever whore changed the subject. "How's a mercenary company end up guarding a prince?"

Callan shifted—her bony ass was stabbing into his equally meatless thigh—and gave her what he hoped was a charmingly sober grin. "We're the Nameless, the greatest swords for hire in all the realms. Fabled warriors, each and every one of us."

"You?" Her eyebrow arched. "You're a fabled warrior?"

“Am I a fabled warrior?” Callan scoffed, looking for one of the other mercenaries to support his claim. None of them paid him a shred of attention. “Trunk, tell her how good I am with—”

“Fuck’s sake, Cal. We can all see your cards.” Trunk pushed Callan’s hand toward his chest. Unlike Joy, whose name paid ode to irony, Trunk’s moniker served as a sincere description of his stature. Consistency did not rank among the Nameless’ virtues.

“Hey, don’t help the fresh meat.” That from Ravi, the pale-haired, pale-skinned southerner who held the distinction of nastiest bastard in a company brimming with nasty bastards.

“Fresh meat?” the whore asked.

Callan cleared his throat and glared at Ravi, who responded with a leer that radiated violence. Callan shifted his eyes to something above the mercenary. “What Ravi means,” he whispered into Anna’s ear, “is that I’ve only been with the Nameless for a season. We’re rather discerning—”

“What I mean is he’s rawer than a ten-year-old bride on her wedding night,” Ravi said. “You want a man with a real cock, girl?”

Callan took a moment to contemplate what constituted a real cock. Anna returned him to the present by pushing a fresh drink into his hand and dragging a fingernail beneath his collar.

“Maybe I like the skinny ones.” Her breath tickled his neck. “Besides, fresh meat here’s won some curr. Ain’t seen you win a hand yet, blanch.”

As if rejecting Ravi wasn’t suicidal enough, she had to throw in a slur. He burst to his feet. His chair flipped to the floor as if it fainted at the sudden outburst. His sword-breaker hissed half-way out of its sheath before the prince clamped a hand on Ravi’s shoulder.

“Easy, friend!” Reis’ deep, lyrical voice pissed Callan off, even as the prince convinced Ravi not to murder the whore on his lap. “Here.” He flipped Ravi’s

chair upright with his foot, pulled the man back into it, and slung a girl from his lap to Ravi's as if she weighed nothing. "Better, friend?"

Ravi teetered on a precipice of rage, gave Anna one last hard look, then quaffed his drink, belched, and roared with the rest of the mercenaries. If his outburst dismayed Anna, she had an odd way of showing it. Which is to say, she regarded Ravi with wry contempt. Her smirk vanished as her hand drifted to the dwindling stack of coins on the table in front of him.

"You've got swift fingers." Her hand found his. "Why don't we go upstairs, see what those swift fingers can do?"

Callan flung his cards into the center of the table. He tried to stand with her in his arms but plopped back down into his chair. It was his drunkenness that foiled him, certainly not his lack of strength.

Anna stood, straddling him, what little chest she had smushed together tantalizingly close to his face. "Drink up." She pressed a glass of unknown origin into his hand, pushed it toward his face.

The Nameless cheered and pounded on tables as he gulped it down. It felt closer to drowning than drinking, and the last sip raked down his air pipe. The raucous ovation made a poor salve for the pain in his throat and chest.

"Good boy," Anna said, grabbing his hand and leading him toward the stairs.

Callan surveyed his fellow mercenaries from halfway up the stairs. Yela and his wolfish grin had a serving girl cornered. Blue, all of twelve years old yet inexplicably a respected member of the Nameless, slept in a whore's lap. Alsom swayed on his feet, his bloody hand pressed to the wall with fingers splayed wide. When Shug threw a knife that thunked into the wood between Alsom's first and second fingers, Alsom grunted and tossed a coin, and then the knife, back to

Shug. Callan, struck by a fear that he'd miss out on the fun, resolved to return after getting laid.

"Chom! Hold my winnings," he called over his shoulder.

"Yes, sir!" Chom slid Callan's coins into his pocket. He'd steal half of them, which is half of what any other mercenary would take. In the Nameless, even the best man wasn't a good one.

The world rocked like a skiff in a storm as Callan stumbled after Anna. Had he really drunk so much? An eternity since he'd been rightly laid and now he'd gotten himself too drunk to remember it.

He pressed a hand on the wall to conquer the staircase, his eyes torn between the tricky steps and Anna's swaying ass just in front of him. He reached the top, staggered to his door, and plucked the key from his pocket. It slipped from his grip but Anna snatched it from the air, giving him a wink as she oh-so-seductively slid it into the keyhole. Or maybe she just unlocked the door.

Callan reached for her, his eyelids heavy as steel. She slipped beneath his outstretched arms and shoved him onto the bed. It felt like he continued to fall even after landing atop the lumpy mattress. The room twirled in jerks and starts, like the whole inn bounced down a hill. His stomach lurched. His eyes closed, sleep crept up and—

*No. No!*

He tried to sit up and settled for propping himself up on an elbow. His belt mounted a spirited resistance, but he finally got it undone. Wherever Anna was, well, he couldn't tell with one eye closed and the other narrowed to a slit. He got his pants unlaced, shimmied them below his ass, flopped back on the mattress with an enormous sense of accomplishment, and passed out.

\* \* \*

"Wake up."

Callan cracked an eyelid, quickly clenched it, and then tried again. The scene didn't improve.

Captain James Karder, broad shoulders narrowing to a slender waist, brow pinched with that ever-present melancholy, loomed over his bed. His eyes were trained on Callan but lacked focus, as if blinded by worry or distracted by some specter only he could see. It boded poorly that the proprietor of the Nameless—a man notorious for delegating to his lieutenants—stood in his room. In a desperate effort to appear more presentable, Callan tucked his cock back into his pants and sat up.

“Sir?”

Captain started, as if surprised to notice Callan, and then said quietly as ever, “I need you to pick a lock.”

Callan tried to say something, but his throat had all the moisture of sunbaked sand, so he grumbled and followed the captain out of his room. His head throbbed. His mouth tasted like rotting flesh, fresh bile, and beer. His stomach heaved. He glanced out the window, winced, and resolved not to look at anything bright for the rest of the morning.

Callan followed him to the end of the second floor hallway where Ravi awaited them. The southerner, slouched against the wall with his face pressed to his hands, looked as miserable as Callan felt.

Captain pointed to the door and said, “Open it.”

“Isn't that Prince Reis's room? Surely we can't—”

“Surely you can shut the fuck up and do it,” Ravi said. The southerner had a certain way with words.

Callan stepped up to the door, shook his hands, cracked his neck this way and that, and reached into a hidden pocket inside his coat for his picks. Except the picks weren't there. Nor was his wallet, his knife, or his flask. The only thing in his pocket was a playing card—which he kept concealed—and a ball of lint.

Captain Karder sighed. Who knew a sigh could hit so hard?

“Right. Just one moment.” Callan raced back into his room, grabbed the spare picks from his satchel, and returned with far too little breath after the short journey.

He had sold his proficiency with locks as a reason for Karder to hire him. Oversold, perhaps, as he didn’t actually expect to pick any in his time with the Nameless. He thanked the suns that the lock on Reis’ door only had two pins. He probably could have managed three, but four would have been too much, especially in his state.

The lock chirped, rotated, and released with a satisfied little click. Callan turned the handle, pushed the door, and ushered them into the room, smirking at Ravi.

“Out of the way,” Ravi said. “Reis, you—” He froze in the doorway. “Fuck. Oh... Fuck. Fucking fuck.”

