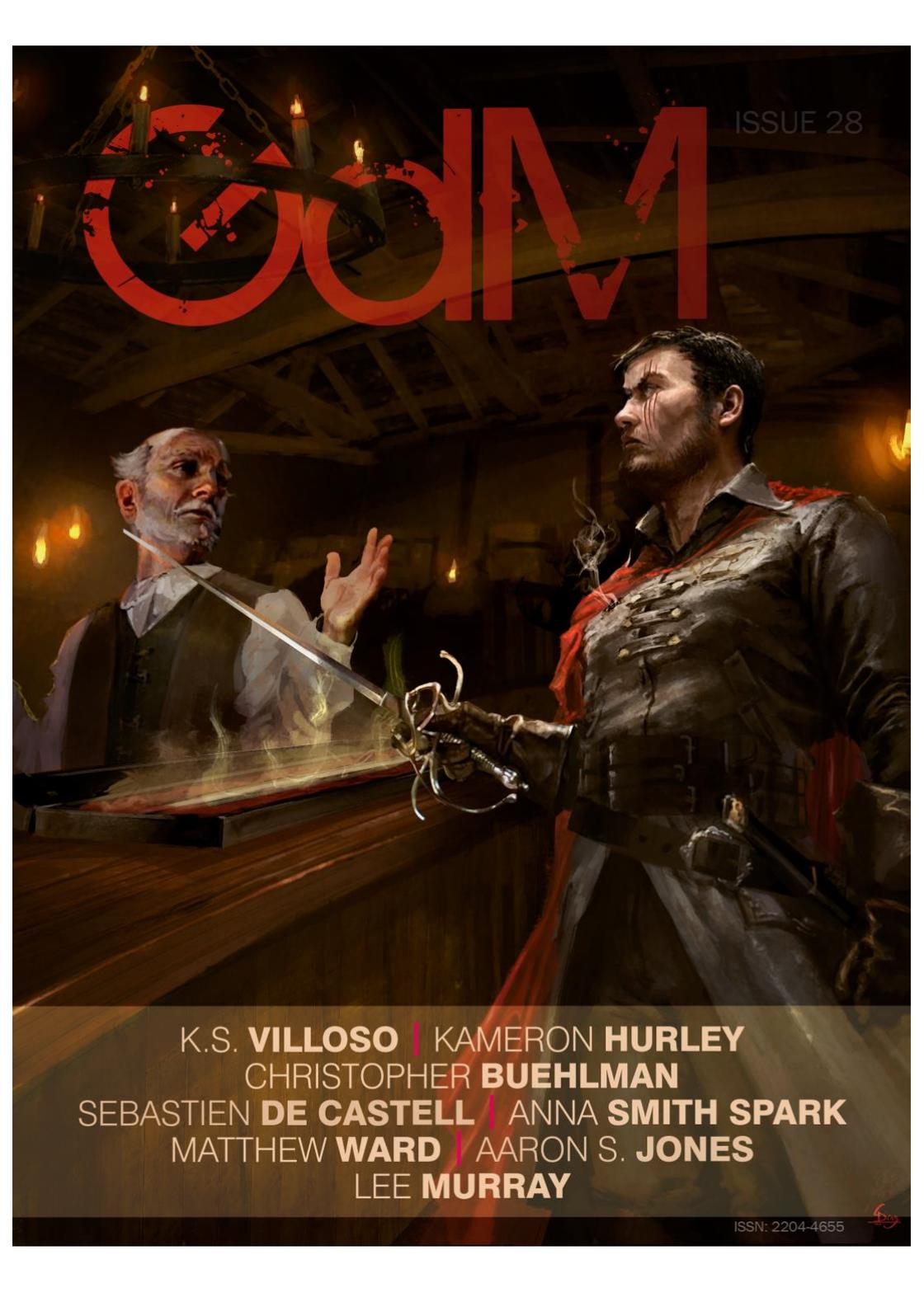


ISSUE 28



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**SEBASTIEN DE CASTELL | ANNA SMITH SPARK**  
**MATTHEW WARD | AARON S. JONES**  
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ISSN: 2204-4655



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# From the Editor

ADRIAN COLLINS

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I'm back!

With Beth having delivered an excellent horror special for Issue #27, I'm back in the driver's seat for this issue (sorry!). We've got a few names you know and love in our line up, and they have produced some excellent grimdark stories, articles, and interviews for you to get your teeth stuck in to.

One of the things I was really excited to do this issue was to interview Anna Smith Spark and Matthew Ward, again. Both have reasonably recently completed publishing fantasy trilogies through big five publishers, and I really wanted to ask about what that's like. What happens when the third books goes in and you're into clear air on the other side? I think we got some really insightful commentary on the topic, and I can't wait to show you.

And finally, to my fellow Australians in the eastern states: there's light at the end of the tunnel. I'll see you at the pub in a couple of weeks.

Adrian Collins  
Founder

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# The Tomb of the Flesh Dealer

KAMERON HURLEY

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Nyx woke with a woman between her legs, a dead man on the floor, and a bottle of whisky in her hand. She patted the woman's head and arm to confirm she was still warm and alive, then pushed the woman clear and sat up. The woman yawned, smacking her big lips, and burrowed further into the other side of the mattress. Nyx had no idea who the woman was.

Nyx dressed quickly, pulling on her dhoti; her breast binding was still mostly on. She adjusted it and checked the poisoned needles in her hair; intact. She found her scattergun under the bed and her sword was lodged in the far wall. No blood on the sword, though, and the gun hadn't been fired recently. That was good?

She hesitated over the man's body, curious as to what did him in; he was cool to the touch. Very dead. Some blood at his mouth. He lay flat on his stomach, and she didn't want to move him. The less she touched him the better.

Nyx opened the shutters, wincing at the glare of the suns. Afternoon already? She slipped out the window and onto the awning over the tavern's patio. Hazy memories from the night before tickled her brain. Four fingers of whisky, a loud singer trilling in Ras Tiegan, a crowd of sweaty bodies and the stink of straw covered in piss-smelling beer, all churned up by dirty, sandy feet.

Nyx hung off the side of the awning and dropped to the dusty ground. A few patrons on the patio glanced

up at her, but quickly turned back to their drinks. She wasn't the sort of person anyone stared at too long.

"Where the fuck you been, boss?"

Anneke, one of her contracted mercenaries, came out from under the shade of the awning, rubbing her thumb and forefinger; one of her few nervous habits. Her teeth were stained red with sen, and the big acid rifle hooked over her shoulder was nearly as tall as she was.

"Where did I say I'd be?"

"Expected you at midday prayer. You didn't show up, came to haul you out of whatever bed or ditch you'd rolled into."

"Got carried away last night, looks like." Nyx pushed forward, hands stuffed in her pockets, and resisted the urge to glance back at the tavern. She had nothing to feel guilty about, leaving the woman and the body up there. People died all the time. Especially men. It had nothing to do with her... probably. "We have a job?"

Anneke trotted after her. "Got a client waiting in the office. Made appointment yesterday, Taite says."

Nyx grunted.

"You need some buni?" Anneke asked. "Maybe shot of whisky in it?"

Nyx grunted again, still trying to piece together her fragmented memories. A night out, a few drinks—that had been the goal. Get away from her team for the night before she got frustrated enough to cut off all their heads. Her hands on that woman's hips, lifting her onto the bar.

But no memory of the dead man. Not yet.

Oh well.

The storefront Nyx and her team worked from was riddled with bullet holes over the doorway. The front windows had been bricked up long before she took out a lease on the tired wreck.

A woman Nyx didn't know crouched under the tattered awning out front, smoking something sweet-

smelling from a shiny pipe made of bug secretions. At Nyx's approach, the woman heaved herself to her feet, towering over Nyx by a head. As she rose to her full height, it was like watching a great bird unfold itself, shaking out its feathers, craning its neck. She wore a bulky burnous teeming with bulging pockets. Nyx wondered if she was a shifter, or if the likeness was simply coincidence.

"You are Nyxnissa so Dasheem?" the bird-woman asked.

"Depends," Nyx said. "Who are you?"

"Rohullah," the woman said. "May we speak privately?"

"Can take you inside, but can't promise it's private."

The woman bowed her head. While the burnous gave her bulk, her hands were thin and gnarled, bearing scars that could have come from bar fights or boxing matches or any number of munitions factories. Her face had the haggard look of a woman who had spent well over forty years in the suns of Nasheen, probably closer to fifty; the suns aged people fast who didn't stay covered up.

Nyx padded into the front room of her storefront, gesturing toward the ablution bowl by the door in case the woman wanted to wash the whole nasty business off before or after dealing with Nyx.

She pushed open the curtain into her office proper; a mean little room with a desk pushed into one corner, piles of old whisky bottles accumulating dust in the corners. She kept a few trophies from various jobs—mostly weapons she was very bad at shooting—laying inside the dusty curtained window seat. She kept meaning to hang them up or dump them into a chest or something, but never got around to it.

Nyx sat on the edge of her desk and said, "Well?"

"I need someone skilled and discrete," Rohullah said, pausing just inside the doorway, but not sitting. Her bulk filled the single exit, and Nyx had a moment

of concern. Was this an assassin? She shifted her weight to her right to make it easier to draw her scattergun.

"That's not me," Nyx said. "I'm the opposite of those things. Especially the second one."

"And I need it done today."

"Not taking a job today. Busy."

"Hungover?"

"That too. Can start later in the week if it's something that interests me."

"I'm afraid you'll need to take it whether it interests you or not."

Nyx laughed, easing her left arm onto her left knee, still trying to work out if she needed to pull her gun or not. "I haven't taken orders since I was at the front."

"Not even when you were a bel dame?"

"If you know that much about me, you'll know I wasn't good at that either."

"The boy you killed last night was a First Family boy."

Nyx's palms prickled. She wiped them against her thighs. "I didn't kill anybody last night."

"You did. His body is still up in the room you and your bed partner were seen entering last night. Dozens of witnesses. It was after evening prayer at the end of a week. Very busy. Though I'm sure you remember little of that, based on your level of inebriation."

"Takes a lot to get me that drunk," Nyx said. Black out drunk? Not since she was mixing drugs and liquor to make it through bad barrages at the front. "Makes me wonder what drugs were on hand that night behind the bar."

"It does indeed."

"Well," Nyx said. "This is all very interesting."

"It is."

"Who you looking for?"

"Who? Rather, *what*," Rohullah said. She moved to the archway of the mostly covered window and peered

at Nyx's sandy collection of ephemera. "I suppose the flesh dealer was a woman once, though not in a very long time."

"Flesh dealer? The woman sells parts to magicians? What makes this one so special?"

"She came into a very... interesting piece of flesh, and it transformed her. It's said she could not be killed, so she was entombed, in the north, before the sand and contagion swallowed the cities there."

"Sounds like some kids' story, made up to keep people from digging around up there."

"It's far more than a story. It's quite real. And I need you to retrieve the flesh dealer from her tomb."

God, she could use a drink. "Course you do."

"I can tell you where to find the tomb. That's the easiest part of this assignment. I had a team searching the wastelands for nearly two years. They found the tomb, and even breached the first few chambers. Take the Queen's highway as far as Katashi, the old fuel station. You'll need to go on foot after that for two days, unless you have fine cats that can navigate the sands. A bakkie will get swallowed up there. The Family seeking this dealer fears if we don't obtain it now, it may be swallowed forever."

"Ah," Nyx said. "First Family hired you, then." Fuck. She wasn't going to get out of something that had to do with First Families. "You know where it is, then why don't you just pick it out yourself?"

She spread her clawed old hands. "Not my skillset."

"What do you do then?"

"I find things for people."

"Sounds like *my* job."

"Mine is far more comfortable. I enjoy hot meals and long baths. One needs... people skills for this type of work, between those of a class like the First Families and those like..." she eyed Nyx. "Well."

"You sound like a Tirhani arms dealer."

"The exercise should be clear enough. Infiltrate the tomb and retrieve the flesh dealer's body. Bring it to me at this address." She placed a simple folded piece of organic green paper on the table next to Nyx.

Nyx peered at it a long time, trying to make sure she read it right. "There's nothing at that address."

"There's an old way station near there. You'll see it. I'll have my people waiting. Do the handover, simple as that."

"And the dead boy? The one you set me up with?"

Rohullah waved her hand. "A word from me and his body will be burned and forgotten."

"Not much of an assurance."

"No, but what choice do you have?"

"Always got a choice," Nyx said, stuffing the paper into the edge of her dhoti. "Just a matter of which choice means living the longest."

"I appreciate that you enjoy living."

"Better than the alternative." Nyx slid off the table, ready to lead Rohullah out, and paused. "What happened to the other team? The search team? They not up to hauling this body out?"

"I'm afraid we lost touch with them. All but the last, and she was a bit... mad when she came back. Got us the location, of course, but little else. We suspect her team died. The old contagions and wrecks and buried cities in the north are dangerous. Casualties occur."

"You sure it wasn't you who killed them? Just the job."

Rohullah wiggled her fingers and smiled. "Oh, you are a character. Have a care, Nyxnissa so Dasheem. If I thought I could get anyone else to do this, I would have had them do it. You were at the very bottom of a very short list."

"I'm flattered."

"Don't be."

Nyx heard raised voices outside. A loud thump.

Rohullah turned, her billowing burnous whirling with her—fast, for an old woman—and Nyx reached for her scattergun.

Footsteps in the foyer. Anneke yelling. Shotgun blast. Smell of dust and spent gunpowder.

A lean woman with a square jaw and small, steely eyes shifted the curtain—gun first, and shot Rohullah in the face.

Nyx popped off her scattergun, but the woman in the doorway had already ducked inside and jumped—like a fucking cat!—onto Nyx's desk.

She kicked Nyx off the table and levelled the smoking gun at Nyx. "You work for me now."

Nyx lay on the floor, head still throbbing from the hangover. Bits of Rohullah's brain spatter clung to her neck and chest. "The fuck?" Nyx said. "Who the *fuck* are you?"

"Tarifah. Beast hunter."

"A... *what?*"

"She wants you to retrieve a sarcophagus, an old flesh dealer? That what she tell you?"

"...yes?"

"It's not. The flesh dealer turned herself into a beast, an abomination. I'm sworn to bring her back."

Nyx considered leaping up and twisting the gun from the girl's hands, but she had been fast—very fast—in getting from the door to the table and gaining the high ground. Nyx didn't often run into anyone that nimble and good with a gun outside a bel dame bar. Things could be messy.

"Boss!" Anneke yelled. The curtain twitched.

"Leave it, Anneke!" Nyx said. More noise in the foyer; Khos and Taite, probably.

Khos, her shifter, forged in, one pale beefy arm inside before Tarifah's gun went off. Khos howled, though Nyx suspected it'd been a ricochet. "Stay the fuck out there," Nyx said. "We're having a civilized fucking conversation."

"Your mother is a drunkard!" Khos yelled in Mhorian. He'd used that curse enough that Nyx understood it.

"Talk," Nyx said to Tarifah, "but let's make it fast."

"You know the story of Nasnas?"

"Who?"

Tarifah crouched on the table staring at Nyx, wiry body still tense. Her thick mop of curly black hair made a halo above her head, tied back loosely with a bit of leather. Three ragged scars, like claw marks, crawled up her neck from beneath her collar and kissed the edge of her left cheekbone. The wounds were still shiny, angry red; relatively recent.

"It's an old story," Tarifah said, "about a creature that was the offspring of a demon and a human, gifted with the power to remove the flesh of a person just by touching them. This flesh dealer she wants you to retrieve isn't human. It's an abomination. A weapon. Something from the early days of the world. The people she worked for want to safeguard it for their own purposes. I want to destroy it. I'm a beast hunter."

"You said that before, but what *is* that?"

"I hunt beasts and abominations."

"You sound like a Ras Tiegan talking about shifters."

"My sister was killed by a jinn," she said. Nyx raised an eyebrow at that. "There are things in this world that aren't explained by bugs and magicians. Secrets the First Families keep, certainly, but older secrets, too, ones they have willfully forgotten. My order hunts them out."

"Never heard of you."

