

ISSUE 32

GodM

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JAMES J. BUTCHER | **PAOLO BACIGALUPI**
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From the Editor

BETH TABLER

Hello everyone,

I want to take a moment to introduce myself. My name is Beth Tabler. I have been a fantasy and science fiction reader my whole life. Over the last few years, I have delved into the very underbelly of fantasy, the dark stories that make you cheer for the bad guy and, maybe see life differently. I have found my home nestled amongst the Jorgs, Geralt's, and Logen Nine Fingers of fantasy.

Taking on the reigns of something this beloved is an important task, and I do not take it lightly. I hope that with my love of the grayer side of people's souls, I can build on the legacy that GdM has built for years to come. This issue has something for everyone. We have some fan favorites with stories set in the existing universes of David Dalglish and our cover story author Daniel Polansky. We have twisted takes on existing mythology from Jude Reid and Lina Rather, and the most grimdark story I have ever read from Paolo Bacigalupi. All I can say is brace yourselves. On the non-fiction side of things, we have some great interviews and articles that may challenge how you view the fantasy genre. As well as a cadre of reviews to add to your TBR.

So, kick back, pop a cold one, and get ready to slide into the grayness of the human soul with me. Cheers!

Beth Tabler
Editor

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Snow White, Green Mantle

JUDE REID

I've been here before.

Not this exact village, of course, but they all start to look alike after a while. The same brown muck creeps over the surface of every building, whether it's the remains of a broken-axled truck from the time before, a rickety shack, or even one of the few thatched-roof cottages that seem to be getting popular again. The same dull expression in each pair of eyes. The smell of desperation that comes from buying your life one day at a time. Not that that's exclusive to village folk.

Don't get me wrong, they've got it good compared to me, and the chief and I both know it. The thought of a place of my own—somewhere to sleep away the hours of darkness, somewhere only a stone's throw from *safe*—is enough to twist my guts with longing. The chief—mayor, headman, laird, whatever they're calling him round here—knows that too. That's why he made the offer he did, and why I'm considering it.

"Have we got a deal then?" he asks.

He's a big man, well fed, strong but probably not quick. If I run, I could be out of the gloomy little hut in seconds, across the village square, through the fields, and into the woods before he has a chance to lay hands on me. It's still morning—ten hours before dark, easy. Plenty of time to get somewhere else before night falls, find a shack or an outhouse, or dig a burrow to pray the time away 'till dawn. Repeat, with variations, every day for the rest of my life.

Turns out there comes a point a girl gets tired of running.

"I'll do it," I tell him.

"Good." He nods, and some of the tension between us eases. It's only a little thing he's asked for, after all, and it's not as if I'm not used to paying my way in flesh. Rabbits, grouse, the occasional deer. This won't be much different. "Then best you get going."

The girl's standing outside when we leave the hut like she's been waiting for me. She's bundled up in layers of oversized clothes, staring off into the woods through the black thicket of her hair. Her skin's pale, the outline of her lips is lost beneath a chapped red crust. Fifteen or sixteen at most, only a few years younger than me. The chief puts his hand on her shoulder and forces a smile onto his face.

I don't know who he thinks he's fooling.

"Jennet, this is Fionn," he says to the girl. The only part of her that moves is her ash-black eyes, flickering back and forth as if she's tracking something fast-moving beyond the treeline. "She's going to take you to Aikwood. They'll look after you there." He presses a worn blue backpack into her hands. "Here, I've packed your things."

The bag gets her attention. She takes it in one hand and traces the faded outline of a grinning cartoon animal—a dog? A cat?—that clings to the threadbare fabric. "When am I coming back?" A child's voice, high and thin.

"I'll send her back for you." The chief looks at his feet. "After it's done, all right?"

"Fionn." She speaks my name like she's trying out the shape of the word and fixes me with her dull black eyes. "Are we going then?"

"Safe travels," the chief says as if that's possible anymore.

As if he hadn't just hired me to take his daughter into the woods and slit her throat.

* * *

The sun's high as we leave, along a path mottled with leaf shadows of yellow and green. Birds are singing, the undergrowth rustling with life. On a day like this, it would be so easy to let your guard down. People do. There's always talk about safe paths but living on the trail teaches you that's just another fairy story people tell each other to pretend they're still in control of the world. You'd think that a hundred years after losing our place at the top of the food chain we'd have come to terms with the truth, but it turns out humans are slow learners. Village folk are the worst. Life behind walls makes you soft.

There's a touch on my shoulder and I look round to see the girl staring at me with her dead, ash-black eyes. She looks enough like her father that her paternity could never have been in doubt, but apparently blood ties don't mean much in these parts. When survival balances on a knife's edge, you'll cut anything loose to survive.

"What is it?"

"I said how far." The girl—Jennet—adjusts the backpack on her shoulders, and I find myself wondering what's in it. A change of clothes, maybe. Food for the journey. She won't be needing them. I'll look inside after and see if it's worth having. "How far to Aikwood."

I don't break stride. Distance is a sketchy concept these days, better measured in hours than paces. I had a map, once, scratched out with lines and dotted with the names of levelled settlements, but it got wet once too often and disintegrated into a soggy unsalvageable pulp. "We'll be there before dark."

"He wants to be rid of me, you know that?" There's no rancour in her voice, but no fear, either. Her father used the same tone with me when we struck our deal, all bland matter-of-factness. "Because of this." She lets her oversized coat fall open, and I see what she

means. Next to her stick-thin limbs and round child's face, the bulge of her belly looks obscene, an overripe apple ready to split at any moment. "Did he tell you about it?"

Of course not. Why would he? If I'd known, I might have increased my price. "Why should I care about that?"

"When he asked you to kill me, I mean."

The question stops me in my tracks—not completely, just enough that I catch my toe on a tree root and stumble, take a step, and right myself. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm a hunter. I know the forest. He's paying me to take you to Aikwood, nothing else."

"Weren't you curious about why he wants to be rid of me? Not even a little bit?"

I ignore the question. Curiosity doesn't fill my belly with food or my pockets with iron. The reason he wants her dead could be as simple as not wanting another useless mouth to feed. Besides, the settlements have to watch their numbers. Too many humans living too close together start to draw the wrong sort of attention. Either way, it's their business, not mine.

I let my hand drift down to my belt, to the knife sheathed there. I hadn't meant to do it so near to the village, but if she keeps this up I might have to. Dragging her body into the deep forest will be a chore, but it's starting to look like less hassle than letting her walk there.

"If you let me go, I won't go back." Jennet leans forward, pulls a leaf from a bramble bush, and begins the work of picking it apart between her fingers. Her nails are bitten down to the quick, the cuticles red and ragged. "You can say you did it. They'll never see me again."

Except her father thought of that. He's expecting proof.

"Don't be stupid. If I leave you out here you'll die."

She shakes her head and lets the dismembered fragments of leaf fall to the ground. "I won't," she says with confidence. "He'll look after me."

Wind stirs the trees, branches tapping off each other like rattling bones. A shape moves off the path to the right, and without conscious thought my bow leaps into my hands, an iron arrow nocked to the bowstring. Dead wood snaps, then something huge erupts from the undergrowth, all flashing hooves and spear-tipped antlers, its body flaring gold in the dappled light. Sweat froths its flanks. I catch a glimpse of one wild amber eye, and then the animal is gone again between the trees.

"A deer." I let out a long, slow breath. "Just a deer."

I should have shot it. A beast like that could keep me fed for most of the winter. I could have strung it up and left it hanging from a tree, and even once the crows had taken their share there would have been plenty left. Stupid to miss a chance like that.

But that's not the only thing I miss.

When I turn back, the girl's gone, vanished. I glance along the path in both directions—empty—then out into the woods. She's moving quicker than I would have expected, weaving in and out of the trees with a dancer's grace. I raise the bow again, then lower it, and start to move instead. She's already put enough distance in that I can't be sure of the shot, and I can't afford to lose sight of her. Not now, not with the future I've always wanted dangling just out of reach.

Stupid.

The longer I stand here, the further away she's getting. I sling my bow over my back and dart into the undergrowth, feeling the skin of my ankles catch and tear in a thicket of thorns. She's nothing more than a shadow now, flickering between the trees and the light, heading deep between the birches. Anger flares in my chest. Surely she knows how this is going to end. Why does she have to make it so damned difficult? A low

branch whips towards my head, and I duck beneath it, rough bark tugging at my hair and pulling strands free of its braid. The ground is uneven under my boots, thick spongy loam crisscrossed with roots and briars and rotting logs. The air smells heavy and green. It's almost beautiful.

The trees thin out ahead, opening into a wide clearing punctured by slender birch saplings. The girl is standing in the middle of the glade, breathing hard. Ruined stonework juts through the ground like the stumps of worn-down teeth, the last remains of whatever building stood here in the time before. There was a city here, once, before the forest and the Othermen claimed back the land for themselves. I draw my bow and nock an arrow. From here I can't miss.

"Don't do that," Jennet says, without looking round.

"It'll be quick," I tell her. "You won't suffer."

She turns, no fear in her burned-wood eyes. A cloud passes across the sun and the shadows grow longer. Deeper.

"No," she says. "But if you loose that arrow you will."

"Nice try." Unease is already prickling its way down my spine. I can feel the pressure of hungry eyes on my skin before I see them, glinting out of the trees.

I should never have come this far from the path.

I should have let her run, not lead me to my death.

"Well played," I tell her. "Now they'll take both of us."

"No, they won't."

A laugh forces its way out of my throat. "I've got ten arrows in this quiver. How long do you think they'll last?" I step forward, and something unfolds itself from the treeline, squat and hunched and growling, a bloody scrap of cloth wound around its head. The girl raises a hand, and it stops.

"They're playing with us," I tell her, but she shakes her head.

"They won't touch you while I'm here." She lets her hand rest on the swell of her belly, and I realise with a

sick lurch of horror what she's telling me. There are always rumours, of course, but I've never given them much credence. Ducks don't breed with swans. And yet...

"You're carrying one of them." I return the arrow to its quiver and sling the bow over my back. The clearing's surrounded. If it comes to a fight, they'll rip me to shreds before the first arrow leaves the bowstring.

"In a way." Her eyes are back on the treeline again. "Part his, part mine. We're going to be together. He loves me."

"Who does?"

"The knight."

* * *

Her life had been a prison, Jennet tells me. The dull-eyed villagers, the tumbledown huts, the meagre allotments of farmland that gave up less sustenance every year. The empty hours of a lifetime had stretched out in front of her, and she had found herself drawn to the woods, again and again, the thrill of stepping from the path returning a little savour to an existence rendered bland by the overwhelming need for safety.

And that was where she had met the father of her child.

He was an Otherman, of course. Fairer than any human male, mounted and armoured as though he had stepped out of an ancient legend. She had been frightened at first, but he had wiped away her tears and lain her on a soft bed of grass. Touch-starved and lonely, she had welcomed his caresses, and when they had made love under the dappled sky he had left her sleeping and safe, untouched by all but his hand. Again and again, she had returned to seek him out, but the woods had stayed silent, watchful, and empty.

"And then I realised what had happened. What he'd given me."

With her coat wrapped around her, she looked younger than ever, but when she spoke of the Otherman her eyes were bright and alive.

“How do you know it’s his?”

That gets a snort of laughter from her. “You hunters all think village girls are easy. It’s his or it’s nobody’s. There’s been no one else.”

“And your father? He knows, does he?”

“He knows I’m pregnant. The rest?” A shrug. “At first he was angry. He told me if I didn’t tell him who I’d been whoring myself out to he’d whip me raw. When I wouldn’t talk he went to all the boys in the village, as if the truth was something you could beat out of someone with a club.” She draws herself upright, preening like a fat cock-pigeon. “Plenty of them would have been happy to claim the baby as theirs, and me along with it. But after *him* there’s no mortal man can satisfy me.”

“You think he’ll come back for you?”

“I *know* he will.”

“And what happens then? He takes you up on his horse and rides away to—” I stop. No one knows where they go, whether it’s the shadowy corners of our own world, or somewhere that’s entirely their own. They had names in the old days. Fair folk. Shining ones. Elves, back when they were myths and nothing more. Back before they tore our world down to retake what was once theirs.

“I don’t know where he’ll take me.” Her voice is calm, serene, assured. “But anywhere has to be better than this.”

The light changes. For a moment it’s noon again, the vanished sun is hot against my skin. Then a cloud covers the sky and it turns the colour of lead, bright and dark all at the same time, the leaves impossibly, unnaturally green. The air fills with the scent of hawthorn, thick, sensual, and heady. The girl smiles.