Callan looked and gasped. Captain Karder pushed between them and froze. The three mercenaries gaped at the corpse of the man they’d sworn to protect. The man they’d been paid a fortune to protect. The man whose throat had been carved from ear-to-ear. Only the slow patter of blood dripping from bed to floor and the curtain fluttering in the wind disturbed the silence.

Callan stumbled back into the hall and vomited.

Besides stepping clear of the splatter, Karder ignored him.

A few minutes later they sat around a table in a curtained-off section of the dingy inn. Karder stared at the table, arms crossed. Other than running his tongue along the inside of his lips, Captain hadn’t moved since their meeting began. Callan sat perfectly still in a poor effort to remain unnoticed, the Nameless’ logbook closed and clasped on the table in front of him. As Karder’s secretary, he was responsible for chronicling their various heroic deeds. He’d yet to chronicle anything in his time with the mercenaries.

In fact, he'd yet to do much of anything at all in his time with the Nameless. Eyterra was a peaceful island kingdom. Their beloved prince, Reis Bryne, had eschewed a traditional guard in favor of a mercenary company. So they played the part of royal guardsman, ostensibly touring the outer counties but actually drinking themselves stupid with the heir apparent.

*Deceased* heir apparent.

Ravi, who attended the meeting because he had been guarding Reis's room when the assassination occurred, fidgeted beside Callan, his face even paler than usual. Callan stayed perfectly still and hoped no one else suspected his clever whore had killed the prince. Joy and Trunk, the band's two lieutenants, debated the best course of action. Which is to say, the least-worst course of action.

"Do we run?" Trunk asked.

"The Nameless don't run." Joy scowled at Trunk before looking to Captain. "Do we run?"

Karder nodded slowly, oblivious to his lieutenants' bickering. "There's only one way forward from this."

"We blame Callan." Ravi nodded. "Rip his tongue out so he can't tell his side. King tortures and kills him in retribution, and we all go on living our merry lives."

"We will—" Karder started to ignore Ravi, then shot him an annoyed glance. "A force of Bakkan Raiders razed Oakton. The prince died. The bodies in the town were charred, so who knows if there was a small mercenary company among the dead? By the time anyone can tell what happened, we'll be off this island."

"Oakton?" Trunk scratched at his scarred cheek. "It's not been razed."

"No." Karder gazed at the table, as if his future was scrawled in the ragged wood. "Not yet."

\* \* \*

Clouds lazed about a brilliant blue sky. The sun perched low on the horizon, blunting the sting of the wind. Oakton's eponymous trees were in their full

autumnal glory, gold and red leaves matching the Nameless' colors. If you stood in the center of town, plugged your ears, and craned your head toward the heavens, you'd deem it as fine a day as ever there was.

It clashed with the hell in Oakton like two paintings ripped horizontally and crudely stitched together, fire and death and rape beneath a pristine morning marred only by the screeches of circling carrion eaters.

Callan stayed in the center of the main street, short bow dangling from his hand, turning frequently so no one would miss his Nameless arm band and accidentally slay him. A teenage girl stumbled past him with skirts held high. Yela gave chase, a savage grin splitting his blood-splattered face as he checked the girl with his shoulder. She crashed down, the side of her face raking the gravel pathway. He pounced on her, smacked the struggle out of her, put his knife between her breasts, and sliced her dress from collar to hem, working at his belt all the while. He looked over his shoulder and flashed Callan a smile more commonly seen on a child with a new toy than a rapacious mercenary.

The girl pulled a slender knife from somewhere in her skirts and drove it through the bottom of Yela's chin. His smile drooped. Blood welled from his mouth. He tried to say something but spewed crimson bubbles instead.

The girl shimmied out from beneath Yela. A vestige of her small clothes clung to her body. Before she could stand, Trunk hacked a third of the way through her neck, yanked his axe clear, and hacked again, wedging the blade into the already dead girl's side. He put a boot to her back to tear his axe free and then he was gone, lost in the smoke.

Yela stretched a hand toward Callan and beckoned him closer. Callan, probably in shock, ambled to the dying man. Yela lay on his back spitting blood, snatching breaths between damp coughs. He tried to

speaking his last words to Callan but nothing came out. The frustration welled in Yela's eyes and he pounded a fist on the ground.

"You just going to watch him?"

Callan spun. Blue shook the tawny hair from his eyes and regarded Callan with disappointment. The boy had initially struck Callan as one of the saner mercenaries. He'd since rescinded that opinion.

"I don't..." What else could Callan do but watch?

Blue flipped his long knife to a reverse grip and stepped past Callan. Yela went wide-eyed at the sight. He tried to wave Blue away and sputtered blood down his chin. Blue made a shushing noise as he drove his knife up and under Yela's ribs. He held it to the hilt until Yela's convulsions ceased.

"What? It was mercy. He'd have done the same for me." Blue wiped his blade on Yela's sleeve and dug through the corpse's pockets. "Never liked him anyway."

Just down the street, Shug banged against a door, sugar cane clenched between his teeth, rapier propped against his shoulder. "Unlock it and I'll kill you quickly."

"Fuck you," a voice called from inside.

Shug noticed Callan and winked. He tossed his perfectly coifed hair from his eyes and called through the door, "Don't tempt me, friend."

Callan scurried toward Shug and stepped in front of the door. This was his chance. He needed to participate in the razing. If he could pick the lock for Shug, then he'd prove himself as a member of the Nameless. He fumbled his picks from his pocket, dropped them, bent to pick them up and—

The door burst open and smacked the crown of Callan's head. He flopped to his side as someone sprinted through the opening. Judging by the wet thunk and muted cry, they didn't make it far.

Callan rolled onto his back, let his head loll to the side, and found a middle-aged woman's face a hair's

width from his own. He scurried back, taking in the full scene. Shug stood between the severed head and the rest of the blood-pulsing body. A toddler lay on the ground beside the decapitated woman, screaming, crawling closer to the headless body.

Shug shook his head. He adjusted the sugar cane with his off hand and casually skewered his blade through the boy's back. He saluted at Callan with the bloody rapier, and then he was off between the ramshackle houses, looking for someone else to kill.

Callan crawled over to the toddler. He felt the boy's neck, as if the child—no, as if *anyone* could survive being skewered. No pulse. A faint voice in Callan's mind said it was a mercy, but nothing about Oakton seemed merciful at that moment.

"Fuck are you doing?"

Callan looked up. Blue snarled down with disgust that had nothing to do with the headless corpse or murdered toddler.

"Looting," Callan said as he nudged the toddler off the woman and began going through her pockets. "I'm looting."

Blue laughed and shook his head. Callan waited until Blue was well and truly gone to pull his hand out of the dead woman's pocket. He got up and staggered on, hopping out of the way of a sprinting villager just before the man was struck in the back by a thrown axe.

Cormac strung a corpse over the branch of a burning tree. Alsom toyed with an injured swordsman, staying just out of the limping man's reach and slapping away his feeble attacks. A burning building caved behind Callan. He reeled away from the rush of embers.

Sweat beaded on his brow. When had it become so hot? His feet felt leaden. His legs weak. The ground seemed awful far away, like he was peering down from atop a bridge. He wandered in a trance, his vision narrowing, his—

“Easy, now.” Rendon, the Nameless’ medic, said from somewhere above him “Head between your knees, yeah?”

Callan lay on his side, confused, cold, and sweaty. “Relax. Just breathe.”