"That's by design. We don't all go around advertising ourselves, like bel dames. Doing so is a good way to get killed."

Nyx could not argue with that. "So why not go do this yourself? Why murder somebody in my house and ask me for help?"

"Rohullah is hardly a person." She gestured with her chin. "Take off the burnous. You'll see."

Nyx slowly rose from the floor, raising her hands, palm out, and took hold of the end of Rohullah's burnous. Beneath the thick, layered fabric and stuffed pockets was a longer skirt that hid her legs and torso. Nyx flicked this back too and stared at a shiny black collection of insectile legs, each as wide around as her wrist, maybe four or eight of them. In the low light, they gleamed with hints of emerald and topaz. The ends of the legs were covered in thick dog leather shoes, which is why Nyx hadn't heard the click and scuttle of the woman's gait.

Nyx snorted and dropped the skirt. "She's just a Plague Sister."

Tarifah recoiled. "She's an abomination!"

"Yeah, well, she's a known type. They don't usually get out of magicians' wards, though. Maybe you just haven't seen one before."

"I've seen enough."

"So this... 'abomination' is like a Plague Sister, one that flays people?"

"Maybe."

"You don't know."

"I just know the books, from my order. You'll help me?"

"For a price."

"Name it."

"Forty notes."

"Done."

"Damn," Nyx said. She should have asked for more.

"Tomorrow. Dawn. We go together. I kill it. You get the body. Easy work, for forty notes."

"So you say. Can my team come in now and not get shot?"

"If they don't shoot *me*," Tarifah said.

"Khos?" Nyx said. "Anneke? Who else out there?"

Khos pushed in first. He had wrapped a bit of his burnous around the injured arm. His glower could have frozen the suns. Both of them.

"Let her go, Khos," Nyx said.

"She's left us with a body!"

"We'll deal with it."

Tarifah raised her chin. She leapt easily from the table to doorway, so fast she had slipped by Khos and into the foyer before he could block the doorway.

Neat trick, that.

She was out the front door just as Rhys, Nyx's healer, came in to join them, his brow still dripping sweat from the magician's gym. He started as Tarifah ran past him into the street.

"Who was that?" Rhys asked.

"A job," Khos said.

Nyx came into the foyer with them all, gave them a look. Taite, her skinny com tech, was hiding in the curve of the entryway to the back of the storefront, the weapons storage and com area they called the keg.

"You think she's a nutter?" Anneke said.

"Could be," Nyx said. "But this story is way more interesting than the one the other woman was selling."

"Maybe this one will pay us."

"Don't know," Nyx said. "But I'm interested. We can deliver this body to Rohullah's checkpoint, and get Rohullah's people off me *and* get paid. Whether or not she's, well, alive..." Nyx gestured at the cooling body of the Plague Sister in her office. "How long will it take for her friends to figure out? We can keep her in the freezer. Check the boards, even. She might be worth something and on a bounty list for eating kids' faces or something. Taite, you get to stay here at the com for this one."

"God bless," he muttered.

"Rhys, you're on this one. It's north. No border, look at that! No fucking excuses."

"Wait," Rhys said. "*What* is it we're doing?"

"Anneke, I'll likely park you out front as scout when we're inside."

"We gonna blow some shit up?" Anneke asked.

"Probably," Nyx said. "Let's make sure we bring enough explosives to get through a... tomb. Stone, mud-brick. Let's hope it's not old-world shit."

"I'm on it, boss. Acid grenades, burst grenades, sand traps, ignition—"

"Yeah, yeah. Rhys, same for bugs. Get ready. Not sure what we'll run into. Khos, if we're hauling somebody out I'll need your muscle."

He raised his brows and folded his massive arms. "Just the muscle, huh?"

"Have I ever asked for anything else?" She met his look, dead-pan, and he snorted.

Nyx was used to getting slammed in the face with a fistful of trouble—usually trouble she'd made for herself—but this was a little much for one day.

"Help me with this," she told Khos, pointing at Rohullah.

"Wait," Rhys said, as Nyx and Khos took either end of the body. "A tomb? No one does that. It's illegal. You know what happens when you bury bodies out there. It's why we burn them."

"Well, this one didn't get burned, apparently. Get out of the way."

She and Khos laid Rohullah's body out into the freezer in the cellar next to a couple of heads that Nyx kept meaning to turn into the bounty office.

Anneke found them there just as Khos finished tying the body up in a linen shroud.

"Bakkie's busted," Anneke said. "Not gonna get a part in for at least a week."

"Fuck," Nyx said.

"It's up the Queen's highway," Khos said. "We could take the train."

"No train stops up there," Anneke said.

"Who says it needs to stop?" Nyx said. "We can jump off. We'll need supplies. Enough for double the amount of time we think we'll spend in the desert."

"I can get us cats," Anneke said. She counted on her fingers, stuck her tongue out as she calculated. "All right, I can get us a sand sled and four cats. Khos can shift, eh?"

"Always taking advantage," Khos muttered.

"You're too fat for a cat anyway," Anneke said. "You are heavy as four of me! You'll break the cats!"

"Nasheenan cats," he said, "are much weaker than Mhorian ones. Much like Nasheenan people."

Anneke patted her gun. "We can compensate tho, eh?"

"I'm starving," Nyx said. "Getting a whisky." She marched back upstairs and rummaged around her office for a bottle. She found one of absinthe and mixed herself a brutal concoction.

Rhys entered, bringing bounty reports and probably balance statements or bills or some shit.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"Trying to get my greens," Nyx said, "eat healthy." She downed the whole absinthe thing in one go.

Then vomited.

\* \* \*

The train rattled like a dying man all the way up the northern edge of Nasheen.

Nyx's teeth chattered. She kept getting up and walking the swaying length of the train to give her aching ass a break from the hard, unforgiving benches. As she sat back down, Anneke and Khos began a game of cards at the fold-out table between them. Rhys remained immersed in his book, oblivious to them all. Tarifah sat a few rows up at a single seat by herself, gaze constantly sweeping the car, though there were only eight other passengers in it.

"Why you always making eyes at women who want to kill you?" Anneke said, not looking up from her cards.

"Is there any other kind?" Nyx said. "Mercenaries have a hard time dating. Gotta make do with what you have."

Khos snorted.

"You know that better than anyone, huh?" Nyx said.

He shook his head and took another card.

"You trust this woman dropping the cats?" Nyx asked. "If we get stuck out there...."

Anneke waved her hand, like swatting a fly. "No problem. Taite connected me to her. Two of those notes go a long way in the north. She'd bleed out and feed us her own breast milk for five."

Rhys grimaced. "This country..."

"Hopefully it won't be necessary," Nyx said. "What are you reading, Rhys?"

"I'm learning to practice patience and humility."

"Neither are things you're very good with," Nyx said.

"Hence the practice," Khos said. He chuckled at his own joke.

"I'm reading about Nasnas," Rhys said. He had taken it upon himself to discuss the story of the flesh dealer with Tarifah on their way to the station. Nyx tried to make out the name on the spine of the book, but it was in Chenjan. "The Nasnas of the story is described as half a human being—half a head, half a torso, just one leg."

"Should make it easier to fight then," Nyx said.

"It's apparently very agile. The offspring of a human and a demon."

"Stories," Nyx said. "I'm sure it's just another dead flesh dealer. Smash and grab."

"Whenever you describe a job that way," Rhys said, "it never goes well."

Movement at the corner of Nyx's eye told her Tarifah was up. Nyx tensed, moving her left hand

closer to the dagger at her hip. Weapons were allowed on the trains that ran along the border; made it likely that only criminals and people rich enough to hire criminals used these ones anymore.

Tarifah came within a row of them and raised her voice over the clatter, "Quarter hour. We should move to the door."

Khos and Anneke glanced at Nyx. Nyx shrugged. "Boss."

They bundled up their things and grouped up around the exit at the back of the car. "Wait for my signal," Tarifah said, and stepped confidently out into the rattling, swaying darkness. The open door sent in a burst of cool air. Tarifah nimbly climbed to the outside of the train, clinging to thick netting holding down a load of linen.

"She say what signal?" Anneke asked.

"She jumps, we jump," Nyx said. "Just like mothers everywhere told us."

Anneke scrambled out next, her whole body swaying violently, the massive gun affixed to her back threatening to yank her under the rails. Chittering red bugs coated the whirring underbelly of the train, leaking loose from the cisterns they powered to keep the aging relic of a conveyance moving.

Khos followed, leaving Nyx on the lurching platform with Rhys, who gripped the rail next to her so tightly she thought he might fuse with it.

"You afraid of moving trains?" Nyx asked.

He did not look at her, but he went—one clenched fist after another—until he, too, was clinging to the netting.

Tarifah yowled and leapt off the side of the train. The others fell after her.

"Fuck it," Nyx muttered, and threw her weapons ahead of her, then jumped after them, tucking and rolling as she thumped hard against the sandy ground below. She wiped the sand from her eyes and stood.

Tarifah was already huffing away from the train toward a craggy rock protrusion three hundred paces farther up the line.

Bursts sprayed blue and green mist across the distant hills. A contagion sensor moaned. Nyx pulled on her goggles and wrapped a scarf around her face and hoped the wind kept blowing the other way.

She collected her weapons, taking stock of her team, and noticed Anneke was favoring one arm, her body burdened by the weight of the gun.

"You all right?" Nyx said.

"Yeah, broken," Anneke said.

"Rhys?"

He came over to them, kicking up more sand. He took Anneke's arm and turned it this way at that, until she swore at him as if he were a dog merchant who'd cheated her.

"I need to immobilize it."

"Fuck that. I *need* it!"

"I have bugs for the pain, a quick sting—"

"Fine do it," Anneke said. Her eyes were big. She grit her teeth and yelled at Nyx, "Don't leave me out here! I can do the job, boss."

"I'm not going to leave you out here. Dope her and get her going."

Nyx left them to sort through the various bugs in the cases stuffed within Rhys's burnous and strode after Tarifah and Khos.

The cats lay concealed in the craggy rock formation, tied together on a single line. Each cat stood as tall as Tarifah, shoulders broader than hers, their deep bellies heaving as they panted in the cool air.

By the time Nyx arrived, Tarifah was already pulling out the sand sled. Nyx helped her, surprised the spry woman was so strong. But anyone as fast as this—what, beast hunter?—would have more strength than expected.

"You'll shift and scout ahead," Nyx said to Khos as he harnessed the cats to the sled. "Supposed to be a two-day walk, by Rohullah's reckoning, but with the sled, we can make it in a day."

"Anneke's hurt," Khos said. "Might be—"

"Fuck you," Anneke said, trundling into the natural curve of the formation, arm knotted with a tight binding. "I can outrun your big ass."

"Children should speak when spoken to," Khos said.

Anneke showed her teeth at him; they were bloody.

"You lose a tooth?" Nyx asked.

"Bit my tongue," she said, snapping her mouth shut.

"The bugs bite," Rhys said. "They aren't easy going down. But she'll feel no pain for some time."

"Let's hurry," Tarifah said. "Enough talk."

"Your beast has been buried a long time," Nyx said. "It'll stay buried awhile longer."

Khos shed his clothing and dumped it onto the sled. He paced to the opening in the formation and started to shake and shift. His great body began to constrict, growing smaller and hairier in the soft light of the moons slanting across the sand.

Nyx eyed him a moment longer, until he was more dog than man, leaving behind a sheen of mucus on the sand. The tawny dog ran ahead.

Tarifah took lead with the cats, and the others moved into the sled, trading the jerking rattle of the train for the rocking gait of the cats. The cats' giant paws padded easily over the sand, gaining speed as the sled moved from scrub to the thick red-orange sand of the wasteland proper.

They spoke little, passing around a water bulb. Nyx kept her whisky close, watching Tarifah's face as they sped across the desert.

"What's this monster to you, really?" Nyx asked.

Tarifah did not turn; the moons' light made her look older, harrowed, as if she were running from some terrible fate, or perhaps into one.

"I told you. My parents were killed by beasts. I have hunted them ever since."

"And how long is that?"

"Ten years on, now. A woman found me, living out in the desert, all the crops turning to dust. I was too small to work the well. Nearly dead of thirst, myself. She said she was a beast hunter. She brought me to the guild. Taught me all she knew."

"Where is the guild?"

Tarifah's lips tightened. Not quite a smile. "If I told you that, it would not be a secretive order, would it?"

"And now that we all know?"

"No one listens to people like you."

"Can't argue with that," Nyx said, and sipped her whisky. She pulled off her goggles, spit a bit of whisky on the lenses, and wiped them clean on her burnous. "How many beasts you kill until you're done?"

"How many people do you kill," Tarifah said, "until you're done killing?"

"As many as I can until one kills me."

"Exactly that."

They paused at sunrise for prayer and rest. Tarifah joined Anneke and Rhys in rolling out a prayer rug and going through the rote while Nyx sat with Khos-the-dog, who had returned for water and food. He lay next to her on a jutting bit of rusted metal worn smooth by sand, not yet made too hot by the suns. It was a wonder the piece of metal remained out here. Scavengers and merchants were said to have salvaged all that was worth salvaging out here, but Nyx supposed more turned up each year as the sand shifted and got blown apart by the fighting. From here Nyx spotted a long line of circular depressions and four antenna-like spires. An old city, or maybe one of the derelicts from above? It was hard to say.

Nyx slept, and woke to find black desert lice leaping across her ankles. She slapped them away. The team continued on, slipping across the sand, pausing again at midday, and finally heaving over a great black mound of sand that appeared from the blood-orange swaths around it.

Tarifah slowed the cats, calling for them to halt.

"This it?" Nyx said.

"It's the right coordinates," Rhys said, his fingers outstretched, three dragonflies fluttering above, sharing whatever bits of information such insects did when he called them.

Nyx stepped off the sled and surveyed the land below. A grey pit spiraled down and down into darkness. Heaps of rubble and layer upon layer of sand spiraled out from the dig site.

"That took some work," Nyx said.

"It will be cooler below," Tarifah said. "The beasts enjoy the cold."

Khos-the-dog circled the opening, tail up, then sat and waited for them.

Tarifah brought the sled down alongside the entrance, and they unpacked the gear, Anneke still favoring her bound arm.

At the top of the broad hole, wide as Nyx was tall, she found a knotted leather rope attached to a great tent pole stuck deep into the sand. The rope dropped into the darkness, its end obscured.

"Youth before beauty," Nyx said, gesturing at Tarifah.

Tarifah smirked, just a quirk at the side of her mouth. "Afraid?" she said. "I promise you I'm good for the forty notes."

"If you live."

"If one always fears death, one never truly lives," she said, and took hold of the rope, sliding down into the darkness.

Nyx went last, waiting for Khos to shift back into human form and change into his clothes. She watched him as he did.

"You stare a lot," he said casually, "for a woman with no heart."

"I stare at a lot of people."

"I've noticed."

She shook out the thick coil of rope and descended after him, watching the eye of light above her grow smaller and smaller. She hit the ground and kept following the rope through a dark tunnel; light ahead, flickering orange. Small fire bugs collected ahead of her, Rhys's creatures.

"There's a drop!" Rhys called, and she saw it in the dim light of the bugs. A sharp crumbling of the tunnel, falling nearly her height to a sandy floor below. Beneath the sand was some thicker, tougher material. Metal? It made her bones rattle.

Nyx used the rope to help herself down, landing beside the others. Rhys knelt next to a desiccated body sprawled on the ground.

"She fell," Rhys said, nodding at the opening above.

"One of Rohullah's diggers, maybe," Nyx said. She pointed at the line of the rope. "It keeps going, though. And Rohullah said at least one of them survived. Might take us all the way down."

"I'll send the fire bugs ahead," Rhys said.

They kept on, following the great rope until they came to a ragged, dripping archway, like a wound cut into the side of the planet itself.

"The fuck?" Nyx said.

Rhys placed his hand on the side of the wound, and jerked it away, as if burned. "That's living tissue," he said.

"They passed in," Tarifah said. "I'm not afraid of it."

"That could be a living beast," Rhys said. "See it oozing? We could be walking into the belly of some... creature we know nothing about."