“He’s coming.” She rises to her feet, and I stand alongside her. The glowing eyes around the glade blink and turn, their attention turning to what’s behind them, and then the horse and rider emerge from between the trees, so bright it hurts to look at them. The mount is the brilliant white of fresh-fallen snow, the horseman golden-haired and high-cheekboned, his eyes glittering like blue stars as he looks first at the girl, and then at me. Oh, he’s beautiful, even I can see that, but there’s nothing human about that beauty. It’s thin ice over deep water, a cornice over a precipice, a diving hawk with its talons outstretched. He swings one long leg over the back of his saddle, drops gracefully to the ground, and spreads his arms wide.

“My love,” Jennet says and runs towards him. Behind him, the red-capped Others stir and mutter with excitement, and the Otherman’s lips curve in a smile.

“Beloved,” he says, in a voice like the chiming of silver bells. “Thank you.”

I should run, I know, but my gaze is tied to the pair of them, reaching out for each other. Her radiant smile. She is truly beautiful in her happiness. His cat-tilted eyes as he bends down to press his lips against hers. Her sigh, soft and long and satisfied. The glint of the dying sunlight on a curving silver blade.

Blood spills in a gleaming crimson waterfall. The girl takes a step back, one hand flying to her throat, the other reaching out for her lover. Her killer. His right hand is gloved in her blood as he slips the other behind her neck and guides her tenderly to the ground. A second stroke of the knife guts her open from sternum to pubis, and another gush of liquid joins the first, this one clear as spring water. With expert grace he reaches inside the vault of her belly and lifts its burden free—something red-raw and wriggling, tethered to its dying mother with a fat scarlet cord. The newborn’s face splits open and it screams, a furious howl louder than any human baby ever made, and its father hoists

it into the air and displays it proudly to the delight of the crowd.

I step away, and instantly every pair of eyes is on me. The girl lies gutted like a deer, the air rich with the metallic smell of blood and death. The Others are restless, dogs at the hunt, the forest alive with white teeth and glinting knives. They're going to tear me to pieces, I realise, and serve me up as a feast to mark the bloody birth of their lord's child. If I'm quick, I could put an arrow through the Otherman's chest before he reaches me, but it won't be enough. Nothing I have will be enough.

Except it's then I think of the look on the knight's face as he lifted the child free—as if it was the most precious treasure in the world, something found after a lifetime of searching. That same hunger is on the face of every Otherman in the woods, unmistakable in their yearning. I rack my brain, my thoughts muddy with fear. Have I ever seen an Otherwoman? Is there any such thing?

I drop the bow, open my jerkin and shrug it off my shoulders. The shirt beneath follows, then my breeches, until I'm naked and shivering in air that's lost any sense of summer. For one awful moment, I think I'm going to die here bare and bewildered, selling myself like livestock. Then, the Otherman steps forward, one hand raised to still the snarling pack at his heels. His head tilts to the side, questioning, as he looks at the bloody ruin of Jennet's body, then back to me.

He nods.

We seal our bargain.

* * *

I'm not like Jennet.

I've taken plenty of men and women to my bed over the years, sometimes for safety, sometimes for pay, and only once—maybe twice—for love. The Otherman fucks every bit as gracefully as he does everything

else, and if it hadn't been for the glowing eyes watching from the forest, I might even have enjoyed it.

I'll be back in the village by midnight, ready to hand over the bloody proof of Jennet's death to her father and accept my reward. The day's cost more than I thought, but the price is paid and I'm still breathing. That's all that matters.

The forest is dark, but for the first time I can remember, I'm not afraid. I've got nine months of safety if the Otherman's seed takes root and the usual blend of herbs isn't enough to flush it from my body. And even if it quickens, I've still got time. Time to think my way out. Time to make a deal, before the Otherman comes to claim his due with a silver knife.

Jude lives in Glasgow and writes grimdark horror and SF in the narrow gaps between full time work as a surgeon, wrangling her kids and trying to wear out a border collie. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines, including Daily SF, the Black Library Anthologies 'The Accursed', 'Sanction and Sin' and 'The Vorbis Conspiracy', and 'Haunted Voices: An Anthology of Scottish Gothic Storytelling'. She takes her coffee with oat milk.

An Interview with James J. Butcher

BETH TABLER

James J. Butcher, son of famous New York Times bestselling author Jim Butcher has entered the urban fantasy world with his exciting new novel *Dead Man's Hand*. *Dead Man's Hand* is the story of Grimshaw Griswald Grimsby, flunked auditor and mediocre witch. When a murder takes place down the road from him that puts his freedom in jeopardy, he needs to use his wits, a strange and unlikely alliance and not a small amount of luck.

James was kind enough to sit down with me for a little chat about writing, fantasy, and his unlikely hero Grimshaw Griswald Grimsby.

[GdM] Is there a story that was very influential for you? If so, how?

[JJB] More than one, certainly. Growing up, I was rarely without a book in hand, especially during school. I was thoroughly entrenched in the Harry Potter generation, but I also enjoyed Eragon, and a good deal of Garth Nix stories. As far as television goes, *Avatar the Last Airbender* is one of the finest stories I've ever consumed in any medium.

[GdM] Along the same lines, it is safe to say that you come from a household steeped in books. Is there a passage or quote from a novel that you found particularly powerful?

[JJB] It's been repeated a lot, but of course it's Tolkien: "All that is gold does not glitter, Not all who wander are lost."

I've been wandering through stories my whole life, and stories are where I feel the least lost.

[GdM] What attracts you to urban fantasy as a genre?

[JJB] Urban fantasy is quite unique amongst fantasies, as it allows for incredibly dense stories. Most fantasy requires a great deal of explanation and translation for readers. After all, they're learning an entirely new world. But urban fantasy is just our world ... but more interesting. You can safely gloss over boring topics and trust the reader will simply assume it's something they're familiar with, leaving the writer with more time to focus on the fun stuff.

[GdM] Can you tell us a bit about *Dead Man's Hand*?

[JJB] *Dead Man's Hand* is the first in the series of stories about Griswald Grimshaw Grimsby, a witch of mild disposition and milder talent in a world that is somewhat darker than he realizes. Magic not being his strongest weapon, he instead has to weaponize wit, snark, and stubbornness in order to survive.

[GdM] *Dead Man's Hand* has a strong horror element. Are you attracted to darker stories? Do you have a favorite?

[JJB] I like dark stories and bright characters. Without that contrast, too dark or too light, the story feels muddled and static or the characters feel bland and boring. An optimist in a utopic cityscape of peace and prosperity doesn't stand out like they would in a dystopic wasteland full of monsters and villainy. The

first character is a product of their environment, while the second is something more intriguing. So, consequently, I often find in my stories that I am putting good people in pretty awful situations.

[GdM] Authors use the expression "kill your darlings" to describe cutting an unnecessary storyline, dialog, or character. Did you have anything in *Dead Man's Hand* that you had to cut? Or that we may see in future books you can tell us about?

[JJB] I did indeed. The initial draft of the story had two back-to-back chapters for the secondary character of the story, Leslie Mayflower. Unfortunately, these chapters were also the very first two in the story, leading readers to believe that Mayflower was the protagonist, not Grimsby. It led to a surprising shift when the tone went from hard-bitten veteran to naïve novice and stayed that way for quite a while. Fortunately, I simply trimmed those chapters down into a single section, relabeled it as a prologue, and the issues were largely resolved. Unfortunately, I had to delete a scene I quite enjoyed, but I'm sure it will find its way into the next book instead.

[GdM] All authors work differently. What was your process when you began to craft *Dead Man's Hand*? Did the magic system come first, or was it the protagonist, Grimshaw Griswald Grimsby.

[JJB] The relationship between Grimsby and Mayflower is actually what came first. The characters changed several times in the earliest versions of the stories, one of which was set in the 1930's, but who they were to each other never changed.

The relationship was a hybrid of buddy-cop-duo and mentor-mentee that is no doubt drawn from the most important relationships in my own life. For a long

time, I wrote stories with loner characters which, as an only child and somewhat isolated individual, I was more comfortable with. But I found the stories dull and droning. It was until I started focusing on the ties, and the wedges, between different characters that I really felt like my stories started becoming engaging.

[GdM] Could you tell us about the characters Grimsby, and The Huntsman and their relationship? They both seem like they are at their lowest coming into the story.

[JJB] Their relationship is basically the story, or at least the central part of it. They are both broken, but in very different ways. Mayflower for the things he has lost, and Grimsby for the things he never had. But while they are both missing important pieces of themselves, they have surpluses in other areas that they begin to use to support each other, giving one another the solid footing they both need to start putting themselves back together.

Oh, and they aren't at their lowest. Not yet, and not by a long shot.

[GdM] Grimshaw Griswald Grimsby is an unusual name for a character. How did you come up with it?

[JJB] Indecision, mostly. Grimsby in particular was a name I knew I wanted to use, ever since I first heard it on a history podcast about World War I. However, Grimshaw and Griswald were both first names that I agonized over for a long time before deciding that I really liked them both. I then realized the only rule saying I had to pick one was one of my own design, so I scrapped the rule instead of a name. But, to make up for the absurd name, I decided I would need an equally absurd character, just in the opposite direction. Grimsby needed to be the total and utter opposite of badass and work his way to earning his name. I used

the same rule for Leslie Mayflower, but inverted. He couldn't be as competent as he is and still have a cool name.

[GdM] I am fascinated by the concept of Elsewhere and masks that witches wear to protect themselves from seeing it. How did you come up with that idea? Will we get to read more about Elsewhere and masks protecting witches in future books?

[JJB] The initial concept came from Superman. Clark Kent isn't much to write home about, but he takes his glasses off and becomes something else entirely. I wanted witches to have that same feeling, but with the risks and dangers that are implicit in modern magic settings.

That eventually mixed with another problem I had: over-description. I love to wax over irrelevant things like architecture and scenery and epic, absurd settings, but there simply isn't space in an urban fantasy story for all that. That's where I came up with the Elsewhere: a place where I could go crazy, putting in whatever cool nonsense I could imagine, and still keep it confined to smaller portions of the story and not bloat my wordcount and eat up my readers' time unnecessarily.

Then, to mix them, all I had to do was fill the Elsewhere with monsters and have masks be the only thing between them and witches, and then have witches be the only thing between the monsters and the Usuals.

[GdM] The magic system for The Unorthodox Chronicles is unique. You have the ordinary Usuals and the paranormal Unorthodox. The Unorthodox are witches that use magic, sometimes powerful, and sometimes just useful. Did you research different magic systems? Was there anything that you read that inspired the Unorthodox magic system?

[JJB] This one's a bit involved.

One of the classic elements of urban fantasy is the liminal aspect of the paranormal world. The idea that all these fantastic and wondrous things are real, but most folks don't have any clue about them. Frankly, I got bored of that. It felt like an excuse to not deal with the overarching impact that *freakin' magic being real* would have on practically everything. So, I decided I was going to write a story where everyone knew magic was real.

And boy, was it hard.

I realized that the liminal fantasy element was as much practical as traditional. It saves so, so much time for the same reason that urban fantasies can be so compact: the reader can assume a lot about the parts of the world the writer leaves blank, because they already know about them. Without this, things got more complicated very quickly, and I found that I had to narrow the scope of my stories quite a bit from my initial plans to still keep the stories fast-paced and immersive without feeling like I gloss over important world details.

This concept ended up influencing how my magic system developed. I couldn't have it be so powerful and omnipresent that it would supplant technology, because then it's just fantasy without the urban. But I also couldn't have it be so small-scale that technology totally outclassed it, because then it's urban without the fantasy. So, I needed to strike a balance. With that in mind, magic became something that was the *only* way to solve certain problems, but they weren't really problems most people had, and, importantly, they needed to be problems that most people would prefer not to think about.

[GdM] What is next for you?

[JJB] That's tough to say. I can say that there will be another Grimsby book, the first draft of which is already being churned up in the editing process. In the meantime, I'm working on another project which may or may not see completion in the future. It depends on how well I can reconcile demons and cowboys.

James J. Butcher spends most of his time in places that don't exist, some of which he even made himself. What little time he has left is usually spent writing or exercising. He is the son of #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Jim Butcher, who introduced him to books, movies, and games. James lives in Denver and is working on his next novel.