Ravi interrupted Callan’s measured breathing. He squatted and dangled a severed head over Callan’s face. The mercenary spoke in a high-pitched voice, moving the head’s jaw with his free hand. “Oi, what’s wrong, Callan? You look green!” Ravi brayed at his own joke, tossed the head aside, and skipped off.

Rendon wrinkled his nose. “Anyone asks, I’ll tell them you took a clubbing to the back of the skull.”

“Much appreciated.”

Chom paused nearby and arched an eyebrow. Callan gave him a trembling thumbs up, and his friend carried on with a shrug.

“Captain’s on a hillside south of town,” Rendon said. “You good to walk?”

Rendon helped Callan to his feet, waited until he was steady, and then went in search of those afflicted by more than cowardice. Callan cursed himself as he trudged away from the chaos of Oakton. He found Karder sitting cross-legged on a grassy hillside. Joy was sitting beside him. Neither the captain nor the lieutenant acknowledged Callan as he plopped down beside them.

At last, Captain looked at him. “Right now, you’re thinking about how fast and how far you can get away.”

“What?” Callan briefly wondered if Karder could read his thoughts. “Captain, no.”

Joy laughed.

Even Captain Karder’s lips quirked. “I understand. Most everyone in the Nameless has that moment. Right now, you’re wondering why you should stay. But I have a better question. Why would you leave?”

Callan looked toward the sunrise and tried to ignore the burning hellscape in his peripheral vision. “Morality comes to mind.”

“Morality aside. What else does life have to offer? You’re an effete little bastard, the youngest son of a disgraced family. We’re not asking you to fight. All you need to do is scribble a few lines in a logbook, track our expenses, and make sure everyone gets paid. It’s a good life.”

Joy nodded. “With what the prince was paying us on top of what we loot from Oakton, everyone’ll get paid damn well this time.”

Callan did some mental arithmetic. Without knowing how much would be looted from Oakton, his share was sufficiently large that he knew he wasn’t going anywhere. He laughed, high and brittle. “Is this what I’m supposed to scribble about?”

Captain Karder’s forehead wrinkled. He averted his eyes from Oakton. “You can leave this one out.”

**Zachary Fritz** lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with his wife and cat. He writes fantasy fiction in the early mornings and a different kind of fiction later in the day as a full-time policy consultant.

# The Future is Grimdark

AARON S. JONES

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Ten years have passed since *Game of Thrones* hit our screens. Ten years since the world was introduced to a grimdark story on a big budget.

The weekly shows produced by HBO became must-watch television for people all over the world and not just fans of fantasy—events like *The Red Wedding* had viewers comparing their shared horror and disgust for some of the diabolical, scheming characters that the show brought to life so well. It provided fully formed characters who were not typical of Hollywood-style heroes and villains. The kings and queens in Westeros were not noble and righteous: they abused their power and treated their people like pawns to be moved on a whim. The show displayed a nihilistic view of fantasy that had not been presented with such a large budget before, and the world devoured it and asked for more.

Producers took note that there was a market for this grimdark sensibility, and it happened to coincide with a boom in the streaming market. The past decade has seen the rise of the streaming giants. Netflix began producing its own content in 2013, and in the past decade more than 203 million people have subscribed to their TV and film streaming service. Amazon Prime now works with a similar model and has over 140 million subscribers. Disney, Sky, HBO, Apple, and countless others have followed with similar models.

The success of the streaming giants and the current model in which they produce their own content has led to a boom in risk-taking shows and films. In line with this, a plethora of grimdark tales have hit our screens

over the past decade, and that only appears to be on the rise. Long gone are the days when producers looked for happy endings for its audience and grinning protagonists to follow on journeys with minimal risk. Big-budget fantasy films and shows such as *Twilight*, *Heroes*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Hobbit*, all offered viewers entertainment in comfort. Though filled with problems for heroes to overcome, viewers could always be sure that the heroes survive and save the day and all things will return as they were in the beginning with only minor changes to the status quo. Now we have a rise in popularity of media that is designed to keep us out of that comfort zone, to keep us on the edge of our seats. *Game of Thrones*, *The Boys*, *The Walking Dead* and *Star Wars: Rogue One* are all recent examples of well-received and popular films and shows that are loved because the audience cannot watch comfortably with the expectation that all the characters will make it through to the end unscathed. Years ago, such stories would have been rejected by producers or 'softened' for the audience. Proof of this lies in *Seven*, a dark thriller known best for its incredible 'what's in the box?' ending that only survived re-writes and cuts in 1995 due to its writer sending the wrong script to the right producer after it was turned down by so many others for being too dark and gruesome.

With so many viewers now streaming, it is easier for companies to keep tabs on viewing habits. Media with a grim tone and dark themes had once been classed as 'cult' essentials (*Firefly*, *Dark City*, *Dredd*, *Blade Runner*) suitable only for a small audience. These examples grew over time with word of mouth and good reviews, and now similar films and shows are being given the time and money to succeed from the start. Before streaming, shows had a short time to amass a following or they would be cancelled and classed as failed experiments. Now those shows are given time to

build a viewer base, and on sites such as Netflix, the audience can even see what is becoming popular using their top 10 system. Viewers can follow what is popular in real-time and see what their fellow watchers are consuming.

As expected, the success of *Game of Thrones* led to cries for the next great, gritty fantasy series. HBO stuck with the world of Westeros and called for spin-offs from the hugely successful series. Netflix decided to plug the gap in the market with *The Witcher*, based on the hugely successful series of games and books written by Andrzej Sapkowski and fronted by Superman himself, Henry Cavill. Amazon Prime spent over a billion dollars buying the rights to Tolkien's Middle Earth and reports so far anticipate a grittier version of *The Lord of the Rings* is on its way in some form this year. When Netflix took the reins of BBC's *The Last Kingdom*, the series instantly upped the ante with larger scale battles, blood, betrayals and more despicable characters. Series like *The Expanse* and *Vikings* have been able to grow and maintain their audience, which past shows like *Firefly* were unable to do. Bigger companies are starting to portray darker themes in their storytelling and allow the audience to decide what is successful, and grimdark fans are reaping the rewards.

The popularity of streaming and the wealth now associated with companies such as Netflix and Amazon have changed the style of television. For many, TV was a little brother to film, a stepping stone on the way to Hollywood. Often, viewers would see their favourite stars of TV make the leap to the big screen but only rarely would this work the other way. The success of streaming and the financial growth in the sector meant that huge stars could be attracted to TV projects. Sean Bean in *Game of Thrones* and Henry Cavill in *The Witcher* are prime examples. Nicole Kidman, Ellen Page, Matthew McConaughey

are further signs that huge stars are willing to take on roles in series that they perhaps would not have taken in the past. But it is not just about money. The longer form of storytelling allows characters to grow and breathe, which is good for grimdark as much as any other genre. It offers time for viewers to understand characters, who in film could sometimes appear cartoonish and two-dimensional. Just think of how Peter Baelish and The Hound would have been treated if they were squashed into ninety minutes. Actors are drawn to these roles now because they allow time to develop characters. And it seems to be working: Netflix alone received a record 160 Emmy nominations this year.

Reading a post by Mark Lawrence on his blog at the tail end of last year, I saw that, for him, grimdark is characterised by “defiance in the absence of hope”. They are stories that people of all backgrounds can relate to because everyone has had at least one point in their life where they feel helpless. Grimdark shows viewers characters who stand up and fight even when there is no light at the end of the tunnel and portrays imperfect characters perfectly brought to life.