"Fine place to hide a body," Tarifah said, and stepped through, fingers on the rope.

Nyx and Khos kept to the rear, carrying on in silence as the air around them warmed. Nyx ran her hand along the pulsing walls; they flickered with splashes of color, red and violet, green.

Ahead of them, the others paused under a great archway of foaming bone. Two more bodies lay on the thrumming ground here, both somewhat gooier than the one in the outer chamber.

The air smelled different, a hint of sulphur. The line went clean through a solid wall ahead of them, a wall made of secretions, as if the diggers had cut a hole and the ship must have closed around it like a scarred wound.

"Anneke?" Nyx said. "You blast that open?"

"On it, boss," Anneke said. "Get back!" She threw two acid bursts at the wall. They splattered the corrosive compound across it, making it sizzle like cooking meat.

Nyx brought up her scarf again to shield her face.

When the hole was large enough, Khos and Nyx kicked away the thinner pieces.

"Another body here!" Nyx said, catching sight of a single sandaled foot. As she raised her gaze, a swarm of blue insects became visible, pulsing softly above a great stone slab set at the top of a fleshy staircase carved into the living tissue of whatever thing made up this great cavern.

"Be still," Rhys whispered, soft fingers tapping her upper arm, his breath on her neck.

The little blue lights grew closer; a hum filled the air.

"Very, very still," Rhys said. "They are not friendly."

"Got it, thanks," Nyx whispered, and wondered why she was whispering; it wasn't as if the bugs cared one way or another.

Rhys crept past her into the great chamber, hands raised. Dragonflies slipped from the wide sleeves of his

burnous and over his head, slowly moving toward the great swarm of blue insects; beetles, Nyx saw now as they came nearer, each as wide as her palm. They began to emit a high-pitched whine.

"He's a bad magician," Khos whispered. "If he fucks up—"

"If he fucks up we're dead as the woman on the floor," Nyx reminded him.

"I'll tear them up in my teeth."

The approaching beetles made a great blue jewel over Rhys's head. His dragonflies darted among them like startled birds, buzzing and diving.

Sweat beaded Rhys's brow. He moved to the left, toward another gap in the wall, an oozing, jagged tear from which sand drizzled.

One by one the dragonflies corralled the jeweled insects and drove them toward the crevice. Another swarm of beetles, and the dragonflies brought them down and down, removing them from the cavern until the blue glow faded, leaving the cavern in a soft green glow emitted from the platform steps at the center.

Rhys stumbled to his knees, bowed over.

Nyx scrambled after him, even as Tarifah sprinted toward the great stone slab at the center of the chamber.

"You all right? Rhys?" Nyx slid next to him and took his head in her hands. "You fuck, you all right?"

He sagged against her. "Just... tired," he said.

"All right. Good." She patted his cheek.

"Help me!" Tarifah called. "Get this open! The creature is inside!" She stood on the platform, hands atop the stone slab that Nyx realized was a sarcophagus.

Nyx gestured for Khos. He strode up the steps with her, and each took one end of the slab covering the sarcophagus. *The sarcophagus.*

Tarifah positioned herself in front of it, sword raised. Anneke kept at the bottom of the platform, gaze on the entrance.

"This fucker's heavy," Nyx said, grunting at the weight of it.

"We still convinced this is a good idea?" Khos said.

"I never have good ideas," Nyx said.

The slab grated, inching away from the sarcophagus. A glimmer of white light escaped the tomb and lit Tarifah's face from beneath. She appeared radiant, fiendish, transformed. Nyx paused, even as Khos grunted and pushed his side over another hand span.

Tarifah's visage put Nyx in mind of someone, though it took a breath to understand who. The flat black eyes, the quirk at the mouth that was not quite a smile, merely a sneer. A passion for blood, for death, as if to fill some hole deep inside of her.

Nyx knew that expression, because she saw it on her own face far too often; when she could remember. When she did not break the mirror and use it to cut out some boy's throat.

A snarling of white mist snapped out of the tomb. One finger. Then another. They curled around Tarifah's neck. She gurgled; her lusty expression transforming into one of fear and panic.

"Close it!" Nyx yelled at Khos. "Close it!" She grabbed her end.

The mist became a cloud, enveloping Tarifah. She shrieked. Her skin began to bubble, and peeled away from her body, carried away in strips by the lashing mist.

"Khos!" Nyx yelled.

They both pushed, sliding the slab back another few inches, but not enough.

Flayed swatches of Tarifah's skin floated in the air, leaving her face a weeping wound, her arms pink and

oozing. She fell back onto the steps with a surprised grunt.

Anneke ran to her, "The fuck—"

"Kill it!" Tarifah yelled. "Kill it!"

Anneke took an acid burst into her good hand and threw it into the sarcophagus. It landed and burst, spraying acid everywhere; the acid splattered the outside of the sarcophagus, drops landing on Nyx's burnous, and she swore as it ate through the fabric.

"Khos!" They heaved again together.

Anneke threw one more burst. This one rattled into the sarcophagus and exploded dully, making the stone slab shudder and moan.

One last heave, and Nyx and Khos got the slab closed.

"Fuck," Nyx said, panting. She scrambled back down the steps to where Tarifah lay, a flayed, bloody suit of meat.

"Rhys! Rhys, can you help her?"

Rhys limped over, still exhausted. He shook his head. "I can... I can try and stabilize her. We have to get her to a magician, though."

"You see that throw, boss?" Anneke crowed. "You see that?"

"Yes, thanks, Anneke, you're very smart," Nyx said.

"Let's bundle her up." Nyx shed her burnous. "Can you dull the pain? Give her what you gave Anneke?"

Rhys doped her up. They wrapped Tarifah. She and Khos carried her, one at either end. Nyx was thinking about her forty notes and the flesh dealer she was leaving behind. Fuck.

*Fuck.*

They spoke little on the way back up through the belly of the beast.

Khos and Nyx settled Tarifah into the sled. Nyx sat next to her, holding her close as Khos and Rhys got the cats untied. The day had moved on into dusk; the

blue light of the setting of the second sun still bruised the horizon.

"Fuck, Tarifah," Nyx said. "Bunch of monsters. When you going to get it, kid? There aren't any fucking monsters but us. Digging up shit that should stay down. Killing shit to prove... what? Shit, that's what. Nothing to nobody."

Nyx listened to the sound of her own breath. Turned to Tarifah's ruined face. Tarifah's eyes stared blankly into the distance, already losing their shine in the cool, dry air.

"Goddammit," Nyx said. "God damn you. God damn waste."

"All right," Rhys said, clambering into the sled. "We're ready. The nearest magicians' gym is—"

"Fuck it," Nyx said. "She's dead."

Rhys sighed and sat back in the sled. "Oh, no."

"There goes our forty notes!" Anneke said.

Khos folded his arms. "I need a walk," he said, and started off in the other direction.

Nyx appraised Tarifah's body a long moment, then, "I have an idea."

\* \* \*

Ten kilometers on, they stopped at a bullet-riddled bug farm and traded the cats, sled, and a future favor to borrow a bakkie. The meeting place Rohullah had given Nyx was along the Queen's highway. They took the bakkie the last twenty kilometers to the meeting place: an old, abandoned way station. Before the war the way stations had been oases, filled with water and vegetation; that's what all the murals on what remained of the walls advertised, anyway. In the deep afternoon light, they took on the unreal quality of hallucinations.

A long time ago, all of it. Somebody else's world.

Nyx went inside first, scattergun drawn. Khos dragged the body with him, all wrapped up in Nyx's burnous.

"I've got what Rohullah promised you!" Nyx called into the dusty interior. Two large women came out of the back, where the kitchen had been. Both bore guns bigger than Anneke's. They took up positions at either side of the door to the back. From there, a young man entered. He looked awfully familiar.

"Aw, fuck you," Nyx said.

The young man laughed. It was the man Nyx had left in the room above the tavern, the one Rohullah said Nyx had killed. Same soft face, curly hair, slender build.

"I was worried Rohullah had let me down," he said. "I haven't heard from her in several days. But she did insist you'd be punctual. Your ass on the line, and all. She says you're very attached to living, which is why she chose you for the job."

Nyx gestured at the body in the burnous. "There's your flesh dealer."

He told the bodyguards to retrieve it. They did. He knelt over the swaddled body and revealed the flayed face of Tarifah—or what was left of her—and grimaced. "A little ripe, isn't it?"

"Didn't last long once we took it out of the ground," Nyx said. "It's a wonder it hadn't already turned, like everything else we leave unburned. Could have turned into... fuck knows what, out here."

"Indeed," he said, and flicked the burnous back over the face. "I admit I'm disappointed. I hoped for something more... substantial. Alive."

"It was in a sarcophagus," Nyx said. "You can go check it out yourself, you don't believe us."

"Oh, I believe you," he said. "People like you, you know, disposable people, people short on cash and stocked up on guns, they can be bought cheaply. Very cheaply."

"A hundred notes," Nyx said.

He laughed again, and she hated it. He rooted around in his tunic pocked and pulled out a fat wad of

notes. Peeled one off, balled it up, and threw it at her. "Enjoy it," he said.

Goddammit, she thought. Should have asked for more. Always. Always ask for more, from these fucks.

Khos glanced over at her. She nodded at the crumpled bill, and he retrieved it for her. She stuck it into her dhoti. It was only twenty notes.

"Lose my name," Nyx said. "I don't do jobs for First Families."

He laughed. His laughter followed her outside and back into the bakkie. She rolled up the window so she didn't have to listen to it.

\* \* \*

When they got back to the storefront, Anneke went off to see a proper magician, and Khos headed out to the brothels. Nyx went to her office and spread the crumpled bill out on the surface of her desk.

Rhys knocked on the doorframe. "You need anything before prayer?"

"You used to be rich, right?" she said.

"I wouldn't say that."

"Better than us, then. You act it. No, don't answer. I know you were. You do something like that to somebody?"

He hesitated. Then, "My father would, yes. Others I knew, yes. That's how power works. The strong against the weak."

"I'm pretty strong, Rhys."

"The strongest person I know," he said, "but that doesn't always mean power."

"You ever want to burn this shit down?"

"All the time."

She put the bill into her drawer. "Hey, you have that story? About Nasnas?"

"I have a few, yes. One from *The Sage and the Scholar*."

"How about I pour some whisky and you make a tea and you read that shit to me, huh? They get him, in the end?"

"That spoils the story."

"Nah. Makes it more bearable, knowing what happens. I wanna know the bad guy gets it."

"The gift of tragedies," Rhys said, "knowing how it all turns out before you have to experience it."

"Yeah, that. I know how I'm going down. Makes this all more bearable."

"You know how you'll die?"

"Yeah," Nyx said, pulling out her bottle of whisky. "Whenever, wherever it happens—I'll be drinking."

Rhys made his tea. Nyx found a bottle of whisky and went up onto the roof; it was too hot to sleep downstairs anyway. She sat cross-legged on a dirty mat and he sank into the tatty old divan they kept up there.

The moons were shadowy crescents. The stars were out, bright, so bright, in all but that blackest part of the sky where there were no visible stars, only the abyss, their world out here at the edge of the universe, maybe, who knew? All alone, in the night.

Rhys began to read, and Nyx drank, thinking it was the only way she knew to keep her own monsters satiated, in this moment, and maybe, just maybe—the next moment, too. All the moments she had left in the world. However many she had left.

**Kameron Hurley** is the author of the upcoming titles *Losing Gravity* and *Future Artifacts: Stories (2022)* as well as *The Light Brigade*, *The Stars are Legion* and many other titles. Hurley has won the Hugo Award, Locus Award, Kitschy Award, and Sydney J. Bounds Award. She was also a finalist for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Nebula Award, and the Gemmell Morningstar Award. Her short fiction has appeared in *Popular Science Magazine*, *Lightspeed* and numerous anthologies. Hurley has also written for *The Atlantic*, *Writers Digest*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Village Voice*, *LA Weekly*, *Bitch Magazine*, and *Locus Magazine*. She posts regularly at [KameronHurley.com](http://KameronHurley.com).

# The History of Grimdark: The Inspirations behind the Darkness

AARON S. JONES

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Grimdark: an often derided and ridiculed subgenre of fantasy known for portraying dark and gritty worlds full of morally grey characters with stories full of profanity, sex, and bloody violence.

Now, this may seem like an oversimplification of a genre that has brought much discussion and debate to the message boards and conventions over the last couple of decades but for the sake of this argument, it will have to do. It is easy to see why there is a debate regarding grimdark: taken from the description of the dark and gritty world of *Warhammer 40K*—“*In the grim, darkness of the far future there is only war...*” Some have argued that grimdark is simply too broad of a label to be referred to as a subgenre, instead arguing that there have been grimdark moments and scenes, characters and settings across a range of SFF novels and other media throughout the history of humanity. Some of the greatest and eternally popular Greek tragedies deal with the harsh, brutal realities of the human condition so what has inspired this drive for writers to explore the darker side of humanity?

Grimdark is everywhere. The subgenre that revels in the chaos and darkness of the world can be seen in media all around us. Re-runs of *Game of Thrones* are on HBO every night (and a slew of spin-offs appear to be on the horizon), the books of Joe Abercrombie,

Anna Smith Spark, Mark Lawrence, Andrzej Sapkowski and many more fill prominent bookstores around the world and even the darker and close to the bone content based on media like *The Boys* is making its way onto our screens. Though the popularity of these bloody and grim books, TV shows, and movies continue to grow, there is a backlash from those who claim that such content is *too* dark and bloody, that they use extreme methods to pander to an audience wanting over the top villains, gruesome deaths and gore for the sake of it. The argument is that this is all just a little too unrealistic and that things go a little *too* far, past the point of being realistic. But does this argument stand up to scrutiny?

In all great stories throughout history, writers need inspiration. They look to the world around them: to the merciless tyrants of the past; the bloody massacres; the moral dilemmas faced by well-known men and women; and even the pandemics and rebellions of our recent history. Inspiration is all around us and good writers use this a fuel to light the flames of their stories and some happen to be grimdark as hell. Are they darker and bloodier than real life tales that inspired them? Or do they actually hold back on the blood and madness of humanity throughout the dark history of our species?

The main argument against grimdark always seems to be that it is too dark and unrealistic—something that often seems to fall flat seeing as the subgenre is a big part of the SFF community. But how different is it to the history of the world? Texts over the centuries portray the dark side of humanity—the Bible gives various accounts of a holy man betrayed by a close friend and tortured in the most gruesome and public of ways. *Oedipus Rex* is a Greek tragedy about a man who ends up fated to kill his father and sleep with his mother (very *Game of Thrones*), and it is not just Sophocles and the writers of the past who saw the horrors of

humanity and sought to twist their stories into popular tales for the masses. Joe Abercrombie mined the history of British incompetence in warfare to create characters such as Poulder and Kroy (and so many others) in his *First Law Trilogy* who fought against each other instead of focusing on the important matters at hand—the war against Bethod and his men. George R.R. Martin use the bloody history of Scotland and in particular the Black Dinner of 1440 and the Massacre of Glencoe of 1692 to inspire his masterpiece of *The Red Wedding in A Storm of Swords*.

The fact is, the history of humanity is filled with blood and darkness that would make the bravest of readers tremble. Stories allow us to deconstruct the horrors of life and humanity and tackle themes that we struggle to face directly. Many may disregard the grimdark genre as too dark and grim but even the briefest glance in a history textbook reveals that it is more likely that writers within the subgenre are actually holding back when it comes to such dark tales. Fantasy has always been a vehicle for writers to tackle large themes in a safe space. The horrors of the holocaust and genocide, racism, sexism, homophobia—grimdark is a genre with wide boundaries that allow writers to delve into the darker side of humanity with the end goal of providing slithers of hope for those readers having to deal with such difficulties day to day. The lucky readers who are not having to deal with such pain are instead offered a path to learn about other perspectives and hopefully be given a chance to look at life through a different lens in the hope of teaching empathy and understanding.

Historical fiction doesn't shy away from the gore and violence of the past. Bernard Cornwell's *Saxon Stories* and anything by the always amazing Matthew Harffy (*Bernicia Chronicles*, *A Time for Swords*) are often viewed as grimdark but are also seen as interesting and realistic takes on the history of Britain.