Men and Monsters

AARON S. JONES

Go back as far as you like in the written history of humanity and there will be tales of darkness; monsters and horrors that could keep you awake at night. Different cultures have developed different monsters throughout history. Demons were used to explain wrongdoing or unexplained illnesses in Christianity. Djinn could influence the actions of humans. Wendigos fed on their unfortunate victims according to early Native American legends. Vampires, werewolves, and other monsters, with which many are familiar, have been a base for storytellers to create thrilling tales of mystery, suspense, and horror. Centuries ago, the purpose of a monster in a story was primarily to help people understand the unknown. Why did bad things happen? Why would people behave in bad ways? Stories have always had a way to lend understanding to situations that might seem beyond comprehension. Fantasy stories have been linked with monsters of all kinds for as long as they have existed. From the dark fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, Tolkien's Orcs and Balrogs, to the Dragons and Zombies we see all over the place in stories such as *Game of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead*, and *The Witcher*—monsters have dug their claws in fantasy literature and never let go.

If you're reading this, then you're a fan of grimdark. Like me, you will search for stories that get the blood pumping, and spark your fight-or-flight instinct. Books, games, TV shows, and films that we devour may often edge towards the darker side of the spectrum and you'll want to see characters going through hell

(literally and figuratively) and come out the other side changed. We need our characters to find themselves stumbling into perilous situations, battling monsters, and knowing that all might not be well in the end. We want Ripley fighting the Xenomorph in *Alien*, we want Geralt using the silver sword, and we want our vampires less sparkly and more bloodthirsty. We want tangible danger. The monsters in fantasy, sci-fi, and especially those with grimdark aspects, can provide that. As children, we hear or see the diluted version of monsters. Dragons are slain by knights. Aliens are defeated. Witches melt. As adults, those of us drawn to the darker stories begin to see the layers which writers work with when creating monsters. Dragons become creatures of warning about avarice and greed. Vampires teach us about how humanity handles loneliness and grief. Zombies help readers identify what could happen when we become lost in commercial routines and forget to live a life full of heart and soul. It is when this understanding of monsters has developed, that the tales become more than entertainment and an interesting thing happens. We begin to ask, what makes a monster?

Ask any *Game of Thrones* fan which character or creature they hate or fear the most and I would bet that The Night King (capable of bringing an endless winter across the land) and the dragons (capable of burning flesh from bones) would not make the top three. Taking a guess, I'd say Joffrey and Ramsay Bolton are the top contenders for most people. So why would a boy king and a bastard young man be hated and feared more than dragons and a mythical blue demon dude? Not all monsters look like monsters, and that's what is truly terrifying. Early civilizations didn't have answers to difficult questions about why people behave badly. They created monsters to explain. Now, we know a bit more. People make choices. Bad choices. And they are choices that any one of us could make. Characters

who behave in evil ways are terrifying because they are so real, so close to home. Turn the news on and you might hear a comment about someone behaving like a monster or acting in a monstrous way. These aren't vampires, ghosts, or werewolves but men and women. Grimdark deals with this aspect of humanity by diving into the grey morality of mankind and reminds us of the difficulty of being good all of the time. We all make mistakes, but then there are some people who truly act like monsters. Characters like Ramsay Bolton in *Game of Thrones*, and Homelander in *The Boys*, are more terrifying than aliens and zombies. And this is because their actions are not mindless and distant. They are closer to home. The things they do that make them such despicable characters are things that feel real and believable. They are actions that we pray never to be a part of, but they are actions that spark our awareness. Fantasy is often lauded for its ability to provide escapism and pull a reader from the horrors of the real world and provide comfort. Grimdark can provide that, but it is also something that, when in the hands of a skilled writer, can shine a light on the worst parts of humanity and act as a warning to its readers.

Reading grittier fantasy, there often isn't a need for some fantastical beast to stand before the heroes to test their skill. The brilliant *The Court of Broken Knives* by Anna Smith-Spark is full of dark magic and dragons, which I love, but the scenes which disturbed me the most and sent a chill down my spine were when the protagonists were behaving in monstrous ways. It is pure grimdark at its best wrapped in dazzling poetry. With *The First Law* series, Joe Abercrombie creates characters that readers can fall in love with. Some behave like monsters and follow redemptive arcs whilst others start well and are corrupted. Logen Ninefingers, Black Dow, Monza Murcatto, all of the Gloktas, and many more of Abercrombie's creations are some of my favourite characters in all of fantasy. However, it is

interesting that these characters, though at times heroic and even honourable, can be seen as monsters by either themselves or others. They kill, scheme, plot, and betray as easily as breathing and yet we follow their journey and hope they make it through the challenges they face. They behave in ways that would make them the villains in other stories and in moments of introspection they question their own actions and wonder if they are doing the right thing.

The protagonist of Peter McLean's excellent *The War for the Rose Crown*, Thomas Piety, has a classic moment of reflection in book two of the series. After committing certain atrocities to gain power and weaken his enemies, he is told by a character in the town he is protecting that he is the monster. That his actions have caused harm and destroyed lives. Piety seems to feel guilt, but he believes he is doing bad things for good reasons. Readers have to make their own minds up on whether he behaves in a monstrous way.

It makes you question what a monster truly is. Are monsters created, or is it a label applied due to perspective? Which characters behave in monstrous ways in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*? Would Joffrey or Ramsay's family agree that they are irredeemable monsters? In Neil Gaiman's (*The Sandman*, *American Gods*, *Coraline*) list of his top ten new monsters, he picked out The Pale Man (*Pan's Labyrinth*), Nosferatu, Pennywise the Clown (*IT*), and Hannibal Lector (*Red Dragon*, *Silence of the Lambs*). It proves that monsters aren't things that can be easily defined. They can be fantastic beasts or as human as you are. The diversity of monsters is what makes them so appealing. Whichever skillset the protagonist of the story has, there is always something out there to stand in their way and make life difficult, to build conflict. Sometimes, the very monster in the story is the protagonist themselves. Monsters provide entertainment, they give us insight into the characters that we care about, and

when we are fortunate, they teach us something about ourselves as well. They bring to the surface the ideas and boundaries that we are comfortable with and make us question the world around us.

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.

Baby Teeth

LINA RATHER

Laura watched from the window while Mama took the salt packets they'd pocketed from a Speedway and sprinkled a circle around the house to hide them from the monster. She tore the top of each one off with her teeth and spread it as far as she could, then dropped the white paper scraps on the ground. Laura had stuffed her pockets with packets, so she knew Mama had enough to walk around the whole perimeter of the property. Not that it was much—the next mobile home sat just ten yards away.

When she came back inside, she swept her hands together to brush off the salt and sat next to Laura at the table. "Okay, honey, show me again."

Laura opened her mouth. She'd been probing the sore spots (one in front, on the bottom, and one on the top right) and now her mouth tasted tinny. Mama touched her swollen gums.

"These just fell out today?"

Laura nodded. She pointed at her top front tooth and the canine next to it, and tried to say, "These are loose, too" but with Mama's finger in her mouth it came out all garbled. Mama pinched the front tooth and her hands were shaking hard enough to wiggle it. When she touched the canine, it popped out in her hand easy-peasy. Mama stared at it.

"You said I should've lost them before." Most of her classmates started losing their teeth in first grade, and that was a whole four years ago.

Mama got up and took a cereal bowl out of the dish drainer. She pressed a Kleenex to the raw spot in

Laura's jaw, puffy and red like a hangnail. They moved their folding chairs next to the sink, so Mama could make warm salt water for her to gargle. It was way after both their bedtimes. The canine went *ping* when she dropped it in the cereal bowl on the kitchen counter.

Ping went the front tooth that came out next.

Ping went the incisor from Laura's pocket that had fallen out during gym class, while she was jumping rope.

The cereal bowl was half full, a week of lost teeth. Too many teeth, Laura thought. They'd learned about the body in her last school and she knew that kids had twenty teeth, more or less. Her teacher back there was what Mama called a free spirit and she liked to say *Humanity is infinite variation so you're just the way you're supposed to be*, but Laura was pretty sure there was an upper limit on teeth.

* * *

Laura was nine-and-a-half and for her entire life it had been just her and Mama, and for her entire life they had been running from the monster. She was six before she realized that other people's mothers didn't salt a ring around the house every full moon, and that other kids were told to stay out of the street more than they were reminded to wash their hands and feet with black soap so their scent didn't track behind them. The year she was seven, they lived in Alabama. Laura loved the heat that sat around her shoulders like a baby blanket all summer and hated the humidity that made her hair go to frizz.

They left when the monster caught up to them, when the skulls of small things appeared on the doorstep and the air tasted of the monster, of deep, wet loam and burnt green branches. Mama stayed as long as she could, but Laura still missed the last week of school, the pizza party and the yearbook signing. Even after she saw the trail of footprints in rotted grass

around the perimeter of the trailer they rented, she still resented missing the pizza party.

Now they lived in Indiana, right by the water. Laura was small for her age and she had no winter clothes. The other kids at school didn't understand her nowhere-accent or why she wore tennis shoes to school in the snow. Mama got a job at a call center where she sold kitchen gadgets from the TV to old women with not enough money.

Mama said all the water made it hard for the monster to find them, and that might have been true before Laura's teeth started coming out.

The day after Mama salted a circle around the house on a half-full moon, she packed Laura mashed potatoes and pot roast shredded to tiny pieces for lunch the next day because it hurt to chew with the new teeth coming in. Laura's face was different now too. She could tell the new teeth had pushed her jaw out and changed the angles of her skull.

Once she'd gone on a field trip to a natural history museum where they saw the skeleton of a kid who'd died of some disease nobody got anymore ("consumption" her memory said, or maybe "influenza"). All their adult teeth were inside their facial bones, waiting for their little teeth to fall out. That day in school, the pressure in her face nearly unbearable, Laura imagined that her whole skull was made of teeth, honeycomb bones stacked with incisors and molars and premolars instead of marrow.

She sat in the cool, dark space under the play escape at recess, in a pile of woodchips. Down here it smelled dank and earthy like the monster did, and she crawled in sometimes to remind herself to be afraid of it. Now, though, she only wanted the quiet.

Something scratched next to her. She opened her eyes to find a boy pulling himself through the same hole in the play structure she had. They were in the same class. His name was Jonas, he was ten-and-a-

quarter, and he took what wasn't his. She didn't like him very much.

"What's wrong with your teeth?" he said, instead of hello. They sat at the same table and had to share the same box of crayons. She imagined now that he'd been staring at her mouth all day and blushed. "They're all pointy."

Laura ran her tongue over the sore places. He was right. She tasted blood when she scraped the tip of her tongue on the sharp, serrated edge of what should have been a molar. Carnivore teeth, she thought. Omnivores had flat molars for plants, and she had these, for biting. "Everybody's different."

He squinted at her in the dark, leaning so close she could smell his breath. Goldfish crackers and bubblegum toothpaste. Her stomach roiled. She knew she'd been right—there was a limit on human variation.

"You're like a crocodile," he said. He grabbed her arm and his face was right up in hers. "Like a dinosaur. Lizard Laura."

"Let go of me," she said, even though it wouldn't do any good. It wouldn't do any good to say *Dinosaurs and crocodiles aren't lizards* either, and if she screamed she'd have to explain to the lunch lady what had happened. She'd have to show her teeth.

"Is this why you talk funny?" Jonas's fingers dug into the soft spot under her arm. His other hand hovered by her face, almost touching. "Show them to me again."

She smashed her head against one of the beams when she tried to yank away and she couldn't breathe because all she could smell was him and the earth, all she could smell was the monsters. He grabbed her cheek and pulled up her lip with his thumb.

Laura bit him then. But she never heard him scream. All sound fled from the world when she tasted his blood. It filled her mouth—so, so much of it even though she knew it was just a little cut. Salt and iron and bitter sweat. And him. She saw straight through

him, through clothing and skin and bone. She saw his memories and his future and his death.

“Jonas Wilder,” she said, and did not recognize the sounds or the throat that made them. “I know all of you.”

He lurched backward, tripped over himself, and tried to scramble away. But the hidey-hole was too small, and he couldn't make his arms and legs work together well enough to crawl out. And she was so big, she could pin him down if she wanted, she could eat him up if she wanted.

“You are very stupid,” she said, and got to her feet, and brushed the woodchips off her jeans. “And you will never learn how to not be mean. You will die being stupid and mean. I can see the maggots crawling around in your skull.”

She left him crying there. Afterwards everywhere she walked, even in class, she smelled the wet ground under the play escape, the decaying cedar. She cleaned off her shoes in the bathroom and walked around in wet socks for the rest of the day but the smell of the monster still followed her home.

* * *

That night, Mama found a turtle skull on the front step. It crunched under her flip-flop when she took out the trash. The bones were so dry that Laura heard the snap from inside. She also heard Mama fall against the side of the motor home and her gasping breath. Her nails scabbled along the siding by Laura's room, and Laura lay flat on her bed very quietly so that she could not see out the window.