So what does the future look like? Expect more from *The Witcher*, *The Expanse*, a prequel to *Game of Thrones* and Amazon to milk *The Lord of the Rings* for all its worth. HBO is pushing forward with *The Last of Us* and *The Black Company* is being developed by Eliza Dushku (*Buffy*, *Angel*, *Dollhouse*) and written by David S. Goyer (*Blade*, *Dark Knight*, *Man of Steel*). *Conan* (Amazon), *The Sandman* (Netflix), *Judge Dredd*, *Dune* and a grittier-than-ever *Batman* film are due to be released over the course of the next 12 months. There are options on cracking tales from Mark Lawrence, Nicholas Eames and a host of other popular authors from the genre. Grimdark is unpredictable and often full of shocking twists and turns. One thing I can predict is—the future of film and TV is grimdark.



Born in the area of Birmingham that inspired Tolkien's Middle-Earth, **Aaron S. Jones** caught the fantasy bug early.

He is the author of *Flames Of Rebellion*, the epic first part of The Broken Gods Trilogy. When he isn't reading or writing, he teaches as Head of English at a primary school in Kent, introducing the next generation of readers to the world of fantasy.

You can find him rambling about his favourite books, films, and games on Twitter @hereticasjones or via his website [aaronsjones.com](http://aaronsjones.com)

# An Interview with Marina Lostetter

BETH TABLER

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Marina Lostetter, author of the space opera series *Noumenon* is releasing a new series, *The Five Penalties*, with the first book *Helm of Midnight* in April. *Grimdark Magazine* had the great fortune of chatting with Marina about her love of games, science fiction, and the new series. If you are looking for a story that is a combination of *Hannibal* and *Mistborn*, then her new story *Helm of Midnight* is perfect for you.

**[GdM]** Hi Marina, thank you for doing this interview with me! Firstly, please tell me a bit about yourself and your writing.

**[ML]** Thanks for having me! I'm originally from Oregon, but live in Arkansas with my spouse Alex, two cats, and way, waaaaay too many aloe plants (seriously, it's Area X over here). I write both science fiction and fantasy, usually about people trying their best--even when their best is truly awful.

**[GdM]** I have found that most writers are also readers and start reading early. Were you a big reader as a kid? When did you first discover SFF, and what was your gateway drug?

**[ML]** I was a big reader from an early age, and I mostly devoured things like Nancy Drew when I was young. In the fourth grade my dad gave me *The Hobbit*, and even

though it was really above my reading level at the time, I was sold. I've been and SFF lover ever since.

**[GdM]** I had read from a previous interview that you are a fan of the Final Fantasy Games. What about them draws you to them? Is it the narrative, graphics, depth of story? Or is it all of the above?

**[ML]** Definitely all of the above. I think they also hit some of my player/reader/writer cookies world-building wise. I really like stories that have a world-based mystery, where what's seen on the surface drastically contradicts the real mechanics of the universe. The Final Fantasy games are constantly inverting the rules mid-story, which reflects a lot of my own narrative philosophies. I like to present a world and then try to make the audience question what they think they understand about it. I often world build with the explicit intent to break my own world building.

**[GdM]** Do you also play tabletop?

**[ML]** I do! I love tabletop games. I've recently enjoyed *Scythe* and *Mysterium*.

**[GdM]** Before *The Helm of Midnight*, you had delved deeply into the science fiction genre with your space opera Noumenon series. Can you tell me a bit about the series?

**[ML]** The Noumenon series is an epic interstellar adventure featuring clones, rogue AIs, alien artifacts, ancient sentients, and dubious signals from far-off stars. The trilogy takes place over one hundred thousand years, with a focus on societal changes as seen through the eyes of several 'immortal' characters.

**[GdM]** As a prolific short story author, how does plotting a short story differ from planning a three-book arc such as *Noumenon*? Obviously, you have only so many words to work within short stories, but what else?

**[ML]** I think it's like the difference between a song and an album, right? A song is a mood. An album is a journey.

Short stories usually focus in on a single, definitive event in a character's life, and often try to convey one lone, strong emotion. A novel is just an expansion into a set of emotions, where events get to breathe and there can be more contrast over-all. A novel can be more dynamic than a short story, and a series can be more dynamic than a novel.

**[GdM]** What does the writing process look like for you? I read that you were a plotter; how do you keep track of all of the story angles?

**[ML]** I think when people learn that a writer is a plotter, they think the writer must be really organized and have a strict plan that they follow, but I don't. My plotting is very stream-of-consciousness and contradictory. Early in the process, I have a file where I just write all my ideas as they come to me. It's actually my favorite part of writing, because it's purely playful and creative. It doesn't have to make sense yet, it doesn't have to be good yet, I just have to please myself. After, I mold that file into a rough shape that resembles a real narrative. I find I can't write unless I have a direction to write in, and this process provides that direction. But it's not exactly efficient, and I work 99% in Microsoft word, so most of the story angles are just intuitively tracked in my own mind. I wouldn't actually recommend my methodology to anyone—there are much smarter ways to keep track of structure.

**[GdM]** You have a new release dropping in April, *The Helm of Midnight*. Tell me all about it. You pretty much had me at, "Evil blooms in darkness."

**[ML]** My husband actually came up with the tagline, so all related kudos should be directed to him.

I like to bill the novel as Brandon Sanderson's Mistborn meets *Hannibal*. It's secondary-world epic fantasy with highly structured magic, featuring a truly creepy serial killer. The murderer, Charbon, kills at night, and molds his victims' bodies into sculptures of flowers he calls blooms. Thus, "Evil blooms in darkness."

Nothing is as it seems in the story. There's a lot of hidden history and magic gone awry.

**[GdM]** The worldbuilding is unique in *The Helm of Midnight*, gods, emotions, and evil masks. What inspired you for its creation?

**[ML]** *The Helm of Midnight* is an expansion of my short story *Master Belladino's Mask*, which was one of the first short stories I ever sold. When I sat down to write the short story, I was casting around for elements to include and just happened to glance at the Boruca masks we'd brought home from our honeymoon (in 2020 we celebrated our ten-year wedding anniversary, so this story has been in the works for a long time). The masks themselves are very expressive—created by exceptionally skilled artists—and filled with a lot of personality, so I started to imagine that maybe they'd been carved to match the personalities of real people. The world building really spiraled from there, but they provided the initial story seed.

**[GdM]** You write compelling evil and violence in this story, was that emotionally draining to write?

**[ML]** Yes. Looking at the end product, it might be hard to believe, but I have a very hard time hurting my characters. I frequently get first draft critiques that amount to "everyone is being way too reasonable" or "they shouldn't just be able to talk their way out of this" or "there should be more stabbing." I'm the type of person who takes spiders outside and reloads videogames if I accidentally step on Thumbelina (shout out to *Witcher 3*). So I really have to push myself to go raw, to go dark. And it is very draining sometimes.

**[GdM]** Tell me about the characters Krona Hirvath, Melanie, and Chabon. Was their specific inspiration for their personalities?

**[ML]** Krona Hirvath, the main character, is on the hunt for the stolen death mask of Louis Charbon, one of her city's most notorious serial killers. Charbon was hanged ten years previous, but the mask was magically—and illegally—imbued with his knowledge and his memories. Melanie Dupont is a young apprentice healer who gets caught up in a magical accident which threatens to turn her into a tool of the state or an object for experimentation. The thrust of each character's story takes place in a different time line, but they all twist together in the end.