G. R. Matthews *Seven Deaths of an Empire* uses the Roman Empire and its battle with the Germanic barbarian tribes as a source of inspiration for the violent and brutal world created and nobody is claiming that this is unrealistic. The Roman Empire fought some of the bloodiest battles in the history of humanity and created a style of warfare that is still taught today in that it was unique and clinical in its approach.

Whether it is Tolkien using the chaos of Europe in the early nineteenth century or Martin using the War of the Roses for inspiration, human history is littered with dark and difficult times that can inspire writers. Stories are built on conflict and overcoming difficulties so it is easy to find the inspiration in times of darkness. Recently, pandemics, riots, and rebellion have led to a surge in inspiration for writers. The aftermath of the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan gave us Godzilla and the political climate of America in the 60's (Vietnam war, Civil Rights) gave us a rise in Zombie based horror courtesy of George A. Romero.

It may be easy for critics to attack grimdark as being overly sick and focused on the darker elements of the world, but looking at the history of humanity and the chaos of the past few years, surely it can be argued that most writers actually tone down the gritty, grim reality of the world around us? Times of conflict and darkness often lead to an increase in music, film, and literature focused on informing the general public of the difficulties of life and tackling the darkness of humanity. It will be interesting to see what the current crop of talented authors produce based on the problems that we have faced over the last few years and whether such tales can help us to overcome the individual and communal issues that have risen internationally. If history has taught s anything, it is that grimdark stories can give us all a safe space to deal with the chaos of humanity and create a community of like-minded

people who can support one another through the darkest of times.

Grimdark fantasy tales can seem to be too dark and gritty to some, but to many people, they provide a safe and secure environment in which to learn resilience and strength in which to face the grimdark reality of their own lives. In the right hands, it is an essential subgenre that can be used for the increased understanding of society and various cultures around the world and one where its audience can learn as much as they enjoy.

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 [aaronjones.com](http://aaronjones.com)

# An Interview with Anna Smith Spark

ADRIAN COLLINS

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Anna Smith Spark is known as the Queen of Grimdark for a reason. Her brutal worlds, emotional whirlwind storytelling style, and characters that just make you want to rip your hair out or look away from the page while simultaneously caring so deeply about them that your wife asks you who you're talking to, just make her books an absolute *experience*.

As all of her fans have likely noticed, Anna has been a bit quiet since wrapping up *Empires of Dust*. It was time to sit down with this brilliant author and find out what's been happening, and what she has in the works.

**[GdM] Getting a trilogy book deal is an almost impossible feat for most fantasy authors. Even then, there's no guarantee that once the first book is released you'll get to put out the second and third book of the trilogy. *Empires of Dust* was an amazing experience, a unique and breathtaking read. What happened to you when the last book went out?**

**[Anna]** *Empires of Dust* broke me. It's something I feel so proud to have achieved, and honestly if I never had another word published I'd feel I'd done something special with my life. I do look at bits of it and feel astonished that I somehow found those words. But it was such an exhausting, all-consuming thing writing it.

The end, especially, the second half of *House of Sacrifice*—I went so deep inside myself pouring things out, finding words to shape things I'd always feared about the world and myself. I ended the series utterly spent and exhausted—physically exhausted as well as mentally. Writing my big battle scenes is really physically exhausting for me, I feel the words so intensely when I'm writing. I have ended up shaking after writing a battle scene.

And, as I've said before that I didn't start writing *Court of Broken Knives* with an idea what I was writing—it really felt (and still feels) like the books already existed, and I was simply channelling them. Really like they were things I birthed, not projects I had control over. In direct contradiction to this, the characters and the world were also a part of me that I'd lived with since childhood, a really deep part of my psyche.

So, as you might be able to guess, finishing the series had a huge impact on my sense of self that I'm only now really beginning to understand. I really felt like the Destined Hero, I'd done the great task I was born to do, and now... I'm still alive so I guess I need to do... something else? I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. And now you expect me to just move on and see new things?

And then covid happened and home schooling happened and... dragons and wonders rather stopped being a priority. Actually, I was probably more creative in 2020 than I've ever been before, just in really, really different ways (mostly focussed around providing children with lunch every single bloody day).

Which is all a really long-winded way of saying yeah, I totally know that it's been several years now since I published *House of Sacrifice* to towering critical acclaim and I've barely published a word since.

I tried starting a big new thing, but it didn't fit properly. It certainly didn't feel like the blinding

revelation Empires of Dust did. Just... meh, I'm writing something, a fantasy novel I guess so I'd better stick a fight or a dragon or summit in. I couldn't see it or feel it, it wasn't real for me. Also I was checking the daily death rates every five minutes which is not really exactly helpful to the creative soul.

Then, a little while ago, I saw it. A new series has found me. Having that time and distance from Empires of Dust has let me get my head sorted, and the series is there, I can almost see it in front of me. I'm living it in like I lived in Empires of Dust, it exists and I'm just writing it down as it shows itself to me. Honestly, when I say I can see it, I really can, it's like a ball of light or something or the words scrolling down the screen in Star Wars in front of my eyes all the time. It was like that with Empires of Dust, it's like that now with this new thing. Only the new thing is maybe a *bit* less bleak. Still fierce and savage and violent as hell, but I seem to have discovered this thing called 'hope'. I don't know if you've heard of it? It's weird and strange and feels odd but after a time you just about get used to it.

To be serious, I think I drained a lot of mental pus writing Empires of Dust. Levelled the ground, took myself apart mentally. Burned the world and pissed on the ashes indeed. (Although I will still maintain it's a fundamentally hopeful story in its own way.) Now I'm finally ready to build something new and wonderful.

Short version—finishing Empires of Dust almost destroyed me. But I'm back now and the fire burns bright.

**[GdM] from the perspective of the publishing industry, what does that feeling of spending yourself to the point where you need to stop, sort your own shit out, and then figure out where that next sellable story is coming from look like? Are agents and editors bashing down your door screaming, "WHAT'S GOING ON, ANNA!?"**

**[Anna]** Honestly, I was kind of lucky to be going through this stuff when I was! Like everything else, the publishing industry is trying to get itself back to something resembling normality (or as close as publishing can ever get to normality, anyway). Books got postponed because the printing presses literally shut down, people's ability to work editing or cover-designing or whatever kind of collapsed due to sickness/caring responsibilities/lockdown generally, now in the UK we have distribution problems caused by covid and Brexit that mean books can't get to the bookshops... I feel so wretched for anyone who had their life's work published to absolute indifference last year. It feels kind of a relief not having had to try to drum up interest in a book while the world went to hell. Also, I would have had no time to edit anything (see below) in 2020 or early 2021. Not having that pressure on top of everything else was in some ways the best thing that could have happened to me last year to be honest.

I think people accept that I'm not and never going to be someone who can produce a book a year every year. I need that space and time to find the new thing and feel it. My agent and editor understand that, I think (hope!).

**[GdM]** When I put together *The King Must Fall* you and Michael R. Fletcher were the first two authors I pitched to. Can you tell readers what they can expect from your short story?

**[Anna]** Oh man I didn't know that, that's so lovely to hear! Me and Fletch—the grimdarker's grimdark.

My short story in *The King Must Fall* is the last Empires of Dust story. Me laying some ghosts to rest. It's bleak and raw and savage, I went pretty deep into what being part of Marith's army would be like, wrote

myself and friends into being foot soldiers in the army doing these things as just normal day-job stuff. Which to the people who actually did do similar things and do them now—it is just normally day-job stuff. There's also rapturous delight in describing dragons and massive slaughter battles because my god that's good to write. My agent saw a bit of it and described it as 'Tolstoyan' which was rather pleasing given the *Sevastopol Sketches* is my war-writing Bible.

The regicide theme was perfect because the whole question of why regicide isn't in fact much more commonly attempted is something I think about sometimes and wanted to address. Bizarrely, something that's stuck in my head for years is Tom Cruise during his Katie Holmes melt-down phase telling some interviewer that if he'd been alive during World War II he'd definitely have tried to assassinate Hitler. Like... you don't think anyone at time, a Jewish person somewhere or someone maybe, didn't possibly think of doing it? Only maybe assassinating the most powerful man in Europe with a death cult army around him would have been... quite hard? No? But, at the same time, it's true that the worst tyrants often aren't brought down violently, even by people in their inner circle who have access to them and despite them often turning on those very people. Or, if they are assassinated, it's often over something trivial and personal like someone's anger over being ignored for promotion, not over the massive campaign of genocide the tyrant's just ordered against his own people. Caligula, for example, was murdered by the captain of his guard because he kept giving the guy demeaning passwords as a joke ('give us a kiss' etc etc, from which one can only conclude Rome's loss when young Gaius became Emperor was comedy's gain). It's something I wanted to explore, and like magic the *King Must Fall* pitch appeared.

Expect blood, blood, more blood and dragons. Also cute small children and a cameo appearance by Adrian himself.

**[GdM] Anna Smith Spark fans are always looking for more of your work—are there any other short stories or pieces of fiction coming out while we wait to see that next novel?**

**[Anna]** I have quite a few short stories kicking around—‘A Hero of Her People’ in *Legends III: Stories in Honour of David Gemmel*, ‘Stones’ in *Best of Three Crows: Year One* and its companion piece, ‘Water’ in *Lost Gods: A Grimbold Books Anthology*, ‘The Second Siege of Telea’ in *Rogues: A Blackguards Anthology*, ‘The Fall of Tereen’ in *Art of War*, and ‘Gold Light’ in *Unfettered III*. I should have a new short story coming out next year or the year after in *Unbound II* or *III* as well. But the new novel is taking up all my mind now so the short stories will probably dry up a bit again.

While you wait for the new things—if you go to [www.courtofbrokenknives.com](http://www.courtofbrokenknives.com) there’s a brilliant music video that is kind of Empires of Dust in 10 terrifying minutes, plus some playlists I put together to accompany the three books. Also some cakes to bake!

**[GdM] Most people across the globe have now experienced long-term lockdowns. We’ve struggled with Zoom calls, worn holes in our tracksuit pants, and watched as we went from the generation with the most achievable global freedom of movement in human history to not being able to cross district or state lines to see our parents. How was the UK’s lockdown for you, and what sort of an impact did it have on your writing then and now?**

**[Anna]** Lockdown was absolute hell. I have children so I was home schooling them and having to protect them from the worst impacts of being literally locked in the house 23 hours a day. (In the UK we had several months of glorious spring sunshine when we were allowed out for exercise for an hour a day. In some areas, the police took ‘exercise’ very literally, so an adult out running in lycra was fine but ambling along chatting about Peppa Pig and collecting sticks was borderline illegal. There are no words for what I feel about that). And yes, as you say, I’d spent years telling my children about the wonders of the modern global village, delighting in how they already saw themselves as citizens of the world without any sense of foreigners and natives, them and us, and then sudden we couldn’t leave our town. I remember looking at them and seeing their dreams for the future collapse.

It obviously affected my writing massively in that for quite a while I had no time to write. It was sad—but, to pre-empt the next question, I had to accept it was absolutely necessary if the people I love were going to get through that time. Sometimes sending a friend a cat gif is far more world-changing than writing a novel. There was a weird confluence of covid, Black Lives Matter protests and then the whole Saudi WorldCon debacle when writing seemed the least important thing I could be doing.

What came out of that time for me that was creatively positive was a new thinking about hope, about family, about looking forward. Seeing the way we all did try to help each other, and of course the incredible way scientists gave everything to develop working vaccines—that made me reflect on the way things could be. I’m writing much more about families and women, now. I successfully got my children through something as awful in its own way as anything in epic fantasy—that’s something I can draw on in my writing for ever. I have some very exciting new books

in the pipeline which I sadly can't talk about yet but which are hugely shaped by those experiences. One is more honest and despairing, because yes there were times I was close to suicidal, really broken by the weight of lockdown and lockdown parenting. One is fiercer and looking to the future.

**[GdM] The global community that you've told your children about is something I can't wait to be a part of once more. I can only see good things coming from this. Do you think the re-emerging of that global community after almost two years of lockdowns and segregation is going to provide any dark inspiration for your darker style of fiction?**

**[Anna]** 'No one is safe until we're all safe'. That's a terrifying statement. One the one hand, one can read it as a vindication of everything I wrote in *Empires of Dust*—we're all fucked, basically, because our lives are so interdependent and so many things even well intentioned end up going to crap. A new vaccine-evading variant emerging in Afghanistan, say—if we're not safe until the women of rural Afghanistan have been vaccinated, well, that's it, then, really, isn't it? Goodbye, hope, it was nice briefly knowing you. So those bleak, angry, horrible stories, of refugees, of the wealthy abdicating responsibility, of system collapse and poverty and war and how that affects everyone even the well-cushioned distant rich, they need telling and I want to tell them.

Oh the other hand, 'no one is safe until we're all safe' can be a positive statement—to tackle the climate crisis, wealth disparity, pollution, we can't be selfish, we can't think only about ourselves or our country, we've got to think globally. The pandemic has finally made people understand that we're all connected. So there are stories to tell about communities looking to the future in a more hopeful, outward-looking way,

about distant heroes and the strange way in which actions can affect others we've never met. Tell the dark tales to make people think of the light.

In the UK, for example, events this year have meant people have finally been forced to confront the legacy of the British Empire. Many people have just turned away in spluttering disgust, but they can't unsee those stories no matter how much they might want to. Telling the really dark truths can only be a positive if it makes even one person change something for the good.

The Jeff Bezos willy-rocket sort of near the beginning of space for the time it takes to boil an egg literally burning the cost of giving everyone in the world clear drinking water and the way the world reacted to it story—that was grimdark fucking gold. Only a shame the thing didn't blow up on re-entry.

**[GdM] For creatives stuck in current lockdowns, like Sydney, Manila, and the like, what advice can you give those people?**

**[Anna]** All I can say is try to hold on to positives.

If you have time and headspace to create, make yourself create to escape. Don't write a dystopian plague narrative, though, because 1) it will only depress you more, and 2) nobody in the world is going to want to read stuff like that for the next ten years at least. This is absolutely the time for soaring empurpled twenty page descriptions of elven glades with gold dragons flying overhead.

If you don't have time, all I can say is that it sucks but see above—sometimes the other stuff has to come first. You are Spock at the end of Wrath of Khan, you are Sam on Mount Doom, and yeah, life totally bloody sucks right now. But you can get through it. Don't try to manically write in the five minutes a week you manage to grab away from your family/housemates/life on the covid frontline, take it slow and try to focus on getting

your head clear and some rest. Lockdown will end, I promise. Although it might then come back again.

If you can't create because you're unable to focus properly or you're too depressed—well, that's the only human responsible possible to lockdown, frankly, feel proud you're a functioning human being with hopes and dreams and empathy and a soul. Those people who crow on about how productive they are during lockdown are psychopaths. The only possible creative response to lockdown is depression, yes. Don't feel guilt that you can't create in these circumstances.

There's a real awareness in the UK of how burned-out people got during lockdown, including wealthy single people who weren't overwhelmed with parenting duties and such and had it relatively easy. We're not made to live like this. So be kind to yourself.

**AND HAVE THE BLOODY VACCINE.**

Fuck me, this is the least grimdark interview response I've ever written. Excuse me while I go away to swear and smash things up for a bit.

**[GdM] With pubs, hotels, convention centres, and borders opening up once more, I'm really hoping to be able to hit the Con scene hard in 2022. Will you be attending any Cons, and where will your fans be able to find you for a signing and a mocktail?**

**[Anna]** I hope I can get to cons soon. I feel happier at cons than I think I do anywhere else, finally being with my own people.

I'm a Guest of Honour at UK grimdarker favourite BristolCon this October—I'm making blood offerings every day to the dark gods\* that it goes ahead IRL. If it's IRN I get a free hotel room, free food and drink, and adulation as I stalk the halls in swanky shoes and a ballgown. Whereas if it's online I get interviewed over zoom.