When Mama came back inside she shut the door softly and began packing. Laura heard her take the stack of boxes out from under the table and start putting the essentials inside. Toaster, silverware, Laura's Children's Illustrated Classics series and Mama's H.G. Wells fancy hardback. Their car was a pick-up truck from the 80's, but they still didn't have

room to keep everything. Clothes they could get for cheap wherever they landed, so they would bring only the favorites that could fit in Laura's backpack. Furniture was too big to move.

Laura crept down the hall to the kitchen and watched from the doorway as Mama packed up the cans of soup and spam in the cupboard. "Are we leaving again?"

Mama stopped with a can of Homestyle Chicken Noodle in her hand. She leaned on the counter for a second. "Yeah. He's coming."

"It's too soon." Laura twirled her hair around her finger and gave it a sharp tug, so the pain would convince her this was real. Her hair was still damp from the shower. She'd scrubbed and scrubbed, first with a washcloth and soap and then with Mama's pumice stone so her skin bled, but she still smelled like dead grass. "We've only been here two months."

"He found us." Mama hefted the soup can like she was testing it for a weapon, then sighed and put it in the box. "We'll stay for a day or two to wrap things up here, but he's already close."

"Because of me." She hadn't told Mama about Jonas, but the teeth were enough.

"Yes."

Laura had known all her life that the monster was her daddy. She couldn't remember Mama telling her. It was just a fact. She had to have come from somewhere, everyone did. She'd never considered what he'd given her. It was only her and Mama who were family, after all.

She'd seen the monster only once. She was eight and they'd waited too long in Idaho. By the time Mama revved the truck they could hear it breathing, huffing, scratching at the ground. The soil turned red under the tires and Laura choked on air so heavy with moisture and decay that it clogged her lungs. Mama hadn't buckled in even though it was one of her rules. Laura

curled up on her seat. They were going so fast and all she could think of was when an oil truck had overturned on these roads and everyone died including a bunch of animals poisoned by the petroleum.

She'd gathered all her courage up and peeked out the back window. She saw only the shadow, so big it blocked out the moon and the stars and the air around it shimmered like the world coming undone. It made her sick to look at. She'd begged Mama to go faster.

"Can he follow us better now?" She helped Mama get the shoebox full of switchblades and hunting knives out from under the sink. They'd done this all before.

"I don't know." Mama's tone said *probably*.

Laura got out another box and packed up the laundry detergent and dish soap, which they always took with them because it was expensive. They worked in silence, with only the whistle of the wind outside and the creaks and groans of the aluminum siding to keep them company.

"Did you—" Laura always thought of the monster as *it*, a force of nature, but that wasn't right. "—love him?"

Mama sat—no, fell—down into a chair. Her hands dropped to her knees and Laura saw every thin, white scar that crisscrossed her palms. The price of holding hands with things with claws. "Yes. But—you're old enough to know, right? That isn't always good."

"Sometimes it's comforting for someone to see right through you. I never could keep a secret from him. He knew me inside and out. I was never anyone but myself with him, and for long enough, that felt like freedom."

Mama took a great big breath and then let herself deflate. "Don't worry about it, baby. Everybody makes mistakes when they're young, and at least I got you out of it."

Laura was old enough to know that she only got called *baby* when Mama didn't want to talk about something.

This was the fifth town she'd lived in (that she could remember—they'd moved three times before she got old enough to notice), the fourth state, the ninth address. While other kids loved to talk about the places they'd go someday, she was terrified of atlases, nauseated at the thought of globes and geography lessons. All those faraway places she might someday have to go to evade the monster's reach. In class, sometimes she'd stare at the inflatable globe hanging from the ceiling and try to work out how long she'd have to run before she ran out of land, and if that would be far enough.

That thought depressed her, so she went back to her room and got her stuffed bunny. His name was Wallace and she'd picked him out at a Speedway when she was three. He was missing an ear now but that didn't matter. She sat him on her lap and chewed on his other ear even though she knew she was too old for it. Mama usually yelled at her about it, but today she didn't even pluck the ear from Laura's mouth.

Mama yanked packing tape across the first box and smoothed it down. "Tomorrow I'll get my last check and we'll figure out where to go. We can be gone by midnight, I bet."

Wallace's black safety eyes stared up at Laura. She'd chewed and chewed on them as a child but they'd stayed on true to their name. She fit one between her front teeth now, felt the shank sewn deep in the plush. A thread snapped. "I'm always going to be running, aren't I, for my whole entire life."

Mama's head shot up. Her lips parted, but there was too long of a pause while she thought of something to say. An unhappy smile stretched her mouth wrong. "No. He's enough of a man to die eventually."

"But for a long, long time. Until I'm as old as you even."

Mama laughed, but not like anything was funny. “Longer than that, sweetie.”

That night Mama mixed up saltwater in the sink and rinsed Laura’s hair with it, even though Laura was too old for being bathed. The salt got in her eyes and the crooks of her elbows and knees and her new teeth ached. When Mama held her hair at the scalp to keep her still Laura imagined how easy it would be to slip Mama’s hand into her mouth. How easy to let her teeth catch on a groove of skin, the sweet taste of blood. Like the dirt here, all iron, it would taste so good. It would fill her up. Her stomach full of grilled cheese rumbled against her ribs. She could hear Mama’s pulse so loud it drowned out everything else, the beat in her wrist so close to the one in Laura’s temple that her skull rattled in tempo with it.

* * *

In the morning there was a map on the table. For the past few years, they’d chased oil. Boom towns, new faces every other week, the sort of places that lived and died on pipeline money.

“We could go north,” Mama said. “Alaska. If we go far enough, he’d have to swim. Or we could go east. Some of the houses there are built to keep out things like him, because they come from a time when people remembered to do that.”

In the night, Laura had woken to hear something in the trees. One moment it sounded like wind and the next like breathing. Her hands itched deep below the skin like she was full of splinters and papercuts. She pressed them against the window and the glass steamed. For a second, there was only the cold. Then warmth, over one hand and then the other, like someone on the other side of the glass pressing back.

Her hands felt fine today. She rubbed her right thumb over her left knuckles and couldn’t find a bone out of place, but anatomy class wasn’t until high school. She didn’t really know how many there were

supposed to be. Would anyone really care if she had a few extra nubs in her wrist or a few less? “Will they let me in?”

“Who?”

“The houses. Out east.”

Mama’s mouth went round like she wanted to say *of course* but then she came around the table and cradled Laura’s face in her hands. “We might have to file your teeth. Then they’ll recognize you for what you really are.”

That day at school, everyone said goodbye to Laura. The teacher said it was sad she had to leave so quick, and her grandmother must be very sick. Laura only nodded. Jonas waited behind the teacher and only came up when all the other children had lost interest in the momentary drama and drifted out of earshot.

“I’m not sorry you’re leaving,” he declared. The teacher’s head turned slightly at his tone, reflexively. But she had too much to do to worry about every instance of children being cruel to each other. Jonas caught the motion and he put his hands on Laura’s desk so she could see what he was doing with them. His voice went small, like something she might have imagined. “I don’t want to be bad.”

“Can you help it?” she asked. This wasn’t the monster in her. She was just angry. His palms opened to her, helpless.

He shook his head. “I try.”

They were supposed to be doing worksheets. Multiplication and division with fractions. Laura had yet to understand remainders as anything more than random numbers that appeared like magic at the end of example problems. But Mama said that in seventh grade she’d be allowed to use a calculator and she’d forget how to do it all anyway, so she hadn’t really tried.

“Maybe it’s just hard,” she allowed. But she had seen his fate and she believed as all children did in

inevitable endings, like in fairy tales and church sermons.

Jonas leaned against her desk and his hair fell over his face. She heard him breathing in and out, in and out, like the last breaths of one of the little creatures that the monster left on their doorstep to scare Mama and to ask her back.

She'd broken him, she realized. She hadn't meant to, but this was also inevitable. Her hands prickled and she wanted to tear up the carpet and the cinderblocks and the grass because she knew there was a long-dead squirrel right under their feet, and maybe if she gave him its picked-clean ribcage he would understand it as an apology.

But he didn't understand her silence. His right hand curled into a fist and he rapped his knuckles on her desk only once, with no sound, with every muscle in his arm tensed and ready. This she understood perfectly well.

* * *

She screamed so loud when the file hit the first tooth that Mama promised they could wait on the rest until they reached Pennsylvania. Laura didn't think it would help. They could blunt all her teeth, these, and the ones she felt waiting in her gums, and it wouldn't matter.

She had a nightmare in the car of one of the houses out east locking her out. When she woke, sweating, expecting to find herself walled up in shiplap and bricks, it was dark and Mama was driving one-handed with a thirty-two ounce Styrofoam coffee cup bouncing on her knee. The wind howled and the only light in the whole world was the glow of their headlights. She tried propping her head on the seatbelt and stretching out across the backseat but the wind kept her up.

There was no moon, no stars. Mama slurped coffee and her nails tapped Morse code nonsense on the steering wheel.

The wind stuck its fingers through the cracks in the seals around the doors, the seams of the trunk. Outside the trees stooped over like old men. The car started making a sound like a blender full of ice cubes. The coffee tumbled from Mama's lap and spilled across the passenger seat.

The windows fogged up. Mama hissed something inappropriate under her breath.

One of Laura's front teeth wiggled. This one had already popped out once, but she could feel a new tooth underneath, the sharp edge cutting through.

The wind became a voice, and in it she heard her name over and over. Not *Laura*, but a different name, a name for the monster that waited in her bones and her blood.

Mama let go of the steering wheel and leaned over the dash to wipe the windshield clean with her shirtsleeve. The car swerved. Laura's head clunked against the door and she saw fireworks.

"You alright?" Mama asked, when she grabbed the wheel again. There was coffee splattered on her cheek.

"He's outside." She couldn't see the trees anymore, or the road. If there were other cars, they were lost in the darkness. Something that sounded like tree branches scraped across the roof of the car, and she knew that they were claws because she could feel her own hands changing shape.

"Just close your eyes," Mama said.

Laura did, and the tires squealed, and the whole car jerked. She imagined that they'd been swallowed up and opened her eyes again. She saw Mama with tears on her face, staring into a black windshield.

It will always be like this, she thought. She felt something in her shift. Not because of what her body was turning into. Because she'd never had such an enormous thought in her entire life. It made her feel

grown up and scared, and she thought that this was how Mama must feel all the time.

She rolled the window down.

“Laura.” Mama was still pressing on the gas pedal, even though it was obvious they weren’t moving, even though Laura knew there wasn’t a road at all anymore. “Don’t.”

Her fingers left bloody prints on the door when her nails popped off one by one, but she could sense the form underneath now and the pain was better with a purpose.

Too late Mama hit the child lock. She fumbled with her seatbelt but her hands were shaking and Laura had always been fast. Her new legs would be faster when she shed this skin.

Before she left, Laura leaned over the seat and kissed Mama’s head, the only part she could reach. Mama, who always tried to save her, who was always doomed to failure. It wasn’t her fault that she would never understand.

“I’ll be back,” she said, “someday. And I won’t be a bad monster, I promise. Maybe I’ll eat him up when I’m big enough.”

She smiled, and Mama froze at the sight of her. But there was nothing to be done. This mouth couldn’t speak Mama’s language anymore. She dropped from the window and the shadow scooped her up with hands made of fur and claws, and she left all the rest of herself behind.

Lina Rather is a speculative fiction author living in Central New York. Her short fiction has appeared in venues including *Lightspeed*, *Fireside Fiction*, and *Shimmer*. Her Tor.Com Publishing novella series, *Our Lady of Endless Worlds*, is about devotion, empire, and nuns living in a giant slug in outer space. When Lina isn't writing, she likes to cook overly elaborate recipes, read history, and collect cool rocks. Find her on Twitter or Instagram as @LinaRather.

Review: Two Doctors Górski by Isaac Fellman

JOHN MAURO

The Two Doctors Górski by Isaac Fellman is an introspective masterpiece of low fantasy, exploring questions of identity, mental illness, and toxic relationships in higher education.

The main character, Annae Hofstader, is a 27-year-old Ph.D. student who escapes an abusive relationship with her thesis advisor at the University of California by transferring to Brandford University in England. As the only female graduate student in her program, Annae feels self-conscious and isolated.

Annae's field of study is magic, which is viewed as both a science and an art. While her peers focus primarily on botanical applications of magic, Annae hopes to use her magical skills to cure mental illness. To aid in this endeavor, Annae has acquired the ability to enter the consciousness of other people, reading their innermost thoughts. Although she seeks to help others, she often finds herself slipping into nearby minds to escape her own troubles and insecurities.