Character is something I have to discover as I write, and I often feel like I don't really know my characters until I've finished a complete draft, so there was no specific inspiration for these characters personalities—rather, I subconsciously built them as I went.

**[GdM]** 2020 was a tumultuous year, to put it lightly. As an author, how did the lockdowns affect you personally? Do current events find their way into your writing, or do you have a line of demarcation separating your story life and real life?

**[ML]** I'm a full-time writer who works from home, and I don't have any kids, so I'll admit that for the most part, my life continued on pretty much as normal. The hardest part has been not being able to see friends and family, and I really miss eating out and going to the movies.

**[GdM]** What are you reading right now?

**[ML]** Fan fiction. I read a lot of fan fiction as an easy escape these days. I probably read more fan fiction in 2020 than I had in the entire previous decade. It's been a year of comfort reading.

Recently a book that blew me away was Bo-Young Kim's *I'm Waiting for You and Other Stories*, which comes out April 6th. It's a really beautiful, heart-felt collection of interconnected sci fi stories.

**[GdM]** Lastly, what do you have going on in 2021, aside from the release of *Helm of Midnight*?

**[ML]** Believe it or not, I have another book coming out in September. *Activation Degradation* is a thriller-paced space opera, featuring biological soft robots, queer space pirates, and unreliable narration. I'm really excited for it.

# Monster Within

ANGEL HAZE

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Voices faded in and out. The room spun. Killien couldn't tell if he was sitting up or lying down, in the pits or in his cell. His cheek throbbed from an elbow to the face... or had it been the hilt of a dagger? The night was a blur. Blood, body odor, liquor, the cheers of the crowd and the wailing of dying men.

He could still taste the blood on his lips. He dropped his head to the side.

"Look at him. You're killing him." The old medic's voice?

"He's got more in him. He owes me." Prince Burne's voice reoriented Killien. He was back in his cell. He tried to lift his arm, then remembered his wrists were chained.

"You kill him in the pits and you'll have no champion for the arena," the old medic snarled. "Who will bring in the crowds and coin that he does? Who will pay off your gambling debts?"

Burne pounded his fist next to Killien's hip on the wooden bed, sending vibrations through the wood and sparking a wave of pain from injuries Killien hadn't yet realized he had. "Enough!" Burne

shouted. "I want him to suffer!" The prince's shouting was making Killien's head ache as bad as the rest of his body. He wished the fat bastard would just leave him alone... to die if need be.

"*Then kill him.*" The voice in his head was his only companion in these desperate hours, and it had become louder, craving more blood.

Killien ignored it. It was just another hallucination. By the gods, they'd been bad lately. He couldn't think straight, didn't know if he was fighting in the pits again or just dreaming about it.

"I don't know how he survives," the medic said. "He looks like he has one foot in the grave already. You can't keep pushing him like this. He's losing his mind."

Burne chuckled. "Wouldn't it be ironic if Killer, the undefeated champion, dies of a sickness of the head?"

"You won't be laughing when the crowds don't come."

"Then, get him ready. He fights tonight."

Killien's head felt like a heavy stone. He wasn't sure if he could stand, let alone fight, yet the monster within hungered for more.

The old man scoffed. "Tonight? He is no condition—"

"Tonight," Burne said firmly.

"Maybe if you'd called me earlier. Look at him. He can't even see out of that eye."

"Do whatever you have to do, but make sure he's ready to fight by sundown."

I'm going to die, Killien thought.

The medic tipped Killien's head back and dripped something onto his lips, something bitter. It felt like his head exploded. Everything went black.

\* \* \*

Screams of the crowd echoed through the underground cells. The smell of blood, sweat, and death hung heavily in the air.

Killien sat slumped on the wooden bench in the last cell, his head resting against the bars. Shackles bound his wrists. The iron collar that inhibited his magic chafed at his neck. Nine other fighters sat in the cells around him, half of them bloodied and battered, two of them not moving at all.

Killien closed his eyes. His fingers were still numb and tingling from the drugs the medic had given him.

He needed to gather his strength and focus, despite his nearly closed eye, if he hoped to survive the night, if he hoped to earn enough coin to keep his family safe.

*“Forget your family,”* the voice in his head chided. *“They’ve turned their backs on you.”*

You don’t know that.

*“It’s been eight years. If they were looking for you, they would have found you by now. They have disowned you. You are a killer.”*

No! He wanted to scream, strangle the monster that poisoned his thoughts.

*“Yes! Use that anger to fuel your hatred, your need to kill! Tonight you will bathe in their blood and be one step closer to breaking free!”*

I kill because I have no other fucking choice.

The beast within him laughed, savaging his thoughts. Killien had half a mind to slam his head against the bars to silence the monster.

“He looks as bad as the fighter we had in here last night.”

Killien blinked, tried to bring the holding area into focus. Two cells down, Blade, a barrel-chested, bearded thug from the slums of Duumhold, stared at him with hungry eyes. He was bald, with so many scars on his head you’d be hard pressed to find an inch of unmarked skin.

Blade turned to another fighter in the cell next to him, Flame, a crazy fucker with burn scars that made his face look like chewed tobacco. He’d burned women and children alive, and bragged about it. “What did they call him again?” Blade asked, nodding toward Killien, “The one with the swollen eye over there? Slasher or some stupid shit like that?” Blade turned his head and spat blood. “Fuck, what I wouldn’t have given to see that bastard die. I watched his last two fights. Stumbled around like he was half drunk, still fucking won. I don’t know if he was high on shadowdust or what, but that fucker would get hit or cut and just keep going. Every

time you thought he was done, he'd crawl back up and fucking kill somebody."

Killien winced at the memory... or what he could remember of the previous night in the pit. He'd used the name Slasher so they wouldn't know who he was. The helmet helped, too. A name was only good for a night, two at the most. So was his look. In order to fight in the pits as often as he did, the prince had him change his identity almost nightly.

Was the medic slipping shadowdust into his draughts? He doubted it, but who the fuck knew anymore?

"I think the bastard musta had one too many pints before he came," a massive, seven-foot fighter who called himself the Behemoth rumbled in a deep voice. Sand and blood matted the man's great chest of hair. "Did you see how he stumbled in here? He's as good as dead."

Blade crossed his shackled hands behind his head and straightened his legs out in front of him. "Good. He'll be easy money."

The Behemoth scoffed. "No easy money in the pits."

Blade shrugged, his smirk unwavering. "We'll see."

Killien grinned, though it hurt his throbbing cheek to do so. He would enjoy killing the cocky bastard.

The crowd roared and screamed for blood, slightly muffled by the iron door to the pit arena.

"Blade, Splinter, you're up next," a guard with a slick, oiled beard and dreads called out to the pit fighters.

Splinter? What a stupid fucking name. Must be his tonight, though, because the guard unlocked his cell.

"Splinter?" Blade asked as the guards unlocked his cell, too. "I thought he was Slasher or something?"

"That was last night," Killien grumbled. "Splinter tonight, or whatever the fuck." He stumbled out of his cell, squinting as he passed a sconce. The light from

the torch hurt his eyes, and splashes of light dotted his vision.

The guards escorted Blade ahead of him down the tunnel toward the pit. The chiseled muscles and thick white scars on his back glistened with sweat. Killien had watched Blade's first fight in the pits a few nights ago. The man was ruthless, animalistic. It was a miracle they hadn't been paired yet.

The roar of the crowd became deafening as Killien stumbled onto the sands of the sunken pit. Sharp, jagged stone edged the foot-deep, rectangular hollow where some flooring had been broken out and replaced with sand.