Then more blood offerings that ICFA happens in the Spring—in Florida, with a pool, and I get to hang out with Steven Erickson. When the pandemic first hit I was due to be on a panel at ICFA in Florida with Steven Erickson and Stephen Donaldson and then...

Then it's every con and social event I can make it to until I've reacquainted myself with all my shoes. Please everyone come up and say hi if you see me.

*\*I'm really clumsy and often cut myself shaving my legs.*

# The Spoiler

CHRISTOPHER BUELHMAN

---

“What do you mean, ‘What did I do?’ I followed orders.”

Ardr leaned forward, tilted the clay pitcher Ezbett the scholar had bought for her, filled her mug again. Her eyes darted up, scanned the scholar’s face for rebuke. Finding none, she drank.

“Keep going, Ardr, please,” he said.

She poured more beer into her mug.

“With the story.”

Ardr paused, considered pouring some back in the vessel, decided that would be worse than taking too much. Nobody wanted to drink a slave auxiliary’s spit, not even a minor southern scholar, not even if certain papers said Ardr was no longer a slave, the slave-suffix of her old named clipped off like her chattel-bracelet. If anybody called her Ardros, she could make complaint, have the violator fined. But that wouldn’t be the worst thing Ardr could do. Even though she was small, well eclipsed by the epicurean Ezbett and his belly, there wasn’t a spare ounce on her. She had always looked like she could hammer nails with her elbows, and knew she likely always would. A lifetime of hard work and fighting didn’t melt away with a few official signatures. She felt entirely out of place in this rich, southern tavern with its pots of rare flowers, its snatches of conversations in various tongues, its uncalloused university clientele.

“Where was I?”

“The bearer of the spoiler was coming,” the scholar said, readying his stylus, his clay tablets.

“Right. What a prat he was. He was begging to be killed, riding on that brilliant white horse, no armor, shirtless even. Tits-out so everyone could see the amber jewel sunk in his breastbone. Everyone knew about the curse. Well, he knew how to use it, didn't he?”

“Fair brilliant it was, him riding in front.”

“Yes. Until it wasn't. But the archers wanted no part of him, they're no keener to die than the rest of us. You could see them loosing everywhere except where Issam-Caril rode, and his picked soldiers rode with him, rolling up our right flank because facing him meant facing *it*, if you were lucky and he didn't kill you, I mean. The spear-hedge broke, and then we were up. And there was Petrallis, our centenary, shouting at us. Petrallis with his buck teeth, like some grandmother of his fancied a woodchuck. *'Die well, auxiliaries! Freedom for the lodgemates of the one who takes the bearer.'* Because the one who killed the bearer would earn another kind of freedom, right?”

The scholar answered, “It is said the Nazzam Neq'asladdh will follow the bearer's killer even to the bottom of the sea to release their soul from their body. The name means something like 'awakened in anger.’”

“Well, I wouldn't say it looked angry.”

“Tell me everything. I've never met anyone who's seen one.”

“So Petrallis was pointing and screaming 'Throw! Throw!' but I didn't see *him* reaching for a javelin. *We* were to throw. So throw I did. All the other cowards threw short or to the sides or didn't throw at all, but not me. I just threw without thinking. That's my problem, I'm impulsive. I can still see the javelin against the bright grey sky, it seemed to take forever to fall, you know how those moments are.”

She considered the scholar.

“Maybe you don't. But things slow down. I saw the javelin fall, strike him right under the collarbone. Went

through him like he was made of honeycomb. He sort of folded around it, started gushing. It was clearly mortal. Issam-Caril looked at the javelin through him like it was a splinter in his foot and he'd better see about getting it out, but he was already leaning in the saddle. My lodgemates, you know, the ones who threw their darts wide, cheered because I had just freed them. Issam-Caril's soldiers stopped fighting, just watched him. Everybody watched him. Then this sort of howl or pained moan rose up. Not from him. From *it*. Then the amber stone fell out of his chest and he died around the hole it left."

"Did you run?"

"Not at first. And not as fast as Caril's men. Everyone ran. From it, but also from me. I was marked now, you see?"

Ezbett leaned close, his stylus poised above the tablet like a crow's beak over a sparrow's egg. The purpled flowers behind him looked almost like a headdress crowning him. She resented his softness, his fondness for food and beauty. Gods, she hated southerners. But everyone loved their money.

"The scrolls say it's... hard to look at."

"Well. Yes," Ardr said.

"How did it... manifest?"

"It wasn't there, then it was. Sort of a pale, monkeyish face. Mane like a lion. Half again the height of a man. Its arms were too long. And it put off cold. Like an open window before a snowstorm. I was frozen, watching it, like it was all happening to somebody else. It turned its head, looking at everybody as they stared or ran. When it saw me, it stopped turning. Raised a finger at me. That's when I ran."

"I'll need you to tell this story again at the university. If you want the money, I mean. The payment is coming from the high scholars and scribes. They'll want to record it."

"Aren't you?" Ardr said, indicating the tablet.

“Officially, I mean. With witnesses.”

“I thought you were giving me the money today. That’s what it said in the advert by the port.”

“You can read?”

“It was read to me.”

“I’m sorry if you misunderstood. My task is merely to report back to the university about whether I think you are the auxiliary who slew the bearer and woke the spoiler.”

“Well, do you?”

“Tell me more. What happened next?”

Ardr pursed her lips. Drained her mug. The scholar watched her pour the last of the pitcher into her mug. Would he order another one? He had two pouches on his belt—one of cloth that clearly held a few meager coins, probably the scholar’s own money, and a larger, hard leather pouch with three fasteners next to it.

Ardr looked back up at Ezbett’s face.

“Now I ran. I wanted to melt into the mob, but they all fled me. The creature wasn’t fast, but it had long strides. Me, I was fast. Before I knew what I was doing it, I ran up to a horse archer whose mount was panicking, pulled her off of it. Climbed on the thing, barely, and rode fifty strides or so, but I couldn’t get my other foot in the stirrup before it lurched and tumbled me off, right onto a couple of dead slingers.

I saw it coming and got to my feet, ran again.

This is where the forest started. The woods were thick, had been too thick to hide reserve cavalry in, which was the usual ploy. I hoped the thing’s height would slow it, and it did. I heard it crashing behind me, and on I went, taking hell from every thorn bush and branch as I went, you can see my face.”

She indicated thin scars on her cheek and forehead.

“I thought perhaps it was a lovers’ spat,” Ezbett said.

Ardr blinked hard, then continued.

“It was falling behind, but I was getting tired, now that that first surge of fear was over. I got up to a sort of rocky, wooded hill and looked back. I could hear it in the distance. I was high enough to see the tops of trees. Here’s the thing. They were dead. Where it was coming. The canopy was turning brown leading back toward the plain; I saw a tree it must have been passing under go yellow and then die *as I watched.*”

The scholar nodded. “Yes. The Nazzam are associated with Qlaf Annra, god of the desert. *His hand withers.*”

Ardr drank more beer.

“It was getting darker, cold.

I heard it coming closer.

I came to a river too wide and fast for me to cross safely, as tired as I was. I started going left, heard it smashing through brush coming straight for me instead of following where I had been. I panicked and splashed in, started crossing the water. I didn’t know about that ‘bottom of the sea’ business. I hoped it wouldn’t like water. Gods knew I didn’t. About halfway across, I looked back and saw it walking into the river. That’s about the time the current swept me away. I sputtered and coughed, tried to swim, hit a rock. It hurt. Thought sure I was going to drown. But at least it was bearing me away from that thing. Drowning didn’t seem so bad. I hit another rock and everything went black.

When I came to, it was night.

My head hurt like it was full of rocks and water—maybe it was. My teeth were chattering, and I shook from the wet and cold. I saw its shadow against the stars above me. Its eyes like two big, red stars. And that’s when it spoke.”

The scholar leaned so close Ardr could smell the rosewater he combed into his hair.

“What words? Tell me.”

“*Nejjuk ar rahum. Mi tarl. Naff d’alakh.* And then it was gone”

“Fascinating.”

A few heartbeats fell in silence.

“Well?” said Ardr, “Do you know what it means?”

“You’re sure those were the words?”

“I repeated them to myself over and over again as I walked out of the woods. I was freezing and my head was throbbing. You tend to remember things that happen when you feel near death.”

“Yes. Well.”

Ardr showed the Scholar a harder face than she had so far.

“What. Does. It. Mean? Am I cursed?”

“No.”

“What, then?”

“It said, *Thank you, fellow slave. Name your...* the word *alakh* can mean surrogate, replacement. It can also mean the second-best of something.”

“So...”

“Yes. It has to kill someone to avenge the bearer. It spared you because you were in bondage. Your hand was not yours to guide. But if you name someone, with intent, and say the name twice, it may come back and take them.”

“And if I don’t name anyone?”

“I don’t know.”

She considered him. “Yes you do.”

“The sources don’t agree.”

“How long have I got before it comes back for me?”

“It won’t. I don’t think it will. Anyway, it wanted the name of your centenary. What was it? Petrallis? That’s who commanded you to throw your javelin.”

“Petrallis is a bastard. But he’s a slave, too. It wouldn’t take him, would it?”

The scholar’s eyes widened.

Ardr savored his fear.

“Don’t,” he said.

“Give me the pouch on your belt. The leather one.”

“It... it’s not mine to give.”

“It’s my purse anyway. I was promised it.”

“We still have to determine...”

“We can determine it now. If I’m not the one who struck Issam-Caril, there’ll be no harm if I say your name again, Ezbett.”

Ezbett shushed her with a large, soft hand.

He undid his belt, slid the hardened leather pouch off, handed it to Ardr. She considered its weight, heard the soft clink of coins inside it, nodded approvingly. She was almost out the tavern door when Ezbett said “You might at least have left me a little beer.”

She stopped, opened the pouch, took out a copper. Tossed it at the serving-eunuch.

“Another pitcher of beer.”

The scholar smiled.

If only it had been a kind smile.

But it wasn’t.

“My friend Ezbett is thirsty,” Ardr said.

The purple flowers withered in their pot.

Ardr stepped out into the sunshine.

Author, poet, playwright, and performer **Christopher Buehlman**, grew up in St. Petersburg, Florida, at a time when there were only five people under the age of 65 in that city. He attended college in Tallahassee, where he was once mugged at gunpoint—when he explained to the robbers that he was studying French language and medieval history, however, they felt bad for him and gave him money. He is the author of six novels, at least five of which will scare the bejesus out of you. *The Blacktongue Thief* (Gollancz 2021) is his fantasy debut. As of this writing, Buehlman lives in a woodsy Ohio suburb with his aerialist wife, his elderly rescue dog, and a black cat named Jane who is skilled at ninjitsu.

"Kirk revels in the grit and grime of the genre. A miasma of  
crow-pecked corpses and urine-soaked taverns rises from his prose."  
-Kirkus Reviews

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# An Interview with Matthew Ward

ADRIAN COLLINS

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In the Legacy trilogy, Matthew Ward delivered on one of the most barnstorming fantasy rides I've read in the last decade. Epic, bold, dark as fuck, and with some of the most enjoyable character arcs I've had the privilege of reading across three absolute doorstoppers, now felt like the right time to catch up again.

**[GdM] You've just wrapped up the Legacy trilogy with an absolutely barnstorming (and mammoth) book three. How does completing your latest fantasy series feel? What's the first thing you did after?**

**[MW]** It's a pretty good feeling, I'm not going to lie. You spend a lot of time working, watching and waiting (and sometimes being told that it'll never happen), and to finally be here? Well, a lot of water's flowed under the bridge since I first coined the names 'Tressia' and 'Trelan' twenty-five years ago. I think it's been worth the wait, and given the reviews the trilogy's getting, that's not an outlier opinion.

As for the rest, it's a year and change in the past now, so I can't really remember. Probably I leapt straight into whichever piece of client work whose deadline was quietly smouldering in the corner of the

room. There are no happily ever afters, only new battles...

**[GdM] One of the coolest things about the Legacy trilogy, and Victor Akadra, was the Dark. Can you tell me about your influences behind creating that magic system, and why you created a few magic systems to compete against one another (as opposed to characters competing under the one umbrella system)?**

**[MW]** I mean, if we go back to proto-Viktor, twenty-five years back, his personality was much less nuanced and his magic was relatively unremarkable. You wouldn't have been cheering him on at all.

It's hard to say when his personality shifted, I think it's probably just the result of me getting more confident in my storytelling with growing experience. However, in terms of presentation and magic? Viktor (and Tressia as a whole) originally owed an awful lot to Looking Glass Studios' *Thief: The Dark Project*, but have since seen huge influences from From Software's various Soulsborne games.

(When I tell people I don't read much these days, I'm not kidding. Video games, though? I absorb a lot from those, and it's great that the medium has come on so much that it offers such rich pickings.)

Viktor's Dark isn't the same as that found in *Dark Souls*, but there's a tone to those games which I absolutely adore. With every step you take through Boletaria, Lordran or Yharnam, you can feel the weight of history—of decisions, good and bad—and that's what I wanted to replicate in Legacy.

As for the rest? We go back to that sense of history. What were the gods? Where did they come from? What are they doing, and why? And then, of course, you have the Dark—the fundamental foundation of all that is—lurking beneath. All magic in Aradane goes

back to that single source—the good or evil of the matter arises from how it’s put to use. If I’m going to point a finger at the gods’ origins—and thus how their magic is used it’s probably going to be long ago viewings of films like *Clash of the Titans* and *Jason and the Argonauts*. Meddling from the sidelines by whatever means come to hand, and all that. When you’ve got a deus ex machina in your story, the very least you can do is make the gods personable.

**[GdM] *Legacy of Light* brings to an end one of my favourite character arcs of all time, Victor Akadra. What was it like closing the back cover on such a wonderful character?**

**[MW]** Honestly? Terrifying. Viktor has been the heart of the story, from the opening chapter all the way through to the very end. Some of the decisions that he makes along the way don’t hold up terribly well to Captain Hindsight, but he’s such a powerhouse of charisma and certainty...

I mean, everything that comes to pass in *Legacy of Light* is absolutely foreshadowed across the trilogy, but sometimes what the reader brings with them is more powerful than anything you write on the page. Watching readers go through the same emotional journey as Viktor’s closest allies? That’s a white-knuckle ride, through and through.

**[GdM] What’s it like finishing a trilogy in the modern fantasy publishing industry? What happens next?**

**[MW]** Publishing’s definitely a “hurry up and wait” sort of affair. Everything happens in fits and starts with fallow periods in between.

I’m hoping to get stuck into something new very soon—I’ve not written any kind of lengthy prose since

I finished *Legacy of Light* back last year, so I'm definitely getting a bit itchy—but the “what” and “when” are very much in other hands right now.

And it's definitely a “when” not an “if”. There are plenty of ideas waiting for their moment on the page.

**[GdM] You have a short story in our latest anthology, *The King Must Fall*. Can you give readers a little insight into what that story is about?**

**[MW]** So, *The Vârcolac* is a story set between *Legacy of Steel* and *Legacy of Light*, and sheds a little bit of light on the messy situation that has existed on the Tressian/Hadari border for years. It's a tale about loyalty, family and revenge—and, of course, there's always something more to be discovered.

**[GdM] We've published a few of your short stories in the pages of *Grimdark Magazine* and our anthologies. For fans interested in reading more Tressia short stories, or even just more Matthew Ward short stories, where should they be looking?**

**[MW]** Earlier this year, I started going through and revising my self-published material. Some format changes, some edits, the usual. But then my client work—the other half of my day job—went absolutely nuts and I've not finished what I started. I need to get it sorted out, and perhaps I'll set aside some time later in the year.

For the moment, *The Tribute*, and the GdM original *The Game* are the only Aradane stories available, but I'll be setting *A Matter of Belief* live again once I've had a chance to give it an edit. They're all set several hundred years after the Legacy Trilogy and—to the best of my knowledge—can still be considered canonical, which is nice. Definitely start with Legacy

though, if you have the choice—there are mild spoilers to be had otherwise.