Annae's new advisor at Brandford University, Dr. Marec Górski, is highly accomplished in the magical arts, but also heartless and temperamental. Marec's cruelty runs deep. Wishing to free himself from guilt over his offensive treatment of others, Marec uses his magical skills to excise the benevolent aspects of his personality, creating another Dr. Górski in the form of a homunculus named Ariel. While Marec is a university professor specializing in magic, Ariel becomes a

psychologist. With her own research, Annae wishes to span both these fields represented by the two Doctors Górski, using magic-enhanced psychological manipulation to heal mental sickness.

Annae is a complex, multilayered character with a genuine desire to help others. However, she doubts her own abilities and doesn't want to face the ethical implications of entering other people's minds—especially without their consent. As a result, her good intentions often result in perilous consequences.

The magic itself in *The Two Doctors Górski* is treated as just another ordinary field of study, subject to the same pressures as real-world academic research. I am impressed by how Isaac Fellman has interwoven this subtle form of magic throughout a realistic, modern-day academic setting.

The Two Doctors Górski is one of the best examples of dark academia that I've had the pleasure of reading. All too often, books labeled as "dark academia" fail to capture a realistic portrait of academic life, with students portrayed as overly self-confident, pretentious, and edgy. In *The Two Doctors Górski*, Isaac Fellman has captured a more authentic view of the struggles faced by graduate students.

Graduate advisors are in a position of almost unquestioned authority over their students, and unfortunately this authority can be abused. Fellman skillfully captures the psychological impact of such abuse, which ranges from everyday bullying to sexual exploitation.

The Two Doctors Górski also brilliantly addresses the issue of imposter syndrome. As the chair of my university's graduate program with over 200 Ph.D. students, this is by far the most common issue that I have seen amongst our students. Imposter syndrome—the persistent doubting of one's own abilities and feeling unworthy of one's achievements or accolades—has become an almost universal feature of

the graduate school experience, especially among female students. On the other side, Marec's pompous attitude and callous treatment of students is, unfortunately, reflective of some faculty members with overinflated egos.

The Two Doctors Górski is a highly original work of fiction, unlike anything I've ever read. The closest comparison I can think of is *The Double* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, in which the main character encounters his doppelgänger who possesses all the charm and good social skills that he lacks. Dostoevsky's theme of split identity is clearly mirrored by the title characters in *The Two Doctors Górski* but is also reflected in a more subtle way with Annae as she leaves her own consciousness to enter the minds of others. This theme is also apparent in the name Annae, which Marec dismisses as just being the plural of Anna.

The author went through his own struggles with identity during and after the writing of this novel, explaining, "I wrote this book before I came out as a trans man, and my own experiences of being seen this way—as someone not a woman, but presenting as one—heighten *Górski's* sense of paranoia and dread."

Isaac Fellman's well-polished and lyrical prose creates a hauntingly atmospheric mood throughout *The Two Doctors Górski*. Annae's ability to enter other people's minds offers a clever narrative tool for the author to switch points of view amongst various characters. I was particularly moved by the scene in which Fellman gives a physical manifestation of the crippling anxiety experienced by Annae's classmate, Torquil, and the hollowness that is left behind in the absence of his fears.

Isaac Fellman earns bonus points for his myriad of subtle allusions throughout the book. I particularly appreciate the reference to the indie rock pioneers Neutral Milk Hotel and their opus, "In the Aeroplane Over the Sea," which serves as Annae's ringtone and

contains a lyric directly relevant to the story: “Anna’s ghost all around / Hear her voice as it’s rolling and ringing through me.”

The Two Doctors Górski is literary fantasy at its finest, a deeply contemplative and multilayered novel that explores the real psychological struggles of identity, imposter syndrome, and the trials of academic life.

Pop Squad

PAOLO BACIGALUPI

The familiar stench of unwashed bodies, cooked food, and shit washes over me as I come through the door. Cruiser lights flicker through the blinds, sparkling in rain and illuminating the crime scene with strobes of red and blue fire. A kitchen. A humid mess. A chunky woman huddles in the corner, clutching closed her nightgown. Fat thighs and swaying breasts under stained silk. Squad goons crowding her, pushing her around, making her sit, making her cower. Another woman, young-looking and pretty, pregnant and black-haired, is slumped against the opposite wall, her blouse spackled with spaghetti remains. Screams from the next room: kids.

I squeeze my fingers over my nose and breathe through my mouth, fighting off nausea as Pentle wanders in, holstering his Grange. He sees me and tosses me a nosecap. I break it and snort lavender until the stink slides off. Children come scampering in with Pentle, a brood of three tangling around his knees—the screamers from the other room. They gallop around the kitchen and disappear again, screaming still, into the living room where data sparkles like fairy dust on the wallscreens and provides what is likely their only connection to the outside world.

“That’s everyone,” Pentle says. He’s got a long skinny face and a sour small mouth that always points south. Weights seem to hang off his cheeks. Fat caterpillar brows droop over his eyes. He surveys the kitchen, mouth corners dragging lower. It’s always

depressing to come into these scenes. “They were all inside when we broke down the door.”

I nod absently as I shake monsoon water from my hat. “Great. Thanks.” Liquid beads scatter on the floor, joining puddles of wet from the pop squad along with the maggot debris of the spaghetti dinner. I put my hat back on. Water still manages to drip off the brim and slip under my collar, a slick rivulet of discomfort. Someone closes the door to the outside. The shit smell thickens, eggy and humid. The nosecap barely holds it off. Old peas and bits of cereal crunch under my feet. They squish with the spaghetti, the geologic layers of past feedings. The kitchen hasn’t been self-cleaned in years.

The older woman coughs and pulls her nightgown tighter around her cellulite and I wonder, as I always do when I come into situations like this, what made her choose this furtive nasty life of rotting garbage and brief illicit forays into daylight. The pregnant girl seems to have slipped even further into herself since I arrived. She stares into space. You’d have to touch her pulse to know that she’s alive. It amazes me that women can end up like this, seduced so far down into gutter life that they arrive here, fugitives from everyone who would have kept them and held them and loved them and let them see the world outside.

The children run in from the living room again, playing chase: a blond, no more than five; another, younger and with brown braids, topless and in makeshift diapers, less than three; and a knee-high toddler boy, scrap diaper bunched around little muscle thighs, wearing a T-shirt stained with tomato sauce that says “Who’s the Cutest?” The T-shirt would be an antique if it wasn’t stained.

“You need anything else?” Pentle asks. He wrinkles his nose as new reek wafts from the direction of the kids.

“You get photos for the prosecutor?”

“Got ’em.” Pentle holds out a digicam and thumbs through the images of the ladies and the three children, all of them staring out from the screen like little smeared dolls. “You want me to take them in, now?”

I look over the women. The kids have run out again. From the other room, their howls echo as they chase around. Their shrieks are piercing. Even from a distance they hurt my head. “Yeah. I’ll deal with the kids.”

Pentle gets the women up off the floor and shuffles out the door, leaving me standing alone in the middle of the kitchen. It’s all so familiar: a typical floor plan from Builders United. Custom undercab lighting, black mirror tile on the floors, clever self-clean nozzles hidden behind deco trim lines, so much like the stuff Alice and I have that I can almost forget where I am. It’s a negative image of our apartment’s kitchen: light vs. dark, clean vs. dirty, quiet vs. loud. The same floor plan, everything about it the same, and yet, nothing in it is. It’s archeological. I can look at the layers of gunk and grime and noise and see what must have underlain it before ... when these people worried about color coordinating and classy appliances.

I open the fridge (smudgefree nickel, how practical). Ours contains pineapples and avocados and endive and corn and coffee and brazil nuts from Angel Spire’s hanging gardens. This one holds a shelf cluttered with ground mycoprotein bars and wadded piles of nutrition supplement sacs like the kind they hand out at the government rejuv clinics. Other than a bag of slimy lettuce, there isn’t anything unprocessed in the fridge at all. No vegetables except in powder jars, ditto for fruit. A stack of self-warming dinner bins for fried rice and laap and spaghetti just like the one still lying on the kitchen table in a puddle of its own sauce, and that’s it.

I close the fridge and straighten. There’s something here in the mess and the screaming in the next room and the reek of the one kid’s poopy pants, but I’m

stumped as to what it is. They could have lived up in the light and air. Instead, they hid in the dark under wet jungle canopy and turned pale and gave up their lives.

The kids race back in, chasing each other all in a train, laughing and shrieking. They stop and look around, surprised, maybe, that their moms have disappeared. The littlest one has a stuffed dinosaur by the nose. It's got a long green neck and a fat body. A brontosaurus, I think, with big cartooney eyes and black felt lashes. It's funny about the dinosaur, because they've been gone so long, but here one is, showing up as a stuffed toy. And then it's funny again, because when you think about it, a dinosaur toy is really extinct twice.

"Sorry, kids. Mommy's gone."

I pull out my Grange. Their heads kick back in successive jerks, bang bang bang down the line, holes appearing on their foreheads like paint and their brains spattering out the back. Their bodies flip and skid on the black mirror floor. They land in jumbled piles of misaligned limbs. For a second, gunpowder burn makes the stench bearable.

* * *

Up out of the jungle like a bat out of hell, climbing out of Rhinehurst Supercluster's holdout suburban sprawl and then rising through jungle overstory. Blasting across the Causeway toward Angel Spire and the sea. Monkeys diving off the rail line like grasshoppers, pouring off the edge ahead of my cruiser and disappearing into the mangrove and kudzu and mahogany and teak, disappearing into the wet bowels of greenery tangle. Dumping the cruiser at squad center, no time for mopdown, don't need it anyway. My hat, my raincoat, my clothes into hazmat bags, and then out again on the other side, rushing to pull on a tux before catching a masslift up 188 stories, rising into the high clear air over the jungle fur of carbon sequestration project N22.

Mma Telogo has a new concerto. Alice is his diva viola, his prize, and Hua Chiang and Telogo have been circling her like ravens, picking apart her performance, corvid eyes on her, watching and hungry for fault, but now they call her ready. Ready to banish Banini from his throne. Ready to challenge for a place in the immortal canon of classical performance. And I'm late. Caught in a masslift on Level 55, packed in with the breath and heat of upper-deck diners and weekenders climbing the spire while the seconds tick by, listening to the climate fans buzz and whirl while we all sweat and wilt, waiting for some problem on the line to clear.

Finally we're rising again, our stomachs dropping into our shoes, our ears popping as we soar into the heavens, flying under magnetic acceleration ... and then slowing so fast we almost leave the floor. Our stomachs catch up. I shove out through hundreds of people, waving my cop badge when anyone complains, and sprint through the glass arch of the Ki Performance Center. I dive between the closing slabs of the attention doors.

The autolocks thud home behind me, sealing the performance space. It's comforting. I'm inside, enfolded in the symphony, as though its hands have cupped themselves around me and pulled me into a chamber of absolute focus. The lights dim. Conversational thrum falls away. I find my way to my seat more by feel than sight. Dirty looks from men in topaz hats and women in spectacle eyes as I squeeze across them. Gauche, I know. Absurdly late to an event that happens once in a decade. Plopping down just as Hua Chiang steps up to the podium.

His hands rise like crane wings. Bows and horns and flutes flash with movement and then the music comes, first a hint, like blowing mist, and then building, winding through a series of repeated stanzas that I have heard Alice play perhaps ten thousand times. Notes I heard first so long ago, stumbling and painful,

that now spill like water and burst like ice flowers. The music settles, pianissimo again, the lovely delicate motifs that I know from Alice's practice. An introduction only, she has told me, intended to file away the audience's last thoughts of the world outside, repeated stanzas until Hua Chiang accepts that the audience is completely his and then Alice's viola rises, and the other players move to support her, fifteen years of practice coming to fruition.

I look down at my hands, overwhelmed. It's different in the concert hall. Different than all those days when she cursed and practiced and swore at Telogo and claimed his work couldn't be performed. Different even from when she finished her practices early, smiling, hands calloused in new ways, face flushed, eager to drink a cool white wine with me on our balcony in the light of the setting sun and watch the sky as monsoon clouds parted and starlight shone down on our companionship. Tonight, her part joins the rest of the symphony and I can't speak or think for the beauty of the whole.

Later, I'll hear whether Telogo has surpassed Banini for sheer audacity. I'll hear how critics compare living memories of ancient performances and see how critical opinion shifts to accommodate this new piece in a canon that stretches back more than a century, and that hangs like a ghost over everything that Alice and her director Hua Chiang hope for: a performance that will knock Banini off his throne and perhaps depress him enough to stop rejoy and stuff him in his grave. For me, competing against that much history would be a heavy weight. I'm glad I've got a job where forgetting is the most important part. Working on the pop squad means your brain takes a vacation and your hands do the work. And when you leave work, you've left it for good.