Rotting wooden beams atop wooden posts held up the crumbling stone ceiling and balcony of the makeshift arena that overlooked the sunken pit. Torches in sconces flickered on each of its four greasy stone walls between the hanging bodies of the defeated strung from beams along the tops of the walls. The stench of rotting flesh, open sores, vomit, sweat, and smoke hung in the air like the ghost of death.

In the alcoves along the back wall, girls and women pleased depraved men behind torn and frayed velvet curtains. A few of the alcoves were barren of any kind of concealment, leaving the naked women—and the torment inflicted upon them—in plain view of the surrounding crowds.

Skull, the heavily tattooed master of ceremonies with the white skull painted on his face, stepped onto the scarlet-stained sand. He wore enough nose rings, earrings, eyebrow rings, lip rings and cheek studs to pay half Killien's debt to Prince Burne. A hush fell over the crowd as he raised his hands in the air. "Raise your cups and your fists if you thirst for blood!" he bellowed. "As payment for their crimes, these two filthy curs have been sent to die in the pits." He paused for the audience to cheer, then continued. "Behold, to my

right, Blade!” The heavily muscled fighter stepped forward, roaring like a lion with a pike stuffed up its ass. Cheers echoed off the stone walls, rippling through the crowds on the floor around the pit and the less adventurous spectators up in the balcony. Skull gestured to Killien. “And to my left, Splinter!”

The crowd booed. With his ever-changing identities, Killien never had the pit crowd’s favor. He was always a newcomer, a no one, a man about to be slaughtered, his blood spilled on the sands. This was not the prince’s famous coliseum, where he was the undefeated Killer every performance.

Go ahead and waste your coin betting against me, he thought. White flashes still danced in his vision. He tried to shake them clear. I’ll rip your fucking throats out with my teeth.

Skull raised his hands and the crowd’s shouting faded to a hush. “What weapons shall the gods grant them? Or will the gods curse them and send them to be beaten to death on the wooden posts?”

A thin black-haired woman, barely clothed, stumbled onto the sand carrying a woven basket.

Skull shouted, “Mongrels, choose your fate.”

Blade reached into the basket, grabbed a stone, and handed it to Skull.

Skull held up the stone for the crowd even though whatever was written on it was too small for them to see. “Blade draws... a chain whip!” The crowd cheered.

Killien reached in and pulled out a smooth stone inscribed with a worn symbol. He rolled his eyes and handed the stone to Skull.

“Splinter draws... knuckle dusters.”

The crowd roared with laughter.

A slave handed Killien a pair of scuffed, chipped iron knuckle dusters. He slipped them on his fingers. His head began to clear as he focused on the big man across the pit from him. The energy of the crowd coursed through him, feeding his lust for violence.

Blood-speckled men and women placed their bets and exchanged coins.

Skull raised his hands. "Fighters ready?"

Blade regarded Killien with an icy stare. Killien stared right back at him, at least through the one eye he could open all the way.

"Begin!"

Blade whirled the chain above his head. Killien kept his distance, hoping the bastard would crack himself off the top of his skull. Most idiots untrained with chain whips usually did. Blade used the momentum and whipped the chain down at Killien, somehow avoiding his own big, bald head. Killien jumped out of the way, and it slammed into the sand.

Blade grinned widely and lashed it down again, this time going for Killien's shins, but Killien jumped over it. Blade roared and spat. As much as he had the weapon advantage, he didn't seem to know how to use it well.

Still, it was deadly as fuck. Killien lunged, trying to close the distance and land a punch, but the whip made him jump back again.

Blade slashed the chain horizontally. Killien took a step back, flung the knuckle duster from his right hand, and caught the whip. It burned like a mother fucker and cut through the flesh of his palm, but he held on, looping it around his hand. He yanked on the chain, and the big man stumbled forward, wide-eyed, clenching his teeth.

It was all the hesitation Killien needed. He ripped the chain from Blade's hand, and snapped it across the man's abdomen. Blood sprayed across Killien's face and chest as Blade fell to his knees. Killien cracked the chain whip across Blade's back. The big man howled and collapsed into the sand. In two quick steps, Killien was behind him. He dropped down onto Blade's bloody back and looped the chain around his neck.

Blade squirmed beneath him, struggling to get his arms forward. He managed to free one and clawed at

the chain, gasping and gagging, eyes bulging, face turning purple. He jabbed his elbow back but missed. Killien pulled the chain tighter.

“Kill! Kill! Kill!” the crowd screamed.

Killien grinned, savoring the rush.

Blade swung wildly, elbowing, kicking, trying to unbalance Killien, but his breaths were becoming shallower, his blows weaker.

*“You are the monster they say you are,”* the voice within Killien taunted. *“Crave the blood. Feel him writhe. This is our victory. Savor it.”*

Our victory?

Blade bucked like a bull, sending Killien tumbling to the sand. Killien punched the ground, cursing his moment of distraction, cursing the damn voice. He crawled across the crimson sand toward Blade. The big man was still choking, staggering to his feet and grabbing at his bloody throat.

*“Kill him!”* the voice growled.

Killien screamed and struck Blade’s temple with a knuckle duster left hook, shattering bone and popping out the man’s eye. A jolt of pain shot through Killien’s wrist as his one-eyed opponent collapsed to the ground. The crowd roared.

His chest heaving, Killien staggered backward. He stared down at his opponent, blood from the man’s head soaking into the sand. Red tinged the edges of Killien’s vision, and he tried to blink it away. He’d never popped a fucking eye out before.

*“Taste your victory,”* the voice in his head hissed. *“Become what they fear.”*

Killien bent down, picked up the eye, ripped it from the pink threads that held it to Blade’s face, and thrust his hand into the air. Blood streamed down his arm. The roar of the spectators was like a cannon exploding in his head.

“The winner is... Splinter!” Skull shouted.

The voice... all the underground fights... he was losing his grip on his sanity.

"You die, they die." It's what the prince had told him over and over. His family... it was the only thing that kept him going, why he continued to kill for the prince.

But he was losing steam. And the voice in his head was getting louder. His next opponent, the Flame, threw him to the ground and cut a line across his back with his rusted dagger. Agony seared across Killien's back. He staggered forward, then collapsed to his knees.

The crowd shouted. "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

*"Get up!"* the monster within urged. *"You don't need a weapon to beat him. You are Killer, the Beast of Vendragon. You are the weapon!"*

Killien rose to his feet, his legs wobbly.

*"Yes! Yessss! Give yourself to the blood rage! Feel the life blood against your skin, feel its power! It's yours now. Unleash the beast and we will be unstoppable."*

He stared at the child murderer with the split lip and burned face, trying to blink away the aura that surrounded him, the glare of the torches. The Flame's eyes were wild and bloodshot, his hands twitching at his sides. He should have been publicly beheaded for his crimes, but he'd been condemned to the pits instead, probably because he was a big ugly sonovabitch.

Without the prince's iron collar, Killien would have happily unleashed his magic and given the sick bastard the fiery death he deserved. But he couldn't get the fucking thing off.

He needed to let Killer out. Even if he couldn't use his magic, he would not allow the Flame to live another day.

Killien charged at him, trying to focus his good eye on the man and not his blurry aura. The Flame laughed and sidestepped him.

Focus.

Flame swung his dagger again. Killien dodged it and threw a right cross at his the man's side, but the aura threw off his aim and he barely grazed him. He screamed and lunged again, knocked the dagger from Flame's hand, punched him in the stomach, and slammed his fist into the Flame's jaw. Flame's head snapped sideways. Blood and teeth sprayed from his mouth. He staggered back and Killien slammed his foot into Flame's wide chest, knocking him to the crimson sand.