**[GdM] You also write in the Frostgrave shared world (Warlord Games) and your own Coldharbour world. What can you tell us about those two works, and to what sort of reader would they appeal?**

**[MW]** I think both of the Frostgrave books have long since left the world of physical publishing, though they're still around on Kindle (though I think the sister series based around the Ghost Archipelago is still around). They're adventure fiction, putting a bit more meat on the bones of the world, and fun little stories for fantasy fans.

Coldharbour's a different kettle of fish. It's a vaguely contemporary fantasy/horror setting based around places where the world runs thin—and that can be anything from the wilds of Cornwall to the forgotten reaches of the London Underground.

It's very much an ensemble setting with lots of different characters (and beasties) to get to know. I've a bunch of short stories and an anthology out in the self-published world (*Roots*, *Innocence Lost*, *Holy Orders* and *Edges of the World*, respectively) and the "ground zero" novel, *Queen of Eventide*, is the one manuscript I managed to get the edits sorted for before my workload went mad, so hopefully that'll be available again soon.

**[GdM] You have decades of experience writing and creating in shared worlds. What are the top three bits of advice you can give to authors looking to either create a shared world to write in, or to start working in somebody else's shared world?**

**[MW]** I vaguely remember covering this in *The Survivor's Guide to Collaborating* back in *Grimdark*

*Magazine #11*, so folk who want detailed thoughts should check that out. However, I will say that setting and managing expectations is absolutely key. Whether you're breathing new life into something old, or merely being invited to play in someone else's sandpit for a while, it's always vital to know what everyone thinks they're getting out of the deal—and what the final product is going to resemble.

**[GdM] What do you have planned next? Are you starting over with a clean slate, or are the people of Tressia (what's left of them) and the Hadari Empire in for more of a beating?**

**[MW]** As I mentioned earlier, I don't quite know exactly where I'm headed next—the options are plentiful, and I'm in the waiting phase of "hurry up and wait". I'm certainly not done with Tressia, even if that's not the very next stop on my publishing journey—by hook or by crook, I'll be back there. In the meantime, don't be surprised if you glimpse a couple of familiar characters around the periphery of whatever comes next. The barriers between worlds are far from impervious...

# REVIEW: The Wisdom of Crowds by Joe Abercrombie

ADRIAN COLLINS

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Having absolutely loved *A Little Hatred* and *The Trouble with Peace*, my expectations for *The Wisdom of Crowds* by Joe Abercrombie were absolutely sky high. With this gritty and fun book full of civil unrest, backstabbing, butchery, and even a little bit of love, Joe Abercrombie did not disappoint. A big thanks to Gollancz for shipping an absolutely gorgeous ARC over to me in Sydney, and a warning to readers who've not read the first two books: spoilers for the first two books to follow.

To kick off *The Wisdom of Crowds*, King Orso returns to Adua at the head of his army and two prisoners, excited for his victorious reception. At the end of the column in a caged wagon, Leo Dan Brock is a broken man, with more than just metaphorical pieces of him left on the battlefield. Sabine dan Brock stares out at the streets through the bars, wondering where it all went wrong. None of them are ready for what's become of Adua in their absence. The Breakers are out in force; the great change is here.

Vicktarine dan Teufel rides with the head of the People's Army, on their way to Adua in their many, many thousands. People from all walks of life march on the capital of the Union to tear down the system and rebuild it into something better. Only, with a philosopher focussed on the ideal and not how to

actually get there, and a judge more obsessed in killing everyone than actually trying cases, at the head of the great change, Vick is very much worried about where this is all going. But she's picked the winning side, as she always does, and she's going to see where this all lands.

Gunnar Broad is facing the hangman's noose. He swears to live good life for his family if he somehow gets out of this alive. Under the Agriont in Adua, he likely doesn't have long to live. Unless... something were to happen to the city to set him on a new course—directly into the type of the trouble he'd just promised to avoid.

Rikke sits in on Skarling's Chair in Carleon, a city and army at her command, and somebody she probably needs to let her men kill in a broken heap in front of her. A decision to be made: consolidate her winnings, or take on the father of the broken heap before her and unite the whole North?

Black and bloody and with a body count to rival Matthew Ward's Legacy series, *The Wisdom of Crowds* delves into what happens when society has the restraints of civility completely removed (no matter how hollow and corrupt the Union's civility had become). Recognising this book would have been conceptualised and drafted a fair few years ago, it's seemingly landed at just the right time to align with our society. There is plenty of commentary on the removal of societal structure and norms, of what shackles-completely-removed freedom means for a people so used to corruption and profiteering, the human basic need to follow and what happens when certain new leaders grasp a people by the throat and lead, and the hilariously dark and infuriating bureaucratic machinery of government. Whether intentioned or not (I certainly won't be the first reviewer to misread an author's intended social commentary in a book), the prosecution character in the court of the people seems

a perfect depiction of social media's current mob mentality driven by the rise of misinformation and lack of repercussions for outright lies the mob leaps upon.

Our leading characters and everyone around them are put through the wringer for a final time in this magnificent trilogy, in the brutal, sometimes comical, and often heart wrenching way that only Abercrombie delivers. And I assure you, plenty of those characters you know and love will either be dead or almost unrecognisable by the final pages—and that's what makes this book and the trilogy it wraps up so damned good.

As always, Abercrombie does a masterful job of working in little nods to past books that delight his long term fans, but would just read like sleek world building for a new reader. There are plenty of nods to *The Heroes* and *Red Country* and the books of *The First Law*. In my eyes he's a towering genius at doing this, and he has not missed the mark at all.

I also need to give a shout out to the last chapter. A vision of the future (and hopefully another future trilogy). Without spoiling, Abercrombie's ability to deliver a clear message to the reader, even when he's being purposefully vague about it, is on show in all its glory. I find that when compared to most other fantasy authors I've read who use the same approach that I either end up more confused than when I started, or just get frustrated and ask, "who fucking cares?" In the final chapter of *The Wisdom of Crowds*, Abercrombie provides me with an intense need to stalk his blog for news of the next book set in this world.

*The Wisdom of Crowds* is Abercrombie at his best. It's fun, it's engrossing, it's brutal on its characters in all the best ways, and it's just a damned enjoyable way to spend a few days glued to the pages of a book.

# An Eye for an Eye

K.S. VILLOSO

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*Nobody owes you anything.* It was the first thing I learned when I landed on these streets—young and angry, filled with more fight than sense. They told me to watch myself. *Smarten up before you get yourself killed, boy. Around here, everyone's shit stinks.* You could spend all month sweating under the hot sun for a paltry bit of coin, only to have your landlord beat it all out of you in an afternoon.

Tough shit, right? It's a tough world. All you've got is to toughen up and thank the gods every day that when the streets run red with blood, yours isn't flowing right along with it. When I started scalping people for money, I did it to survive. I had people to feed. Have you ever asked your sister to pretend a pinch of salt could nourish her? Or told your brother to sleep to chase away the growling in his belly? Most people won't miss the coin to buy a cup or two of rice.

But then it became a game.

I'm not proud of my anger. My mother didn't raise me to carry it around like a fist. But when you see people rise to lofty positions by taking what little others have, people who haven't done a single thing to earn their comfort except exist, maybe you'd get a little angry, too. Those I stole from would see me hang for the same shit they do to others every day. I loved seeing them stumble into my traps, the look on their faces when they realize they only have their greed to blame. In a world where justice exists only for the rich, sometimes you have to be the bigger villain.

All that changed when I met that woman from Jin-Sayeng.

I don't know what the hell her father was thinking, moving her here. Hell, I don't know why *she* thought she'd be safe on the streets of Shang Azi—Shang Azi, where everyone snuffles after prey like a hungry dog. A stranger doesn't get far without rousing the whole street. Another second and it would've been too late.

"The baker's daughter is ripe for the picking," a man called. His friends jeered in response.

"Look the other way," I advised them.

"You're not the boss of us, Khine Lamang," one growled, shaking his hairy fist. "Go play hero somewhere else."

"Just because Lo Bahn tolerates you, doesn't mean we have to," another chimed in.

I pulled up a stool to join them. "I'm not trying to play hero. But a girl goes missing around these streets, the city watch will be on us in the blink of an eye. You, Ning, your uncle's still selling those fake vases, isn't he?"

"They're not fake," Ning said.

"Well, he didn't get them where he said he got them from and if he's hurting for bribe money, the city watch will shut him down in a heartbeat. Trust me, gentlemen, you don't want attention on us. Not right now. It's near the end of the year—no one wants that kind of trouble before the festivities."

"People disappear all the time," the first man said, with a look in his eyes that made you want to scrub yourself with steel wool till you bled. "And this one just moved here from Jin-Sayeng to set up shop down at Dar Aso. Just her and her father."

I forced a thin smile.

"You want her for yourself, don't you, Khine?" the man asked.

They could smell weakness on someone like me, too. Around here, you needed guts like steel. I placed

a purse on the table. “I won this gambling at Lo Bahn’s yesterday.”

“Bullshit,” the men said altogether.

“Count it, if you want. Leave her alone for now, and you can have it all. What can you fellows do, anyway? Half of you are too drunk to see your own toes.”

Ning chuckled, though the other men didn’t share his sentiment. I could see the anger flashing in their eyes. But there was greed there, too. Easy money was more tempting than a woman in broad daylight. She *would* scream.

They took the purse.

I could still see the woman strolling along the edge of the canal and went up to warn her. I passed a handful of street-side vendors and noticed one of the men from the drinking party following me. It was the first one, the big-bellied greybeard with the hairy fists. I didn’t know his name. Didn’t have to. I knew his type well enough. Probably excused himself to take a piss, then went around the back so the others wouldn’t see. Probably planning to knife me and then drag the woman somewhere while everyone was distracted by my corpse. If she fought, he’d knock her unconscious, maybe kill her; it didn’t matter.

One of the vendors was selling bronze pots. I could see the fat asshole fiddling around with his pocket in the reflection. Going for the knife he’d hidden there, more likely. Idiot wasn’t even going to wait. I could’ve told him the street further down was better. More alleys, more people, easier to disappear. You’d think someone who lived in Shang Azi would know its twists and turns better. Not that I was going to give him tips.

I grabbed one of the pots and turned around to meet him. “Hey, boss!” I called. “Did you say steal *this* one?” He stopped.

Everyone turned to look at him and the knife in his hand, which the idiot forgot to throw away. The roar of the crowd descending on him was a beautiful thing.

Watching my plans unfold gives me the same thrill and repulsion as figuring out what killed a dead man. I can never decide which is which.

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In the commotion, someone fleeing the scene knocked the woman straight into the water. It wasn't deep, but gods, it was mostly sewage. I waded after her, laughing—not at her, but the absurdity of what had just happened—and she threw garbage at me and called me names in broken Zirano. I hadn't meant to talk to her at all beyond telling her to watch herself. Instead, I took her straight to her home, both of us drenched in filth. She hid in the back of their shop, refusing to come out even when I promised to buy enough bread to feed my family for a week. Her father—a gruff-looking man, much too scarred for a baker—saw me off with a shake of his head. They hadn't been in town long, and he seemed unhappy his daughter chose to get acquainted with people this way. He looked like a man who was starting to regret his life choices.

Ning's friends were waiting for me as soon as I left.

"We need to talk, Lamang," the greybeard said. He was still covered in bruises. Vendors *really* don't like thieves.

"I don't think we do." I narrowed my eyes, pretending to see his injuries for the first time. "You don't look so well. Picked a bad whorehouse, did you? If you need recommendations, I know some very good doctors who don't charge an arm and a leg."

His friends gathered around us. They were carrying clubs, which they brandished with ease.

"You seem to have a busy night planned," I continued, half-convinced my chattering would save me. "Don't let me keep you."

Greybeard wrapped his arm around my shoulders, pulling so close I could feel his hidden dagger prod the side of my ribs. I felt a trickle of blood. "You pulled a

rotten trick," he said, hissing hot breath. "I don't like rotten tricks."

"You and me both," I gasped.

"This isn't about the woman anymore. This is about paying debts. And you owe me big." He pointed at his bruises. "That money you gave us... that's nearly the amount that went missing from the coin box at the racetracks. You know, where my cousin works."

"Shit, you don't say."

"Quite a coincidence, isn't it?"

"An astounding one."

"I mean, it's not enough to be missed." Greybeard tightened his arm. I was finding it hard to breathe without feeling the tip of his knife dig into my skin. "Pocket change, as far as the officials are concerned. But my cousin is very perceptive. When I told her about you, she thought you sounded familiar. Thought you had a mustache, but that's easily shaved off."

I knew there was no talking my way out of this one. "What do you really want?"

"Night after a race, that coin box gets pretty full," Greybeard said. "And it just so happens it's race night tonight. If you can get it to us, I'll consider your debt paid."

"There's guards everywhere," I said. "I'm not that kind of thief."

"Not my problem." He placed his hands on my shoulders and turned me around so that I was staring right at Jia's bakery. I saw her through the window, talking to her father while drying her hair, and felt a lump the size of a fist in my throat. A woman that beautiful had no place in these streets.

Greybeard seemed aware of my sudden intake of breath, because his fingers tightened. "We know where your woman lives. Get us that money, or...well. Use your imagination."

"She's not my—"

"Details," Greybeard snarled.

“Fuck you,” I whispered under my breath.

The man patted my cheek. “I’m glad we could come to an understanding.”

I stumbled past the rest of them. As soon as they were gone, I struck a fence with my fist. A stupid show of emotion; I could’ve broken my fingers. For good measure, I did it again. I imagined the man’s face as he stared down at me, brown rotten teeth stinking like shit. What did he see? A washed-out immigrant, crawling into the slums with no one to turn to, no family or friends to protect him. He could threaten me, hurt my people, even burn my house down with me and my family in it, and no one would care. Worse, there was nothing to stop him from doing it again and again. Justice existed only for the rich. Shang Azi was full of people like me—threadbare, penniless, with nothing but our hands and the brain inside our skulls. No one moved to the city expecting to end up where we do, but the wind blows where it blows, and people like Greybeard knew how to take advantage.

I stumbled back home to plan out, in great detail, a way to put an end to Greybeard’s tyranny. Poison, traps, a knife in the dark. The streets had taught me how to steal; I knew it was only a matter of time before they taught me how to kill.

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If I stop telling you this right now, you might wonder if Shang Azi, no stranger to destitute souls, housed the same number of people with an endless appetite for bloodshed. You’d be wrong. I have met plenty who would offer me their last bite of food if I told them I was hungry. Generosity thrived in the hardest of places. I’ve always wondered about these people, who gave when they had nothing themselves. I’ve wondered what it took to be like them. Most people survived by shutting their eyes and letting the world do what it will. If it hardened them, if it broke them and they just had to get by with what was left, so be it. Others strove to make it

better—to wash out the darkness with light, whatever that looked like. Some people would embrace you if you struck them.

I'm not like those people. I can't look away without feeling the rage threaten to burn a hole through my gut. Helplessness made me lash out. After a sleepless night, I finalized the last bits of my plan, found a dagger, and went off to start the day. My youngest sister saw me fiddling with the door, just before I'd hidden the dagger in my belt.

"Go back to sleep," I said. "I'll be back before you know it."

"You're going to steal again, aren't you?" she asked.

I crossed my arms. "Have you been listening to gossip? I told you to ignore it. People will say whatever they want out here."

She closed her mouth, but I could see the discontent stirring in her eyes. Not for the first time did I wonder why I didn't just send her back to our village in the south right this instant. Never mind that I couldn't afford to pay for the journey, that the very reason she was out here with me in the first place was because the village was even poorer than the most run-down corner of Shang Azi. She, like Jia, didn't belong here.

"Go back to sleep," I repeated, in a softer voice. "I promise I won't get into trouble."

She knew my lies, but I appreciated that she chose not to argue. She nodded and climbed back up to the loft and into bed. I pushed the image of her innocent face out of my mind; I didn't need any distractions for what I was about to do.

I don't know who owns the racetrack. Some rich bastard no doubt, one who thinks of Anzhao as nothing more than a backwater city a stone's throw from the dragon lands of Jin-Sayeng and good only for its money. The attitude of mainlanders to outsiders always amused me. You would've thought they weren't

transplants themselves, whose ancestors moved from all across the empire to settle down in a new land. *Amused*—that's another word I've learned to use to keep the anger at bay. Pretending to laugh takes the edge off. If you took everything seriously, it would only be a matter of time before you'd explode.