Except now, as I look down at my hands, I'm surprised to find pinpricks of blood all over them. A fine

spray. The misty remains of the little kid with the dinosaur. My fingers smell of rust.

The tempo accelerates. Alice is playing again. Notes writhe together so fluidly that it seems impossible they aren't generated electronically, and yet the warmth and phrasing is hers, achingly hers, I've heard it in the morning, when she practiced on the balcony, testing herself, working again and again against the limitations of herself. Disciplining her fingers and hands, forcing them to accept Telogo's demands, the ones that years ago she had called impossible and which now run so cleanly through the audience.

The blood is all over my hands. I pick at it, scrape it away in flakes. It had to be the kid with the dinosaur. He was closest when he took the bullet. Some of his residue is stuck tight, bonded to my own skin. I shouldn't have skipped mopdown.

I pick.

The man next to me, tan face and rouged lips, frowns. I'm ruining a moment of history for him, something he has waited years to hear.

I pick more carefully. Silently. The blood flakes off. Dumb kid with the dumb dinosaur that almost made me miss the performance. The cleanup crew noticed the dinosaur toy too. Caught the irony. Joked and snorted nose caps and started bagging the bodies for compost. Made me late. Stupid dinosaur.

The music cascades into silence. Hua Chiang's hands fall. Applause.

Alice stands at Chiang's urging and the applause increases. Craning my neck, I can see her, nineteen-year-old face flushed, smile bright and triumphant, enveloped in our adulation.

* * *

We end up at a party thrown by Maria Illoni, one of the symphony's high donors. She made her money on global warming mitigation for New York City, before it

went under. Her penthouse is in Shoreline Curve, daringly arcing over the seawalls and the surf, a sort of flip of the finger to the ocean that beat her storm surge calculations. A spidery silver vine over dark water and the bob of the boat communities out in the deeps. New York obviously never got its money back: Illoni's outdoor patio runs across the entire top floor of the Shoreline and platforms additional petals of spun hollowform carbon out into the air.

From the far side of the Curve, you can see beyond the incandescent cores of the superclusters to the old city sprawl, dark except along where maglines radiate. A strange mangle of wreckage and scavenge and disrepair. In the day, it looks like some kind of dry red fungal collapse, a weave of jungle canopy and old suburban understorey, but at night, all that's visible is the skeleton of glowing infrastructure, radial blooms in the darkness, and I breathe deeply, enjoying all the freshness and openness that's missing from those steaming hideouts I raid with the pop squad.

Alice sparkles in the heat, perfectly slim, well curved—an armful of beautiful girl. The fall air is under thirty-three degrees and pleasant, and I feel infinitely tender toward her. I pull her close. We slip into a forest of century-old bonsai sculptures created by Maria's husband. Alice murmurs that he spends all his time here on the roof, staring at branches, studying their curves, and occasionally, perhaps every few years, wiring a branch and guiding it in a new direction. We kiss in the shadows they provide, and Alice is beautiful and everything is perfect.

But I'm distracted.

When I hit the kids with my Grange, the littlest one—the one with that stupid dinosaur—flipped over. A Grange is built for nitheads, not little kids, so the bullet plowed through the kid and he flipped and his dinosaur went flying. It sailed, I mean really sailed, through the air. And now I can't get it out of my mind:

that dinosaur flying. And then hitting the wall and bouncing onto the black mirror floor. So fast and so slow. Bang bang bang down the line ... and then the dinosaur in the air.

Alice pulls away, seeming to sense my inattention. I straighten up. Try to focus on her.

She says, "I thought you weren't going to make it. When we were tuning, I looked out and your seat was empty."

I force a grin. "But I did. I made it."

Barely. I stood around too long with the cleanup guys while the dinosaur lay in a puddle and sopped up the kid's blood. Double extinct. The kid and the dinosaur both. Dead one way, and then dead again. There's a weird symmetry there.

She cocks her head, studying me. "Was it bad?"

"What?" *The brontosaurus?* "The call?" I shrug. "Just a couple crazy ladies. Not armed or anything. It was easy."

"I can't imagine it. Cutting rejuo like that." She sighs and reaches out to touch a bonsai, perfectly guided over the decades by the map that only Michael Illoni can see or understand. "Why give all this up?"

I don't have an answer. I rewind the crime scene in my mind. I have the same feeling that I did when I stood on spaghetti maggots and went through their fridge. There's something there in the stink and noise and darkness, something hot and obsessive and ripe. But I don't know what it is.

"The ladies looked old," I say. "Like week-old balloons, all puffy and droopy."

Alice makes a face of distaste. "Can you imagine trying to perform Telogo without rejuo? We wouldn't have had the time. Half of us would have been past our prime, and we'd have needed understudies, and then the understudies would have had to find understudies. Fifteen years. And these women throw it all away. How

can they throw away something as beautiful as Telogo?"

"You thinking about Kara?"

"She would have played Telogo twice as well as I did."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe it. She was the best. Before she went kid-crazy." She sighs. "I miss her."

"You could still visit her. She's not dead yet."

"She might as well be. She's already twenty years older than when we knew her." She shakes her head. "No. I'd rather remember her in her prime, not out at some single-sex work camp growing vegetables and losing the last of her talent. I couldn't stand listening to her play now. It would kill me to hear all of that gone." She turns abruptly. "That reminds me, my rejoy booster is tomorrow. Can you take me?"

"Tomorrow?" I hesitate. I'm supposed to be on another shift popping kids. "It's kind of short notice."

"I know. I meant to ask sooner, but with the concert coming up, I forgot." She shrugs. "It's not that important. I can go by myself." She glances at me sidelong. "But it is nicer when you come."

What the hell. I don't really want to work anyway. "Okay, sure. I'll get Pentle to cover for me." Let him deal with the dinosaurs.

"Really?"

I shrug. "What can I say? I'm a sweet guy."

She smiles and stands on tiptoe to kiss me. "If we weren't going to live forever, I'd marry you."

I laugh. "If we weren't going to live forever, I'd get you pregnant." We look at each other. Alice laughs unsteadily and takes it as a joke.

"Don't be gross."

Before we can talk any more, Illoni pops out from behind a bonsai and grabs Alice by the arm. "There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you. You

can't hide yourself like this. You're the woman of the hour."

She pulls Alice away with all the confidence that must have made New York believe she could save it. She barely even looks at me as they hustle off. Alice smiles tolerantly and motions for me to follow. Then Maria's calling to everyone and pulling them all together and she climbs up on a fountain's rim and pulls Alice up beside her. She starts talking about art and sacrifice and discipline and beauty.

I tune it out. There's only so much self-congratulation you can take. It's obvious Alice is one of the best in the world. Talking about it just makes it seem banal. But the donors need to feel like they're part of the moment, so they all want to squeeze Alice and make her theirs, so they talk and talk and talk.

Maria's saying, "... wouldn't be standing here congratulating ourselves, if it weren't for our lovely Alice. Hua Chiang and Telogo did their work well, but in the final moment it was Alice's execution in the face of Telogo's ambitious piece that has made it resonate so strongly already with the critics. We have her to thank for the piece's flawlessness."

Everyone starts applauding and Alice blushes prettily, not accustomed to adulation from her peers and competitors. Maria shouts over the cheering, "I've made several calls to Banini, and it is more than apparent that he has no answer to our challenge and so I expect the next eighty years are ours. And Alice's!" The applause is almost deafening.

Maria waves for attention again and the applause fades into scattered whistles and catcalls which finally taper off enough to allow Maria to continue. "To commemorate the end of Banini's age, and the beginning of a new one, I would like to present Alice with a small token of affection—" and here she leans down and picks up a jute-woven gift bag shot with gold as she says, "Of course a woman likes gold and jewels,

and strings for her viola, but I thought this was a particularly apt gift for the evening ...”

I’m leaning against the woman next to me, trying to see, as Maria holds the bag dramatically above her head and calls out to the crowd, “For Alice, our slayer of *dinosaurs!*” and pulls the green brontosaurus out of the bag.

It’s just like the one the kid had.

Its big eyes look right at me. For a second it seems to blink at me with its big black lashes and then the crowd laughs and applauds as they all get the joke. *Banini = dinosaur.* Ha ha.

Alice takes the dinosaur and holds it by the neck and swings it over her head and everybody laughs again but I can’t see anything anymore because I’m lying on the ground caught in the jungle swelter of people’s legs and I can’t breathe.

* * *

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Sure. No problem. I told you. I’m fine.”

It’s true, I guess. Sitting next to Alice in the waiting room, I don’t feel dizzy or anything, even if I am tired. Last night, she put the dinosaur on the bedside table, right in with her collection of little jeweled music boxes, and the damn thing looked at me all night long. Finally at four a.m. I couldn’t stand it anymore and I shoved it under the bed. But in the morning, she found it and put it back, and it’s been looking at me ever since.

Alice squeezes my hand. The rejoy clinic’s a small one, private, carefully appointed with holographic windows of sailboats on the Atlantic so it feels open and airy even though its daylight is piped in through mirror collectors. It’s not one of the big public monsters out

in the clusters that got started after rejoy’s patents expired. You pay a little more than you do for the Medicaid generics, but you don’t rub shoulders with a bunch of starving gamblers and nitheads and drunks

who all still want their rejoy even if they're wasting every day of their endless lives.

The nurses are quick and efficient. Pretty soon, Alice is on her back hooked up to an IV bladder with me sitting beside her on the bed, and we're watching rejoy push into her.

It's just a clear liquid. I always thought it should be fizzy and green for growing things. Or maybe not green, but definitely fizzy. It always feels fizzy when it goes in.

Alice takes a quick breath and reaches out for me, her slender pale fingers brushing my thigh. "Hold my hand."

The elixir of life pulses into her, filling her, flushing her. She pants shallowly. Her eyes dilate. She isn't watching me anymore. She's somewhere deep inside, reclaiming what was lost over the last eighteen months. No matter how many times I do it, I'm surprised when I watch it come over someone, the way it seems to swallow them and then they come back to the surface more whole and alive than when they started.

Alice's eyes focus. She smiles. "Oh, God. I can never get used to that."

She tries to stand up, but I hold her down and beep the nurse. Once we've got her unhooked, I lead her back out to the car. She leans heavily against me, stumbling and touching me. I can almost feel the fizzing and tingling through her skin. She climbs into the car. When I'm inside, she looks over at me and laughs. "I can't believe how good I feel."

"Nothing like winding back the clock."

"Take me home. I want to be with you."

I push the start button on the car and we slide out of our parking space. We hook onto the magline out of Center Spire. Alice watches the city slide by outside the windows. All the shoppers and the businessmen and the martyrs and the ghosts, and then we're out in

the open, on the high track over the jungle, speeding north again, for Angel Spire.

"It's so wonderful to be alive," she says, "It doesn't make any sense."

"What doesn't?"

"Cutting rejoy."

"If people made sense, we wouldn't have psychologists." And we wouldn't buy dinosaur toys for kids who were never going to make it anyway. I grit my teeth. None of them make any sense. Stupid moms.

Alice sighs and runs her hands across her thighs, kneading herself, hiking up her skirt and digging her fingers into her flesh. "But it still doesn't make any sense. It feels so good. You'd have to be crazy to stop rejoy."

"Of course they're crazy. They kill themselves, they make babies they don't know how to take care of, they live in shitty apartments in the dark, they never go out, they smell bad, they look terrible, they never have anything good again—" I'm starting to shout. I shut my mouth.

Alice looks over at me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

But I'm not. I'm mad. Mad at the ladies and their stupid toy-buying. Pissed off that these dumb women tease their dumb terminal kids like that; treat them like they aren't going to end up as compost. "Let's not talk about work right now. Let's just go home." I force a grin. "I've already got the day off. We should take advantage of it."

Alice is still looking at me. I can see the questions in her eyes. If she weren't on the leading edge of a rejoy high, she'd keep pressing, but she's so wrapped up in the tingling of her rebuilt body that she lets it go. She laughs and runs her fingers up my leg and starts to play with me. I override the magline's safeties with my cop codes and we barrel across the Causeway toward Angel Spire with the sun on the ocean and Alice

smiling and laughing and the bright air whirling around us.

* * *

Three a.m. Another call, windows down, howling through the humidity and swelter of Newfoundland. Alice wants me to come home, come back, relax, but I can't. I don't want to. I'm not sure what I want, but it's not brunch with Belgian waffles or screwing on the living room floor or a trip to the movies or ... anything, really.

I can't do it, anyway. We got home, and I couldn't do it. Nothing felt right. Alice said it didn't matter, that she wanted to practice.

Now I haven't seen her for more than a day.