Killien dropped onto the man's chest and punched him in the face. He couldn't see past the red aura—part blood, part hallucination—that surrounded the man's head, didn't know if the screams were Flame's or his own. But he wouldn't stop until the bastard stopped moving.

The iron collar dug into his collarbone. He longed to tear it off, unleash his magic, and torch the fucker. But the damn thing was unbreakable.

The Flame kicked and bucked under him, but Killien held him pinned him to the sand. *You're mine!* He slid up, pressed his knees on the Flame's shoulders and pressed his thumbs to the man's eyes.

*"Kill him! Kill him! Unleash me!"* The damned voice startled Killien, and he almost let go.

The crowd melted into a whirl of screaming color. Slick, black worms crawled across the sand toward him. He blinked the visions away. The monster within was taking over.

Killien's arms shook. He stared down at Flame's scarred face. Somehow, the bastard was still grinning, mocking him, despite Killien's thumbs stuck in his eye sockets.

*"Kill him! Kill him!"*

Killien growled and drove his thumbs into Flame's eyes until they popped. Blood spouted up into Killien's face. Flame howled. Killien grabbed the man's face

with one hand and the back of his head with the other, turned his head until his neck snapped.

Skull raised Killien's hand, but Killien could barely stand. Flashes of light streaked across his vision. Blood stung his eyes. Burne grinned at him from the crowd. "More." Then the fat prince was on the other side of the pit, laughing and holding his sagging gut. "Again."

Killien shook his head. Burne wasn't there. He couldn't be. He'd never come down to this shithole. And yet, Killien could hear him laughing, smell the wine on his breath and his sweat-stinking robes.

The world seemed to tilt, and Killien stumbled to the sand, taking in a mouthful of dirt. His thoughts were scrambled, spasmodic. The crowd took on the face of his father, mother, sister, and brother. What the hell were they doing here?

"Killien!" Someone screamed.

Killien jerked his head. His sister was screaming, tied to a support post, her blue dress torn and bloody, her arms and thighs bruised. A man with a wooden staff reeled back to strike her again.

A wave of vertigo crashed into him. Killien stumbled to his feet, then fell back onto the floor. "No!" he screamed. But when he looked again, a half-naked man hung from the post, his ribs poking through his skin. The man with the staff struck him, and the shriveled man shrieked.

They're not here. They can't be. He rubbed his eyes with his blood-crusting hands.

*"As long you keep fighting, they'll remain safe."* The fat bastard prince wasn't here either.

A sharp pain flared in his head. Killien winced. His vision blurred again. He clenched his teeth. The crowd drifted farther and farther away.

It wasn't until he saw the grimy, rat-infested holding area that he realized he'd been dragged there. The guards shoved him into his cell and he collapsed.

“He’s done.”

Killien blinked; the holding area faded in and out. He caught a glimpse of the prince’s guard, Ulric, stomping toward him.

“He’s not done,” Ulric shouted at the pit guard. “He has one more fight.”

“You’ll have to throw him into the pit,” the pit guard said. “He won’t make it there himself. And he can’t just lie there? Skull won’t have it.”

Killien tried to lift his head, but his vision spun. He had nothing left. Even the voice in his head was silent. He kept thinking of his sister tied to the post. It wasn’t real. And yet, the ache in his chest returned. What would Burne do to her, to his mother, if he couldn’t fight? If they threw him into the pit again, he wouldn’t survive. No luck in the world, no herbal remedy would be enough to save him.

They don’t even know I’m alive, don’t even know they’re in danger. The world shifted again. His head crashed to the stone floor.

“One more fight,” Ulric growled. “Let me talk to him.”

“Five minutes.” The pit guard snorted and walked away.

One last fight. Killien tried to shake the haze from his thoughts.

Ulric crouched down in front of him and slapped him across the face. “Don’t make me a fucking liar.”

Killien forced his head up, met Ulric’s gaze with his one good eye. “Unlock... the... collar.”

“Not a fucking chance,” Ulric whispered.

“You want me to win. Let me use my magic.”

“And burn the fucking place down and escape? I don’t think so. You want to survive this fight, you’re going to have to pull it off on your own.”

Killien gritted his teeth. “Stick me in.”

“I will, but don’t you fucking die. The prince won’t like that.”

“Just stick me the fuck in. I’ll get the bastard his money.”

He was losing strength fast, bleeding from the gash in his lower back, only able to see through one eye, and he couldn’t use his magic. But he’d survive. He had no choice. Adrenaline thrummed in his chest, in his arms. The first challenge was to get up off the fucking floor.

Ulric drew a small vial from his pocket. “Take this.”

“What is it?”

“With any luck, poison. But the gods are too cruel to grant me such a favor.” He handed the vial to Killien. “It’s from the medic, though you look beyond help to me.”

Killien downed it. His head exploded in pain. He fell back, slamming his shoulders into the cell bars. He could barely breathe, barely see through the white streaks of light that danced across his vision. Fucking hell! He closed his eyes and pressed his fingers to his temples.

The monster within laughed. “Yes! Yesss!!”

It took another minute for the pain to subside, the white streaks to fade.

The fog in his head cleared, and he realized Ulric was laughing. “I bet you enjoyed that,” Killien said without looking up.

“More than you know,” the guard said, smiling. “Now get out there and fight.”

Killien forced himself to stand. The cut in his back still hurt like a bitch, but he could move without his head thinking it might fall off.

“Splinter, Behemoth, you’re up.”

Killien looked at the seven-foot monster.

One. Last. Fight. It would take everything he had.

He followed Behemoth onto the crimson sand of the sunken pit. The crowd chanted, “Behemoth! Behemoth! Behemoth!”

Killien watched the bookies hustle the bets in. Were they betting for him or against him? It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was taking the Behemoth down, and to do that he'd have to become what he hated most. He'd have to crawl down that dark hole and set the monster free ... whatever the price.

He swore he heard the monster within laughing.

As the crowd settled and Skull introduced the two mongrels that had been sent to die in the pits, black shadows crossed Killien's vision. When he turned, they were gone, but something was there. He could hear the flapping of wings, the clicking and scratching of claws against the wooden posts.

By the fucking gods, what did they give me?

His vision blurred as he strode toward the woman holding the basket—or was it two women? He reached for the basket and missed. Behind him, he heard the crowd's laughter, muffled and indistinct. He shook his head, trying to clear his double vision, reached into the basket and drew a stone but he couldn't make out the blurred image on it.

"Splinter draws... a spiked mace!"

A mace? Killien nearly laughed at his change of fate.

"Behemoth draws... a battle axe."

At least it would be a fair match if he could fucking see straight.

"Fighters ready?" Skull bellowed.

The monster within remained oddly silent.

Killien stared at Behemoth and his wicked axe. Shadows darted behind Behemoth. Somewhere, in the distance, an awful screech echoed above the roar of the crowd. Shadows drew closer. One hovered over the giant across the pit.

What the fuck is happening?

The shadows dropped, seemed to be absorbed by the giant. Behemoth's eyes bulged and his jaw

elongated. He let out a piercing cry as black, horn-tipped wings sprouted behind him.

The shadowdust... the vial... Ulric and the fucking medic tricked me!

The monster within laughed maniacally as Killien fought to draw breath, fought to make sense of what was happening.