Of course, it's hard to laugh at how easy it is to get inside any establishment by pretending to be one of the nameless, underpaid peons that run the business from the ground up. It's always a mix of people from just about everywhere else—Jinseins, Gorenten, Gasparians, the occasional Kag, and yes, even Layans like me. People trying to find someplace better, hoping such a vast, rich empire held the answer to their problems. You could tell who had been here the longest. Newcomers exude hope and wonder—a bit like Jia, in a way. Veterans keep their eyes hard and their noses down. Give nothing, expect nothing, live another day. I wondered what I looked like to others. It was easy enough to get people to think what I wanted them to. Makes you wonder sometimes if you know yourself. If I had the luxury of an existential crisis, I'd be more worried.

"You the new cook?" someone called in my native tongue. "A Layan! We've been starved for good food out here."

"No," I replied. I hesitated, remembering Jia. "But if you want, I can point you to a good bakery that just opened up down the street."

He seemed happy with the suggestion. Good bread was always welcome, and a man about to commit murder needed to wash a bit of the taint out of his soul.

Greybeard's cousin met me at the doors and led me into the hall that led to the office where they kept their coin. "I don't know how you got through before. You made us look like fools." She looked almost upset. I knew it wasn't because I'd pocketed that coin from a few days ago. Loyalty to one's master was for suckers.

No—she was mad she didn't figure out a way to steal it herself.

I winked. "Gentlemen don't kiss and tell."

She was dead to my charms. She glanced in the distance as Greybeard came strolling in with his men. "It's all on you now." She glanced left and right and then left us on our own.

I sucked in a lungful of cool, night air and glanced at the seats. There was still one final race before the night was done. I scanned the crowd and found what I needed—a tourist. I knew she was one by the way she stared at everything with amazement, wide-eyed, mouth slightly open. I hesitated.

"Lost your nerve?" Greybeard snapped.

I ignored him. I peered at the crowd again, skipping past a couple with their hands all over each other, a father and son who looked like they had spent all of last week's pay, and an old man who kept repeating his horse's name like a chant. I looked back at the tourist. She was hurling insults at one of the attendants, a Layan girl who didn't even look like she spoke fluent Zirano, yelling that some bastard had plopped his ass into her seat and wouldn't leave despite her insistence. She was making it clear that she wanted her to fix it and that if she didn't someone was going to be very, very sorry.

Sometimes—not always, but often enough—it all just lands on your lap.

I walked up to the tourist. She looked like someone had stuck a turd under her nose and doomed her to sniff the stench for all of time. "If you come with me, I can offer you a seat there." I pointed at the covered seating at the end of the tracks, normally reserved for officials and important guests. They practically gleamed under the moonlight.

Her scowl disappeared and she narrowed her eyes. "This won't cost me anything, will it?"

“Just come with me, madam...” I opened the doors leading to the office. They swung inwards. “When you reach the guards, tell them the password is *tea house*. That’s how they know to take you up there.” I winked. “Only our most highly esteemed guests know this secret.”

“Tea house,” she repeated. She both didn’t and wanted to believe me. People like that made the best marks.

I nodded sincerely. “Best seats at the track. You know Emperor Yunan once sat there? You’ll be the envy of your friends!”

The temptation was too much for her. She gathered her skirts and stepped through the doors. When she disappeared around the corner, I whistled to Greybeard and the others and led them off to the side.

“How the fuck is this supposed to work?” Greybeard asked.

“This is a city of thieves,” I told him. “Just you watch.”

It didn’t take long. The woman reappeared, followed by the guards. *Tea house*. Preying on tourists was a past time in Shang Azi, and all I’d done was given them a clue on just how gullible this woman was. I felt sorry for her, but only a little. Once the city’s wheels started turning, they would squeeze every coin out of her pocket within the hour. No one around here got paid enough, city watch and guardsmen included. The people who were supposed to protect you were hungry, too.

We ran straight for the office. I lingered by the door as Greybeard and his men went through everything. They bagged the coin box, the jade statues, the golden trophies. I wasn’t sure how they were planning to lug all of it out there without the guards knowing. Maybe I would’ve figured it out if I cared. But I didn’t. My hand tightened around the dagger on my belt. I wondered if I could get him from behind before his friends realized

what was happening. No—he was far too big for me, and even though I knew where a person’s vitals were, the man was covered in too much fat and muscle to be killed with one blow. My fingers fidgeted. I felt cold all over.

I thought of my sister and wondered how I would ever look at her again once I’d turned to murder.

“Stop,” I called.

“You just keep watch where we can see you,” Greybeard said as he upturned the drawers.

I grabbed his arm. “I said—”

He swung at me, his fist crashing into my cheek. Fuck, the bastard could hit hard. I tasted blood. I drew my dagger. He gave a slow smile, like he’d expected this. He didn’t have a reason to kill me before, but now...

I saw the guards from the corner of my eyes. The tourist must’ve given up her coin pretty fast. There was always that possibility. I realized Greybeard hadn’t seen them yet.

I bit my lip, letting the blood run down my chin. He stared at me, wondering what I was doing.

I pointed. “Thieves.” I didn’t have to say it out loud. The guards thundered past me, swords drawn.

“Lamang, you bastard!” Greybeard roared. “Fool me once—”

He didn’t get to finish. The guards killed them quickly. For my part, I curled in the corner, drenched in my own blood, and waited for it to be over. Learning to keep your nose to the ground was still the most useful skill of all.

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The guards handed me over to some of the workers, who still believed I was one of them. I didn’t see Greybeard’s cousin; once she heard the guards call the alarm she probably got out of there as fast as she could. They’ll grab her soon enough. The Layan girl was there, though. I think she’d seen everything, and

maybe even suspected I was in on it, but all she did was hand me a wet towel and call me an idiot in our native tongue.

Between the hustle and bustle of the staff, Jia's father arrived. "Someone said to deliver bread here." He walked straight towards me. "I suppose you think this makes up for your insult to my daughter."

"No," I said. "But it's a start. Your bread *is* good, isn't it?"

"It's at least edible," he grumbled. "Well, if you're going to come courting my daughter—"

I sat up. "I barely know her!"

"Are you saying she's ugly?"

I opened my mouth.

He slapped my back. "Thank you. When life gets tough, all we have is each other." He smiled. It looked odd on his scarred, wrinkled face. "I guess you know that already."

I really didn't, though. Not then. And sometimes I'm scared to think about how I would've turned out if he had never phrased it that way. Once you're over the edge, how do you claw your way back up? How soon, living like that, before you find yourself in the river floating with the corpses? Or thrown in a mass grave with the other nameless pieces of meat, leavings of an empire too greedy to care what it does to those without the coin to line its pockets?

I can't say. The shit you do catches up to you, and then someday you wake up and suddenly you're shit, too. I didn't stop cheating people—hell, I did it more as the years went by, because you always need money and people don't just hand out coin like candy. But I took the first step in stopping the anger from wrapping its cold fingers around my throat and dragging me down to the grave with it. Whenever I took, I gave. An eye for an eye. Makes me feel better most days. Maybe that makes me a hypocrite.

The world's seen worse, I'm sure.



Born in Daraga, Albay, **K.S. Viloso** writes speculative fiction with themes shaped by her childhood, with grim and grit inspired by both the streets of Manila, Philippines, and the wilds of British Columbia, Canada. Her books range from epic fantasy touched with the horrors of the aswang to long adventures through magic-strewn lands inspired by the engkanto. She now lives in BC with a pack of dogs and humans. When she isn't writing, she spends her days counting to when she can get lost in the mountains again.

# Of Home and Heritage

LEE MURRAY

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Grimdark is a grey genre. Its unsettling tales exist in the shadowy veil between realism and fantasy, its characters hovering between villain and hero, life and death, hope and despair. Decisions are morally complex and often come with bleak and brutal consequences. With grimdark everything is ambiguous. Hardly surprising then that so many successful grimdark tales also idle at the intersection of culture and myth, authors finding opportunities within those blurred lines to explore geo-political, socio-economic, as well as technological issues. Take Rebecca F. Kuang's grimdark military fantasy, *The Poppy War*, in which poor dark-skinned orphan, Rin, desperate to escape an arranged marriage, discovers a dubious powers which will ultimately serve, and subjugate, her. To inform her story, Kuang drew heavily on her Asian American heritage: the world of *The Poppy War* inspired by the events of the second Sino-Japanese War and the Rape of Nanjing, and making artful use of aspects of Chinese myth, spiritualism, and magical realism. It's a bold debut, fuelled by the fury of 'otherness', and one which resonated for me. Recently, I've become bolder about writing home and heritage into my own stories.

Born in the 60s of Chinese and European heritage, I've wandered that blurred no-man's-land between cultures all my life. I never read a story that represented my reality, never felt that vital "thrill of recognition" described by Goodrich in 1962. And while half a century ago, we could be forgiven for not

recognising the importance of representation in fiction; today not so much. By now, we've seen the inspiring Ted Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. We're aware that *we can't be what we can't see*, and can acknowledge the vital role that storytelling plays in shaping perceptions of ourselves and of others.

Perhaps it's due to the paucity of authentic Asian characters in New Zealand fiction that, for a long time, I largely ignored that part of myself. Or maybe it was because, like showing your teeth in public, it's considered vulgar for Asian women to proclaim our truth to the world; instead, we must be submissive, quiet, demure, hiding the burden of our experience behind our hands. That changed for me in 2020 with the release of three Asian-New Zealand grimdark tales plucked from my heritage and set here at home.

In the first, "Phoenix Claws" (from *Black Cranes: Tales of Unquiet Women*), a contemporary tale set in New Zealand's capital, a young woman chooses to keep her European Kiwi boyfriend, even though he has failed her Chinese family's unwritten litmus test for acceptance by refusing to eat a chicken feet delicacy. The consequences of her betrayal quickly become apparent, her life spiralling out of control soon after. My husband is of European descent, and I subjected him to this very test. If fictional tales at the intersection of culture can transport readers into another's shoes and make them reflect on a new perspective, the same applies to their authors. Writing this story was revelatory for me, highlighting deep-seated assumptions about myself and our couple, including internal racism, superstition, and expectation. Releasing it for publication became an act of courage.

In the second story, "Frangipani Wishes" (also in *Black Cranes*), a young woman, haunted by the hungry ghosts of her mother, falls pregnant to an older relative, resulting in her immediate rejection from the family.

Desperate to offer her daughter more than a life of drudgery, she marries an older man, travelling with him to his home in New Zealand. But, displaced from her culture and her language, she is overcome with loneliness, eventually succumbing to the demands of the ghosts who drive her to an unspeakable act. This story allowed me to explore notions of otherness and isolation experienced by Asian women immigrants to New Zealand through the lens of a popular Asian myth. Miserable thin-limbed creatures with distended bellies, and almost always female, hungry ghosts are unable to eat as punishment for some act of greed, laziness, or sexual transgression, the stories intended to reinforce cultural expectations of servitude, humility, and purity on Asian women in the same way the Red Riding Hood fable reminds Western girls not to stray from the path. Of course, the difference being that whereas Red Riding Hood is rescued by a kindly woodcutter, hungry ghost-women starve for eternity.

Born in New Zealand, I have also gravitated towards stories that reflect our local culture and landscape, making these the backdrop for much of my work. Readers of Grimdark magazine may recall my short story "Lifeblood" (GDM #19) which deals with cultural tensions on the kauri gumfields after changes to New Zealand law precluded certain groups, including Chinese, Dalmatian, and Māori diggers, from making a living, and prompting my main character, Nikolai, to bleed a tree for its sap, an act which violates fundamental Māori beliefs.

There's a certain symmetry between the Māori culture of my homeland and the Chinese culture of my heritage, which, to my mind, makes them perfect bedfellows. For example, both cultures are founded on the deeds of supernatural ancestors, reveal a profound connection to the natural world, and place community before the individual. But there are differences too. Whereas Māori serpent dragons, the *taniwha*, can be

ruthless and cruel (as in my military thriller *Into the Mist*), Chinese dragons are auspicious harbingers of good fortune. My third Asian short story for 2020, “The Good Wife” (*Weird Tales* #364) explores this notion in a grimdark fairy tale set in 1800s Arrowtown, where a dutiful Chinese wife negotiates with a taniwha for the life of her feckless miner husband. At that time, immigrant Chinese miners were working the squared off mines abandoned by the British. But Chinese people know that evil spirits linger in corners, just as the Māori know that taniwha-monsters dwell in caves and waterways. Such wonderful possibilities for story when you mine the shadowy spaces where cultures intersect. More than that: stories conjured at the margins of heritage and homeland offer a space for understanding and connection, for new perspectives, and, I hope, vital steps toward inclusion.

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# The Sword of Seven Tears

SEBASTIEN DE CASTELL

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The sword dealer placed the black lacquered case onto a wooden countertop whose many notches suggested his customers weren't always pleased with the quality of his wares and occasionally returned with their purchases to convey their disappointment.

'This is the one?' I asked, keeping my distance and leaving it to him to undo the lid's seven silver clasps.

Cambrin, the sword dealer, lowered his chin to gaze dubiously at me over the chipped lenses of brass-rimmed spectacles. The price of glass is extortionate in the Duchy of Domaris, and lenses even more so. The value of his stock made the expense a prudent one. A thick grey moustache hung down past his jaw, ending in braided prayer knots dedicated to the twin Gods of Craft and War. Given the somewhat macabre nature of some of the weapons Cambrin was reputed to sell, a little religion was probably equally prudent.

'If you have the money, this is the sword,' he said evenly.

Cambrian was scrutinizing me as carefully as I was him, though his gaze always returned to the three vertical branding scars on my left cheek—a distinctly recognizable symbol at odds with the clothes I was wearing.

The brown leather greatcoat was uncomfortably hot. I'd only acquired it recently and hadn't yet figured out how my fellow members of the King's Travelling Magistrates ever accustomed themselves to its weight.

The slender bone plates sewn into the lining might be good for stopping a dagger's thrust or even a crossbow bolt, but along with the various tricks, traps, and potions secreted in the hidden pockets—the full number of which I'd yet to tally—made the garment ill-suited to a hot summer's day in a cramped weapons shop.

The store stank. You wouldn't think a high-end sword dealer's shop would smell worse than a tannery or an abattoir. The problem was the richening powders: expensive blades have to be kept polished and rust-free despite the humidity that can corrode and rot through just about anything this time of year. Apparently, when burned in a brazier, the smoke from the higher-end powders will make you hallucinate yourself into ecstasy. Alas, the more potent the polishing powders, the worse they smell. Cambrin was clearly a fellow who took the preservation of his swords seriously.

'Usually when a man comes in asking after a very particular sword,' he said, patting the top of the case with his left hand, keeping his right discretely under the counter, 'he at least pretends to inspect the merchandise.' Cambrin's upper lip curled beneath his moustache. 'When the customer in question bears a prisoner's brand on his cheek and stands there staring at the case like you are right now, it makes me think he might intend to grab my goods and run without paying.'

A heavy curtain rustled at the far end of the shop as it had twice before. A light breeze blew in from the open door. I glanced through the shop's front window and across the street. A pair of heavysset women and a barrel-chested man were tethering their horses outside the tavern where I'd purchased a room for the night.

'I have the money,' I said to Cambrin. 'Seventeen flawless romantines as promised, mined in Rijou and cut to the royal pendeloque design. Only the King's

personal lapidaries are legally entitled to cut gems to that shape.'

'Show me.'

I made no move to do so. 'See, that's where you and I have a problem, Cambrin, because I've got a feeling that the moment I reach into my coat, you're going to get it into your head that maybe I'm drawing a weapon. That's when you're going to pull that wheellock pistol out from under the counter. Now, don't go denying it; I watched from outside as you wound and loaded it before I came in for our appointment.'

Cambrin's smile acknowledged my accusation, but didn't apologize for it. 'You're a big young fellow wearing a rapier of quality at your side. How am I supposed to gauge your true intentions?'