I've been on duty, catching up on calls. I've been going for twenty-four hours straight, powered on coppers'-little-helpers and mainlined caffeine and my hat and trench coat and hands are pinprick-sprayed with the residue of work.

Along the coastline the sea runs high and hot, splashing in over the breakwaters. Lights ahead, the glow of coalfoundries and gasification works. The call takes me up the glittering face of Palomino Cluster. Nice real estate. Up the masslifts and smashing through a door with Pentle backing me, knowing what we're going to find but never knowing how much these ones will fight.

Bedlam. A lady, this one a pretty brown girl who might have had a great life if she didn't decide she needed a baby, and a kid lying in the corner in a box screaming and screaming. And the lady's screaming too, screaming at the little kid in its box, like she's gone out of her mind.

As we come in through the door, she starts screaming at us. The kid keeps screaming. The lady keeps screaming. It's like a bunch of screwdrivers jamming in my ears; it goes on and on. Pentle grabs the lady and tries to hold her but she and the kid just

keep screaming away and suddenly I can't breathe. I can barely stand. The kid screams and screams and screams: screwdrivers and glass and icepicks in my head.

So I shoot the thing. I pull out my Grange and put a bullet in the little sucker. Fragments of box and baby spray the air.

I don't do that, normally; it's against procedure to waste the kid in front of the mother.

But there we all are, staring at the body, bloodmist and gunpowder all over and my ears ringing from the shot and for one pristine crystal second, it's quiet.

Then the woman's screaming at me again and Pentle's screaming too because I screwed up the evidence before he could get a picture, and then the lady's all over me, trying to claw my eyes out. Pentle drags her off and then she's calling me a bastard and a killer and bastard and monkey man and a fucking pig and that I've got dead eyes.

And that really gets me: I've got dead eyes. This lady's headed into a rejuo collapse and won't last another twenty years and she'll spend all of it in a single-sex work camp. She's young, a lot like Alice, maybe the last of them to cross the line into rejuo, right when she came of age—not an old workhorse like me who was already forty when it went generic—and now she'll be dead in an eye blink. But I'm the one with dead eyes.

I take my Grange and shove it into her forehead. "You want to die too?"

"Go ahead! Do it! Do it!" She doesn't stop for a second, just keeps howling and spitting. "Fucking bastard! Bastard fucking fuck fucking—Do it! Do it!" She's crying.

Even though I want to see her brains pop out the back of her head, I don't have the heart. She'll die soon enough. Another twenty years and she's done for. The paperwork isn't worth it.

Pentle cuffs her while she babbles to the baby in the box, just a lump of blood and limp doll parts now. "My baby my poor baby I didn't know I'm sorry my baby my poor baby I'm sorry ..." Pentle muscles her out to the car.

For a while I can hear her in the hall. *My baby my poor baby my poor baby ...* And then she's gone down the lifts and it's a relief just to be standing there with the wet smells of the apartment and the dead body.

She was using a dresser drawer as her bassinet.

I run my fingers along the splintered edge, fondle the brass pulls. If nothing else, these ladies are resourceful, making the things we can't buy anymore. If I close my eyes, I can almost remember a whole industry around these little guys. Little outfits. Little chairs. Little beds. Everything made little.

Little dinosaurs. "She couldn't make it shut up." I jerk my hands away from the baby box, startled. Pentle has come up behind me. "Huh?"

"She couldn't make it stop crying. Didn't know what to do with it. Didn't know how to make it calm down. That's how the neighbors heard."

"Dumb."

"Yeah. She didn't even have a tag-teamer. How the heck was she going to do grocery shopping?"

He gets out his camera and tries a couple shots of the baby. There's not a whole lot left. A 12mm Grange is built for junkies, nitheads going crazy, 'bot assassins. It's overkill for an unarmored thing like this. When the new Granges came out, Grange ran an ad campaign on the sides of our cruisers. "Grange: Unstoppable." Or something like that. There was this one that said "Point Blank Grange" with a photo of a completely mangled nithead. That one was in all our lockers.

Pentle tries another angle on the drawer, going for a profile, trying to make the best of a bad situation. "I like how she used a drawer," he says.

“Yeah. Resourceful.”

“I saw this one where the lady made a whole little table and chair set for her kid. Handmade it all. I couldn’t believe how much energy she put into it.” He makes shapes with his hand. “Little scalloped edges, shapes painted on the top: squares and triangles and things.”

“If you’re going to die doing something, I guess you want to do a good job of it.”

“I’d rather be parasailing. Or go to a concert. I heard Alice was great the other night.”

“Yeah. She was.” I study the baby’s body as Pentle takes some more shots. “If you had to do it, how do you think you’d make one of them be quiet?”

Pentle nods at my Grange. “I’d tell it to shut up.”

I grimace and holster the gun. “Sorry about that. It’s been a rough week. I’ve been up too long. Haven’t been sleeping.” *Too many dinosaurs looking at me.*

Pentle shrugs. “Whatever. It would have been better to get an intact image—” He snaps another picture. “—but even if she gets off this time, you got to figure in another year or two we’ll be busting down her door again. These girls have a damn high recidivism.” He takes another photo.

I go to a window and open it. Salt air flows in like fresh life, cleaning out the wet shit and body stinks. Probably the first fresh air the apartment’s had since the baby was born. Got to keep the windows closed or the neighbors might hear. Got to stay locked in. I wonder if she’s got a boyfriend, some rejoo dropout who’s going to show up with groceries and find her gone. Probably worth staking out the apartment, just to see. Keep the feminists off us for only bagging the women. I take a deep breath of sea air to get something fresh in my lungs, then light a cigarette and turn back to the room with its clutter and stink.

Recidivism. Fancy word for girls with a compulsion. Like a nithead or a coke freak, but weirder, more self-

destructive. At least being a junkie is fun. Who the hell chooses to live in dark apartments with shitty diapers, instant food, and no sleep for years on end? The whole breeding thing is an anachronism—twenty-first-century ritual torture we don't need anymore. But these girls keep trying to turn back the clock and pop out the pups, little lizard brains compelled to pass on some DNA. And there's a new batch every year, little burps of offspring cropping up here and there, the convulsions of a species trying to restart itself and get evolution rolling again, like we can't tell that we've already won.

* * *

I'm keying through the directory listings in my cruiser, fiddling through ads and keywords and search preferences, trying to zero in on something that doesn't come up no matter how I go after it.

Dinosaur. Toys. Stuffed animals.

Nothing. Nobody sells stuff like that dinosaur. But I've run into two of them now.

Monkeys scamper over the roof of my car. One of them lands on my forward impact rails and looks at me, yellow eyes wide, before another jumps it and they fall off the carbon petal pullout where I'm parked. Somewhere down below, suburban crumble keeps small herds of them. I remember when this area was tundra. It was a long time ago. I've talked to techs in the carbon sink business who talk about flipping the climate and building an icecap, but it's a slow process, an accretion of centuries most likely. Assuming I don't get shot by a crazy mom or a nithead, I'll see it happen. But for now, it's monkeys and jungle.

Forty-eight hours on call and two more cleanups and Alice wants me to take the weekend off and play, but I can't. I'm living on perkies, now. She feels good about her work, and wants me all day. We've done it before. Lying together, enjoying the silence and our own company, the pleasure of just being together with nothing needing to be done. There's something

wonderful about peace and silence and sea breezes twisting the curtains on the balcony.

I should go home. In a week, maybe, she'll be back at worrying, doubting herself, thrashing herself to work harder, to practice longer, to listen and feel and move inside of music that's so complex it might as well be the mathematics of chaos for anyone but her. But in reality, she has time. All the time in the world, and it makes me happy that she has it, that fifteen years isn't too long to prepare for something as heartstoppingly beautiful as what she did with Telogo.

I want to spend this time with her, to enjoy her bliss. But I don't want to go back and sleep with that dinosaur. I can't.

I call her from the cruiser. "Alice?" She looks out at me from the dash. "Are you coming home? I could meet you for lunch."

"Do you know where Maria got that dinosaur toy?"

She shrugs. "Maybe one of the shops on the Span? Why?"

"Just wondering." I pause. "Could you go get it for me?"

"Why? Why can't we do something fun? I'm on vacation. I just had my rejoy. I feel great. If you want to see my dinosaur, why don't you come home and get it?"

"Alice, please."

Scowling, she disappears from the screen. In a few minutes she's back, holding it up to the screen, shoving it in my face. I can feel my heart beating faster. It's cool in the cruiser, but I break into a sweat when I see the dinosaur on the screen. I clear my throat. "What's it say on the tag?"

Frowning, she turns the thing over, runs her fingers through its fur. She holds up the tag to the camera. It comes in blurry as the camera focuses, then it's there, clear and sharp. "*Ipswitch Collectibles.*"

Of course. Not a toy at all.

* * *

The woman who runs Ipswitch is old, as old a rejoy as I've ever met. The wrinkles on her face look so much like plastic that it's hard to tell what's real and what may be a mask. Her eyes are sunken little blue coals and her hair is so white I think of weddings and silk. She must have been ninety when rejoy hit.

Whatever the name of it, Ipswitch Collectibles is full of toys: dolls staring down from their racks, different faces and shapes and colors of hair, some of them soft, some of them made of hard bright plastics; tiny trains that run around miniature tracks and spout steam from their pinky-sized smokestacks; figurines from old-time movies and comics in action poses: Superman, Dolphina, Rex Mutinous. And, under a shelf of hand-carved wooden cars, a bin full of stuffed dinosaurs in green and blue and red. A tyrannosaurus rex. A pterodactyl. The brontosaurus.

"I've got a few stegosaurus in the back."

I look up, startled. The old woman watches me from behind the counter, a strange wrinkly buzzard, studying me with those sharp blue eyes, examining me like I'm carrion.

I pick out the brontosaurus and hold it up by the neck. "No. These're fine."

A bell rings. The shop's main doors to the concourse slide open. A woman steps through, hesitant. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail and she hasn't applied any makeup, and I can tell, even before she's all the way through the door, that she's one of them: a mom.

She hasn't been off rejoy long; she still looks fresh and young, despite the plumpness that comes with kids. She still looks good. But even without rejoy-collapse teltales, I know what she's done to herself. She's got the tired look of a person at war with the world. None of us look like that. No one has to look like that. Nitheads look less besieged. She's trying to act

like the person she was before, like the actress or the financial advisor or the code engineer or the biologist or the waitress or whatever, putting on clothes from her life before, that used to fit perfectly and don't now, making herself look like a person who walks without fear in the open air, and who doesn't now.

As she wanders the aisles, I spy a stain on her shoulder. It's small but obvious if you know what to look for, a light streak of green on a creamy blouse. The kind of thing that never happens to anyone except women with children. No matter how hard she tries, she doesn't fit anymore. Not with us.

Ipswitch Collectibles, like others of its ilk, is a trap door of sorts—a rabbit hole down into the land of illicit motherhood: the place of mashed pea stains, sound-proofed walls, and furtive forays into daylight for resupply and survival. If I stand here long enough, holding my magic brontosaurus by the neck, I'll slip through entirely and see their world as it overlaps with my own, see it with the queer double vision of these women who have learned to turn a drawer into a crib, and know how to fold and pin an old shirt into a diaper, and know that "*collectibles*" really means "*toys*."

The woman slips in the direction of the train sets. She chooses one and places it on the counter. It's a bright wooden thing, each car a different color, each connected by a magnet.

The old woman takes the train and says, "Oh yes, this is a fine piece. I had grandchildren who played with trains like this when they were just a little more than one."

The mother doesn't say anything, just holds out her wrist for the charge, her eyes down on the train. She fingers the blue and yellow engine nervously.

I come up to the counter. "I'll bet you sell a lot of them."

The mother jerks. For a second she looks like she'll run, but she steadies. The old woman's eyes turn on

me. Dark sunken blue cores, infinitely knowledgeable. "Not many. Not now. Not many collectors around for this sort of thing. Not now."

The transaction clears. The woman hustles out of the store, not looking back. I watch her go.

The old woman says, "That dinosaur is forty-seven, if you want it." Her tone says that she already knows I won't be buying.

I'm not a collector.

* * *

Nighttime. More dark-of-night encounters with illicit motherhood. The babies are everywhere, popping up like toadstools after rain. I can't keep up with them. I had to leave my last call before the cleanup crew came. Broke the chain of evidence, but what can you do? Everywhere I go, the baby world is ripping open around me, melons and seedpods and fertile wombs splitting open and vomiting babies onto the ground. We're drowning in babies. The jungle seems to seethe with them, the hidden women down in the suburb swelter, and as I shoot along the maglines on my way to bloody errands, the jungle's tendrils curl up from below, reaching out to me.