“Begin!” Skull bellowed, his voice muffled and distorted as if he was shouting through water.

Behemoth let out a terrible screech that seemed to echo off the walls. Killien winced, stumbled forward, and swung the mace at him, cutting through the wings, meeting no resistance. Were they even real? He turned, panting, nearly deafened by the insufferable screeching. Behemoth hissed and flapped those damn wings as if Killien hadn’t just run a spiked mace through them.

Killien went to swing again, but the spikes of his mace turned into hissing black snakes, some slithering down the mace’s wooden shaft. Fucking hell! He dropped the weapon, cursing the drugs the guard had given him. It wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real.

Behemoth opened his mouth, his jaw stretching impossibly wide, and a swarm of insects flew out between his jagged teeth. They swarmed Killien’s head, biting, stinging, and burrowing under his skin. Killien couldn’t see through the mass of black dots, through the blur of his tears. His face itched and burned. He could feel them crawling beneath his skin, clawed at his face, desperate to get them off.

He dropped to his knees. He felt dead. But he could still hear Behemoth laughing. Perhaps he was not dead yet.

*“Death is not an option,”* the voice roared. *“Get up. You’re mine now.”*

Through the blur of insects, Killien fumbled in the sand for his mace. He looked up at the winged demon towering over him.

*“Stop resisting my power! Unleash me!”*

Killien winced, punched the sand. Fine, you win! Tonight, I'll set you free! But even as the thought crossed his mind, fear swelled in his chest. He knew what he was capable of, how many people he had brutally slain by order of the prince. Killing was second nature. What would he do if he was free from his enslavement, free of the godsforsaken collar that nullified his magic? How many lives would quench his thirst for vengeance?

Fuck the consequences. It was only one night.

Killien fought to catch his breath, to muster his strength, his hatred. He could feel the monster within lending him strength, fueling him with the anger, giving him the power he needed to survive. Tonight, there were no rules.

When he looked up at Behemoth, the insects were gone. His blurred vision, the auras, the wings, and all traces of his hallucinations had disappeared. The giant grinned down at him seeming to think he was one blow away from winning. Killien stood just as Behemoth swung the battle axe down.

Killien caught it by the shaft, the impact rattling his wrist and forearm. Behemoth gaped at him wide-eyed. Killien screamed, an otherworldly scream, hatred and vengeance. He hurled himself at the colossus, swinging his mace down and crushing Behemoth's shoulder.

Adrenaline coursed through him. With each spray of blood he felt more powerful. The monster within savored the blood, the violence, absorbed by its power. Killien felt it burning within him. He felt invincible. So he fed the monster what it craved, what he craved.

Slaughter them all and break free of this wretched place, of Prince Burne and all who stand against you!

Killien no longer knew if the thoughts were his own.

*“Gouge his eyes! Tear off his fucking limbs! Make him beg for mercy!”*

Behemoth blocked Killien's next swing of the mace, but Killien growled and advanced across the bloody sand. He would not let up. He would not back down.

He feinted a thrust at Behemoth's chest, then swung for the giant's face. The spikes of his mace caught the edge of Behemoth's left cheek, and the beast of a man howled. Blood spattered Killien's face. He licked his lips, savoring the metallic tang on his tongue.

*"Kill! Kill! Kill!"* the voice screamed.

*"Kill! Kill! Kill!"* the crowd roared.

Blind rage filled him and he could barely see the mace in front of him, barely feel it in his grip. The monster within had a hold of him now, but he didn't care.

He wanted blood. He swung wildly, laughing as his mace thumped the side of the giant's head. Still, he didn't stop. Warm blood streamed down his chest, arms, and legs.

Behemoth fell to his knees, making him about Killien's height. The side of his head was crushed in, white shards of bone sticking through skin and hair. He begged Killien to stop, to get it over with. But Killien wouldn't grant him that mercy. There were no mercy kills in the pit.

Behemoth flailed his massive fist, catching Killien by surprise, slamming his jaw, jerking his head sideways. Killien bit down on his tongue and snarled, angry the bastard had been able to get in a shot. He slammed the mace off the side of Behemoth's head again. Bone snapped, blood spurted, gray chunks flew into the crowd. They cheered wildly. Behemoth began to topple sideways, holding up a hand, surrendering, but Killien smashed the mace down on his head again, collapsing the giant's skull around his eyes. Behemoth's face was nothing more than a mash of blood and bone.

“Splinter, victor!” Killien vaguely heard Skull shout behind him.

Killien whipped around, glaring at the roaring blood-speckled crowd and then at the grinning Skull, the man who made a fortune overseeing these pit fights. “You!” he screamed.

Skull’s smile faded, and for the first time since Killien met him, a look of fear twisted his white-painted face. Two guards, one tall and one stout, leaped into the pit in beside him.

Killien grinned at the three men. “I bet you sick fucks enjoyed that! Betting on the lives of men, watching them beat each other to death, so you can go home with jingling purses. Death is a game to you. Well, let’s see how fun you think it is when it’s you in the pit.”

The crowd stepped back, murmuring.

“Guards!” Skull shouted. “Take him down!”

Killien lunged at the two men charging toward him. He cracked his mace off the head of the tall guard. The monster’s laughter filled his head, and Killien laughed along with it.

Skull shouted for more guards. Men came running from every corner of the arena, swinging batons and swords. Killien smashed them down as fast as they came, slamming his mace on their skulls with one hand, punching and tearing at them with the other.

“Stop! Move away! Get the hell away from him!” Ulrich pushed through the throng of pit guards, catching an elbow to the side of his face as he fought his way through the men and tangle of limbs toward Killien. The crowd shuffled back. Killien stood there, drenched in blood, panting, and staring at Ulrich.

Ulric pointed his cudgel at Killien. “This stupid fuck may be a lowly gladiator,” he lied, “but he still belongs to the prince.”

Skull snarled, but stepped aside.

Ulric turned to Killien and lowered his voice. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” He slammed the

cudgel against Killien's head, dizzying him. "The prince has men watching your family. One word and they're dead."

Killien's head started to spin, the fight draining out of him. As Ulric hauled him out of the filthy pit hall, he looked down at the bloodied and broken bodies sprawled across the pit, the skulls crushed in the crimson sand, the blood-splattered spectators gaping at him drop-jawed.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Perhaps the monster within would tell him.

**Angel Haze** is a dark epic fantasy author obsessed with magic, adventure, and morally grey characters.

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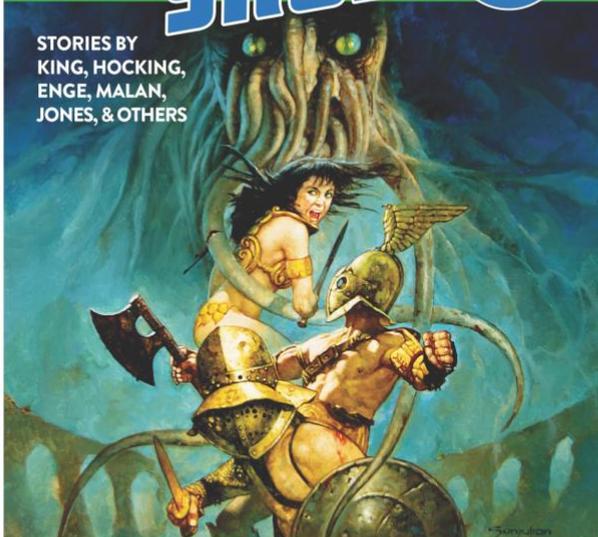
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