Careful not to make any sudden moves, I gestured to my coat and the twelve buttons down the front that bore the new King's seal. 'I'm a judge, remember? I'm not in the pilfering business.'

*Anymore, anyway.*

Cambrin spat on the floor behind his counter. I've never understood why people do that. How was disrespecting his own shop supposed to insult me?

'A judge,' the sword dealer repeated. 'You mean, a *Greatcoat*.' He twisted that last word beyond recognition in case the spitting hadn't sufficiently communicated his opinion of the King's Travelling Magistrates.

Even before I'd acquired this coat, I'd never understood why half the country assumed anytime a Greatcoat showed up it was to confiscate their property. Our job was to hear cases and bring some semblance of justice to this corrupt little nation of ours. Common folk who got screwed by the nobility six times a week and twice on festival days somehow found reasons to distrust the Greatcoats instead of the very Dukes, Viscounts, and Margraves who'd been denying them their rights their entire lives.

Still, not my problem, since I happened to be one of the few Greatcoats whose mission didn't involve conducting trials and rendering verdicts. When I came to town, the verdict had already been decided.

*'Why in the name of Saint Zhagev's right testicle would you want me?'* I'd asked the snooty young King who'd turned up at the door of my cell three months ago. *'Are you so desperate for Greatcoats that you're recruiting them from Ducal prisons now?'*

Filian, son of Paelis and lawful King of Tristia—a title of dubious practical effect these days—was as scrawny and gangly as his father had been. The kid's looks were nothing to brag about, either. Yet, he still had that royal bearing you hear those damned Bardatti balladeers sing about. The sort of... ineffable majesty that makes you want to punch him in the face.

*'My new First Cantor informs me you've been convicted by the Duke of Luth himself for sabotaging his new war machines,'* he'd said to me, offering me a flask of wine through the bars of my cell. *'A pair of cannons, I believe? Illegally confiscated by His Grace during the aftermath of the recent war with Averages?'*

I had been at the front, along with a couple thousand other fools who'd followed the call of the Greatcoats to help them hold off the Avarean horde. I'd seen first hand what those mighty cannons of theirs could do to flesh and to bone. And after the battle was done and the celebrations were over, I'd seen two dozen of the Duke of Luth's personal guard—men and women in armour who hadn't fought in the battle at all—sneak away two cannons the Avareans had left behind.

*'Never much liked weapons that allow cowards to hang back and unleash untold destruction on their neighbours without risking their own lives,'* I'd told the King that night in my cell, which had the virtue of being at least a teensy bit true.

The young, inexperienced, and from what I could tell utterly weak Filian the First had nodded from his side of the bars, then asked, *'And how do you feel about Kings wielding such power?'*

My answer had won me my freedom, this heavy and extremely complicated leather greatcoat inside which I still regularly cut my fingers whenever I reached into the wrong pockets, and a rather unique mission about which even the other Greatcoats had been kept in the dark.

'Look, Cambrin,' I said, plastering as kindly a smile on my face as I could muster for a merchant who made his fortunes on weapons of war. 'I can't remove the gems without unbuttoning my coat. If I do that and you decide to fire that wheellock, the bone plates in the lining won't be doing me any good. Then you'll have my money, the sword, and this coat. Me? I'll just be dead. So how about you put the pistol down on the counter so we can complete this transaction without any blood being shed?'

'My shop,' he informed me, his right hand still beneath the counter. 'My rules.' He patted the black lacquer lid again. The ebony sheen glimmered beneath his touch—a side effect, I suspected, of the weapon contained inside. Such swords as these bring all kinds of strange happenings with them. 'What does an ex-convict want with such a dangerous weapon?'

'I don't want it at all. The King sent me to buy it.'

'The *King*.' Cambrian took the opportunity to further moisten his floor. 'Don't go barking the title of that craven boy around here expecting anyone to bow to him.'

'Go easy on the kid,' I said. 'He's sixteen years old and inherited a country that six months ago barely survived a war. Half the Dukes are measuring him for a prison cell and the other half a coffin. Meanwhile—' I gestured to my ill-tempered host '—his beloved subjects have yet to warm to him.'

Cambrin sneered, causing his long, braided mustachios to dance against his jowls. Apparently he'd decided not to shoot me, though, because his right hand came up from beneath the counter without the pistol and proceeded to undo the seven silver latches one by one. 'So the boy monarch sends you here to buy him a magic sword so he can pretend to be a warrior, eh? I'll bet even pretentious little kinglets fear weapons such as this one.'

'Only if the ones wielding them take a disliking to him,' I said, and began unbuttoning my coat to retrieve the tiny satchel of romantine gemstones hidden inside. 'As to the rest, It's none of your business what His Majesty wants with the Sword of Seven Tears. You get your money, I get the blade, the two fellows hiding behind the curtain in the back who keep sticking their curious little noses out don't have to come chasing me and the three thugs waiting across the street pretending to take an hour to tether their horses won't have to ride out after me for an ambush tonight.'

I would've expected Cambrin to deny the accusation, but all he did was grin. 'No danger to an honourable Magistrate such as yourself, Your Eminence. So long as those gems are genuine and cut true, that is.' He opened the final clasp. 'A tool of destruction such as this beauty, well, sometimes a customer gets it into his head that once armed with it there's nothing to stop him from riding back here and retrieving his money.'

I put my hand on the lid before he could open it. 'You ever consider whether perhaps selling swords like these to anyone with enough money to buy them might not be the most shining example of fulfilling your civic duty, Cambrin?'

The dealer snorted. 'Yet you'd hand one of the deadliest weapons in all of Tristia over to a boy whose only virtue is that he's the only one of his father's bastards to survive the assassins the Dukes sent after

them? *That's* your idea of who should wield the Sword of Seven Tears?'

I removed the blue velvet bag from my coat. The silver cords were still sealed together by the almost impossible-to-forge purple-and-gold-flecked wax the King used for such purposes so anyone seeing this would know I'd never opened the satchel.

You'd almost think the King didn't entirely trust me yet.

On the other hand, if His Majesty had decided to play a practical joke with one of his new and largely untried Greatcoats, this would all turn out rather badly for me in the next few seconds.

I set the satchel on the counter next to the case. Cambrin leaned closer to it, adjusted his spectacles to examine the sealed cords, then nodded once before chipping off the purple-and-gold-flecked wax with his fingernail and unveiling his payment.

'Seventeen pendeloque-cut romantines,' he said, sounding almost disappointed. 'It's all here.'

The sword dealer's gaze returned to the case, and behind those chipped glass lenses I noted a softness in his eyes. This was a man who had grown to love his weapons as a parent loves a child. I suspected he would be equally as keen to part with one.

I waited, half expecting a sudden rush from the back room by his lackeys or from the ones waiting across the street. None of them had moved, though. Good thing, too: one of the conditions of my parole and subsequent recruitment to the Greatcoats had been that I not kill quite so many people in the execution of my duties.

With both reverence and sorrow, Cambrin at last lifted the lid of the case to reveal for me a blade referenced in three-hundred-year-old treatises on witchcraft and spoken of in hushed tones by those few who claimed to have seen it in action.

'The Sword of Seven Tears,' Cambrin intoned.

What an ugly piece of shit.

No beautiful flowing lines, no gleaming gemstones or gold inlay. The dull object in the silk-lined case looked like nothing so much as a flattened steel cactus. Not that I'd ever seen a cactus, mind you, save in an obscure Shan herbiary text. You get a lot of time to read during an indefinite prison sentence when your jailers have generous natures and your former wife a guilty conscience.

The Sword of Seven Tears got its name from the seven flat, teardrop-shaped protrusions that extended out from the blade. Like all the deadliest forms of magic, those protrusions appeared entirely unthreatening to the naked eye.

'You know how it works?' Cambrin asked me.

'Seven tears of blood from seven different people, each of whom—if the rumours are true—'

'They are.'

'Right. Well, if those seven whimperers happen to be utterly devoted to the wielder, then in battle those teardrop-shaped spines will come alive and seven opponents will end up dead on the ground at his feet.'

Cambrin sighed. 'Too bad finding seven devoted souls isn't as easy as one would hope... 'The fingers of one hand came up to twist the ends of his moustache. 'Unless one happens to be a King, I suppose.'

I caught his knowing stare.

'You really have a low opinion of your monarch, don't you, Cambrin?'

'Why should I have faith in some beardless bastard boy? He's nev—'

'I mean me,' I said, cutting him off.

'You?'

'Sure. I'm a magistrate, after all.' I patted the symbol inlaid on the breast of my leather coat depicting a sharpney hunting dog. 'The King's Bloodhound, they call me now.'

The dealer shrugged. 'I assumed the title means you went about hunting treasure to fill "His Majesty's" reputedly empty coffers.'

I tapped the rim of the sword's case. 'Maybe if you had more faith in people you'd be able to find seven of them devoted enough that their tears would make you unbeatable in battle instead of having to sell your prized possession to a King you apparently despise.'

*Or temporarily loan it before sending your sons to take it back from me, anyway.*

Cambrin waved my disapproval away. 'Be off with you then, "King's Hound" or whatever you're calling yourself.'

'Not yet.' I withdrew a silver coin from my pocket and deposited it on the counter before pointing to an upper shelf laden with small leather bags. 'I'll need some of those foul-smelling caustic powders of yours. Don't want my blade getting rusty on the journey home.'

'Are you mad?' Cambrin asked open-mouthed. 'Look at the blade! The iron's hundreds of years old, held together by nothing but the spells that grant its power. Seven tears of seven devoted souls—that's all that must touch it other than the hand of its wielder. You go polishing it willy-nilly with richening powders and the blade will fall apart before you've the sense to wipe it clean again!'

'How touching that you seem so upset at the prospect of the King's investment going to waste, Cambrin.'

The dealer caught himself. 'I... wouldn't want a priceless antique to come to ruin because some jumped-up sell-sword in a fancy coat doesn't know how to treat it properly.'

'Then you've no fears on that account,' I informed him, and patted the scabbarded and very ordinary rapier at my side.

‘Ah, of course,’ he said, sighing with relief. He dragged a small stepladder to the wall, climbed up and got me a satchel of the nostril-destroying richening powder. ‘Always wise to keep a duelling blade like that one polished.’

Once he’d set the satchel down on the counter, I opened it up and gave it a sniff. The only thing that kept me from passing out was the sudden urge to vomit.

*Yep, that’s the good stuff, all right.*

‘You won’t find any more potent polishing powders in the entire country,’ Cambrin declared proudly as if there were a dozen prospective customers in the shop rather than just me. ‘A mere pinch diluted in oil will remove the rust from any blade. No more than that, though, otherwise it’ll eat right through the steel.’

‘I’m counting on it,’ I said.

I was struck by an unexpected hesitation, torn by the competing sensations of pride at the chance to prove myself worthy of a King’s trust and the unsettling feeling that there was a price to pay for the crime—whether legal or spiritual—that I was about to commit.

‘*Are you sure about this?*’ I’d asked the King in his private library the night before I’d left Aramor with my new coat and a satchel of seventeen Pendeloque-cut romantine gems. ‘*This is a lot of money to entrust to a former convict.*’

Filian hadn’t answered, merely turned to bury his nose back in some book or other. I’d interpreted his lack of response as the sort of troubled determination that I was now experiencing myself.

At least he’d had the grace to spare me another of his speeches about power and who the Gods desire should wield it.

Cambrin started to close the lid of the case. I rammmed my palm against the rim, holding it open. The sword dealer peered at me through the chipped lenses of his glasses, wondering, I supposed, whether I now suspected him of trying to sell me a forgery.

‘If you doubt my—’

‘I don’t doubt you at all, Cambrin, and if it means anything, I really am sorry.’

With my free hand I snatched up the sack of richening powder and dumped its contents across the Sword of Seven Tears.

‘By the Gods of Craft and Death!’ Cambrin screamed, desperately trying to reach over the lid to rescue the sacred weapon even as the iron hissed beneath the grains of richening powder worming through its blade. ‘Are you mad! That’s the *real* Sword of Seven Tears, you fool!’

The two workers who’d been hiding in the back raced towards me, cudgels in hand. I flicked the leather sack at them, sending the remnants of the richening powders flying into their faces. They both fell back, rubbing frantically at their eyes and cheeks. The powders wouldn’t kill them, but they’d be blinded for a couple of hours and would suffer unpleasantly rosy complexions for a day or two.

Cambrin grabbed his wheellock and with a smooth, practiced efficiency that belied his explosive fury, shot me in the chest.

‘May a hundred hells fight to feast on your soul, King’s Hound!’ he shouted in what one had to concede was a decently poetic epithet to conjure on the fly like that.

The thunderous report of the pistol was answered by an even louder crack as the bone plate inside the left-side lining of my coat shattered. I fell back a good three feet and slammed into a rack of assorted sword pommels—several of which fell on my head and nearly knocked me unconscious. There was a smoking hole in the leather over my heart and a pain in my chest that wouldn’t be going away any time soon, but the bone plate had kept the lead ball from piercing my flesh.

Turns out at least a few of the silly gimmicks the Greatcoats are so proud of actually work.

Despite the sharp ache, I had my rapier out of its scabbard and its point resting under Cambrin's chin before he could reach for a second pistol.

'The gemstones are real, in case you're wondering,' I said to him. 'You've a small fortune with which to console yourself tonight.'

His eyes went to the ruined slag inside the black lacquer case. 'Why?' he asked, almost pleading with me. 'In all the world there can't be more than a dozen mage-forged weapons of such power.'

I kept my rapier on him as I shut the lid and began snapping the silver clasps shut. I glanced out the window at the dealer's other three assistants waiting across the street, who must have caught the look in my eye as I stared back at them. From the way they shuffled off into the tavern, it seemed they'd come to the conclusion that attempting to ambush a Greatcoat might be more trouble than it was worth. When the last silver clasp was closed, I grabbed the case by the handle and headed for the door.

'There are fourteen mage-forged weapons in Tristia that we know of, actually,' I informed Cambrin, then realized my math was off. 'Well, thirteen now.'

I should've left then, there being no reason for me to stay and plenty to get out of town quickly. But the way the sword dealer was staring at me in disbelief, anguished over an act he no doubt saw as sacrilegious, made me want to answer the lingering question in his piteous expression.

'I didn't trust this new King either,' I said. 'But when he came to my cell and asked me whether weapons like this sword weren't safer in the hands of Kings than out in the world where any fool with enough money and sufficiently devoted followers could use them for malice and mayhem, I replied that Kings, least of all, should ever be allowed to wield this kind of power.'

I couldn't help but at chuckle at the memory of that sixteen-year-old prat stooping outside my prison cell

with a stack of books in hand, droning on to me about patterns of history and what we can learn about the use and abuse of power.

‘You know what that beardless little bastard we’re supposed to call King said to me after I gave him my answer, Cambrin?’

The dealer shook his head.

I tapped the guard of my rapier against the broken bone plate inside my coat.

‘He said, “Welcome to the Greatcoats”.’

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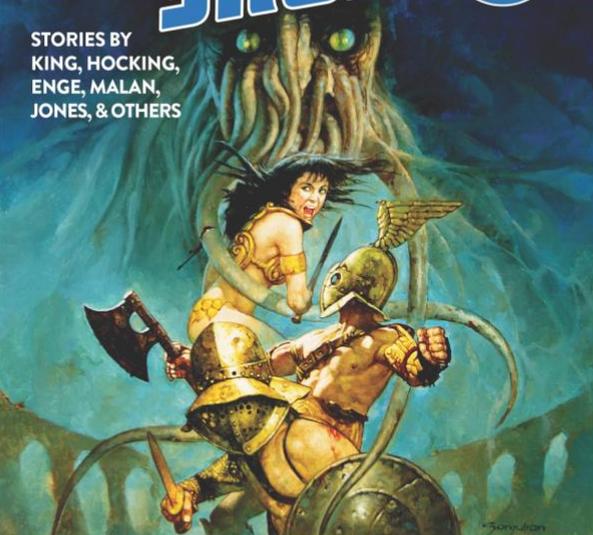
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