I've got the mom's address in my cruiser. She's hidden now. Back down the rabbit hole. Pulled the lid down tight over her head. Lying low with her brood, reconnected with the underground of women who have all decided to kill themselves for the sake of squeezing out pups. Back in the swelter of locked doors and poopy diapers amongst the sorority who give train sets to little creatures who actually play with them instead of putting them on an end table and making you look at them every damn day ...

The woman. The *collector*. I've been holding off on hitting her. It doesn't seem fair. It seems like I should wait for her to make her mistake before I pop her kids. But knowing that she's out there tickles my mind. I

catch myself again and again, reaching to key in the homing on her address.

But then another call comes, another cleanup, and I let myself pretend I don't know about her, that I haven't perforated her hidey-hole and can now peer in on her whenever I like. The woman we don't know about—yet. Who hasn't made a mistake—yet. Instead I barrel down the rails to another call, slicing through jungle overstory where it impinges around the tracks, blasting toward another woman's destiny who was less lucky and less clever than the one who likes to collect. And these other women hold me for a little while. But in the end, parked on the edge of the sea, with monkeys screeching from the jungle and rain spackling my windshield, I punch in the collector's address.

I'll just drive by.

* * *

It could have been a rich house, before carbon sequestration. Before we all climbed into the bright air of the spires and superclusters. But now it exists at the very edge of what is left of suburbs. I'm surprised it even has electric or any services running to it at all. The jungle surrounds it, envelopes it. The road to it, off the maglines and off the maintenance routes, is heaved and split and perforated with encroaching trees. She's smart. She's as close to wilderness as it is possible to live. Beyond is only shadow tangle and green darkness. Monkeys scamper away from the spray of my headlights. The houses around her have already been abandoned. Any day now, they'll stop serving this area entirely. In another couple years, this portion will be completely overgrown. We'll cut off services and the last of the spires will go online and the jungle will swallow this place completely.

I sit outside the house for a while, looking at it. She's a smart one. To live this far out. No neighbors to hear the screaming. But if I think about it, she would have been smarter to move into the jungle entirely, and live

with all the other monkeys that just can't keep themselves from breeding. I guess at the end of the day, even these crazy ladies are still human. They can't leave civilization totally behind. Or don't know how, anyway.

I get out of my car, pull my Grange, and hit the door.

As I slam through, she looks up from where she sits at her kitchen table. She isn't even surprised. A little bit of her seems to deflate, and that's all. Like she knew it was going to happen all along. Like I said: a smart one.

A kid runs in from the other room, attracted by the noise of me coming through the door. Maybe one and a half or two years old. It stops and stares, little tow-headed thing, its hair already getting long like hers. We stare at each other. Then it turns and scrambles into its mother's lap.

The woman closes her eyes. "Go on, then. Do it."

I point my Grange, my 12mm hand cannon. Zero in on the kid. The lady wraps her arms around it. It's not a clear shot. It'll rip right through and take out the mom. I angle differently, looking for the shot. Nothing.

She opens her eyes. "What are you waiting for?"

We stare at each other. "I saw you in the toy store. A couple days ago."

She closes her eyes again, regretful, understanding her mistake. She doesn't let go of the kid. I could just take it out of her arms, throw it on the floor and shoot it. But I don't. Her eyes are still closed.

"Why do you do it?" I ask.

Her eyes open again. She's confused. I'm breaking the script. She's mapped this out in her own mind. Probably a thousand times. Had to. Had to know this day would be coming. But here I am, all alone, and her kid's not dead yet. And I keep asking her questions. "Why do you keep having these kids?"

She just stares at me. The kid squirms around on her and tries to start nursing. She lifts her blouse a little and the kid dives under. I can see the hanging bulges

of the lady's breasts, these heavy swinging mammaries, so much larger than I remember them from the store when they were hidden under bra and blouse. They sag while the kid sucks. The woman just stares at me. She's on some kind of autopilot, feeding the kid. Last meal.

I take my hat off and put it on the table and sit. I put my Grange down, too. It just doesn't seem right to blow the sucker away while it's nursing. I take out a cigarette and light it. Take a drag. The woman watches me the way anyone watches a predator. I take another drag on my cigarette and offer it to her.

"Smoke?"

"I don't." She jerks her head toward her kid. I nod.

"Ah. Right. Bad for the new lungs. I heard that, once. Can't remember where." I grin. "Can't remember when."

She stares at me. "What are you waiting for?"

I look down at my pistol, lying on the table. The heavy machine weight of slugs and steel, a monster weapon. Grange 12mm Recoilless Hand Cannon. Standard issue. Stop a nitfitter in his tracks. Take out the whole damn heart if you hit them right. Pulverize a baby. "You had to stop taking rejoy to have the kid, right?"

She shrugs. "It's just an additive. They don't have to make rejoy that way."

"But otherwise we'd have a big damn population problem, wouldn't we?"

She shrugs again.

The gun sits on the table between us. Her eyes flick toward the gun, then to me, then back to the gun. I take a drag on the cigarette. I can tell what she's thinking, looking at that big old steel hand cannon on her table. It's way out of her reach, but she's desperate, so it looks a lot closer to her, almost close enough. Almost.

Her eyes go back up to me. "Why don't you just do it? Get it over with?"

It's my turn to shrug. I don't really have an answer. I should be taking pictures and securing her in the car, and popping the kid, and calling in the cleanup squad, but here we sit. She's got tears in her eyes. I watch her cry. Mammaries and fatty limbs and a frightening sort of wisdom, maybe coming from knowing that she won't last forever. A contrast to Alice with her smooth smooth skin and high bright breasts. This woman is fecund. Hips and breasts and belly fertile, surrounded by her messy kitchen, the jungle outside. The soil of life. She seems settled in all of this, a damp Gaia creature.

A dinosaur.

I should be cuffing her. I've got her and her kid. I should be shooting the kid. But I don't. Instead, I've got a hard-on. She's not beautiful exactly, but I've got a hard-on. She sags, she's round, she's breasty and hippy and sloppy; I can barely sit because my pants are so tight. I try not to stare at the kid nursing. At her exposed breasts. I take another drag on my cigarette. "You know, I've been doing this job for a long time."

She stares at me dully, doesn't say anything.

"I've always wanted to know why you women do this." I nod at the kid. It's come off her breast, and now the whole thing is exposed, this huge sagging thing with its heavy nipple. She doesn't cover up. When I look up, she's studying me, seeing me looking at her breast. The kid scrambles down and watches me, too, solemn-eyed. I wonder if it can feel the tension in the room. If it knows what's coming. "Why the kid? Really. Why?"

She purses her lips. I think I can see anger in the tightening of her teary eyes, anger that I'm playing with her. That I'm sitting here, talking to her with my Grange on her grimy table, but then her eyes go down to that gun and I can almost see the gears clicking. The calculations. The she-wolf gathering herself.

She sighs and scoots her chair forward. "I just wanted one. Ever since I was a little girl."

“Play with dolls, all that? *Collectibles?*”

She shrugs. “I guess.” She pauses. Eyes back to the gun. “Yeah. I guess I did. I had a little plastic doll, and I used to dress it up. And I’d play tea with it. You know, we’d make tea, and then I’d pour some on her face, to make her drink. It wasn’t a great doll. Voice input, but not much repertoire. My parents weren’t rich. ‘Let’s go shopping.’ ‘*Okay, for what?*’ ‘For watches.’ ‘*I love watches.*’ Simple. Like that. But I liked it. And then one day I called her my baby. I don’t know why. I did, though, and the doll said, ‘*I love you mommy.*’”

Her eyes turn wet as she speaks. “And I just knew I wanted to have a baby. I played with her all the time, and she’d pretend she was my baby, and then my mother caught us doing it and said I was a stupid girl, and I shouldn’t talk that way, girls didn’t have babies anymore, and she took the doll away.”

The kid is down on the floor, shoving blocks under the table. Stacking and unstacking. It catches sight of me. It’s got blue eyes and a shy smile. I get a twitch of it, again, and then it scrambles up off the floor, and buries its face in its mother’s breasts, hiding. It peeks out at me, and giggles and hides again.

I nod at the kid. “Who’s the dad?”

Stone cold face. “I don’t know. I got a sample shipped from a guy I found online. We didn’t want to meet. I erased everything about him as soon as I got the sample.”

“Too bad. Things would have been better if you’d kept in touch.”

“Better for you.”

“That’s what I said.” I notice that the ash on my cigarette has gotten long, a thin gray penis hanging limp off the end of my smoke. I give it a twitch and it falls. “I still can’t get over the rejuo part.”

Inexplicably, she laughs. Brightens even. “Why? Because I’m not so in love with myself that I just want to live forever and ever?”

“What were you going to do? Keep it in the house until—”

“Her,” she interrupts suddenly. “Keep *her* in the house. *She* is a girl and *her* name is Melanie.”

At her name, the kid looks over at me. She sees my hat on the table and grabs it. Then climbs down off her mother’s lap and carries it over to me. She holds it out to me, arms fully extended, an offering. I try to take it but she pulls the hat away.

“She wants to put it on your head.”

I look at the lady, confused. She’s smiling slightly, sadly. “It’s a game she plays. She likes to put hats on my head.”

I look at the girl again. She’s getting antsy, holding the hat. She makes little grunts of meaning at me and waves the hat invitingly. I lean down. The girl puts the hat on my head, and beams. I sit up and set it more firmly.

“You’re smiling,” she says.

I look up at her. “She’s cute.”

“You like her, don’t you?”

I look at the girl again, thinking. “Can’t say. I’ve never really looked at them before.”

“Liar.”

My cigarette is dead. I stub it out on the kitchen table. She watches me do it, frowning, pissed off that I’m messing up her messy table, maybe, but then she seems to remember the gun. And I do, too. A chill runs up my spine. For a moment, when I leaned down to the girl, I’d forgotten about it. I could be dead, right now. Funny how we forget and remember and forget these things. Both of us. Me and the lady. One minute we’re having a conversation, the next we’re waiting for the killing to start.

This lady seems like she would have been a nice date. She’s got spunk. You can tell that. It almost comes out before she remembers the gun. You can watch it flicker back and forth. She’s one person, then

another person: alive, thinking, remembering, then bang, she's sitting in a kitchen full of crusty dishes, coffee rings on her countertop and a cop with a hand cannon sitting at the kitchen table.

I spark up another cigarette. "Don't you miss the rejoy?"

She looks down at her daughter, holds out her arms. "No. Not a bit." The girl climbs back onto her mother's lap.

I let the smoke curl out of my mouth. "But there's no way you were going to get away with this. It's insane. You have to drop off of rejoy; you have to find a sperm donor who's willing to drop off, too, so two people kill themselves for a kid; you've got to birth the kid alone, and then you've got to keep it hidden, and then you'd eventually need an ID card so you could get it started on rejoy, because nobody's going to dose an undocumented patient, and you've got to know that none of this would ever work. But here you are."

She scowls at me. "I could have done it."

"You didn't."

Bang. She's back in the kitchen again. She slumps in her chair, holding the kid. "So why don't you just hurry up and do it?"

I shrug. "I was just curious about what you breeders are thinking."

She looks at me, hard. Angry. "You know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking we need something new. I've been alive for one hundred and eighteen years and I'm thinking that it's not just about me. I'm thinking I want a baby and I want to see what she sees today when she wakes up and what she'll find and see that I've never seen before because that's new. Finally, something new. I love seeing things through her little eyes and not through dead eyes like yours."

"I don't have dead eyes."

"Look in the mirror. You've all got dead eyes."

“I’m a hundred and fifty and I feel just as good as I did the day I went on.”

“I’ll bet you can’t even remember. No one remembers.” Her eyes are on the gun again, but they come up off it to look at me. “But I do. Now. And it’s better this way. A thousand times better than living forever.”

I make a face. “Live through your kid and all that?”

“You wouldn’t understand. None of you would.”

I look away. I don’t know why. I’m the one with the gun. I’m running everything, but she’s looking at me, and something gets tight inside me when she says that. If I was imaginative, I’d say it was some little bit of old primal monkey trying to drag itself out of the muck and make itself heard. Some bit of the critter we were before. I look at the kid—the girl—and she’s looking back at me. I wonder if they all do the trick with the hat, or if this one’s special somehow. If they all like to put hats on their killers’ heads. She smiles at me and ducks her head back under her mother’s arm. The woman’s got her eyes on my gun.

“You want to shoot me?” I ask.

Her eyes come up. “No.”

I smile slightly. “Come on. Be honest.”

Her eyes narrow. “I’d blow your head off if I could.”

Suddenly I’m tired. I don’t care anymore. I’m sick of the dirty kitchen and the dark rooms and the smell of dirty makeshift diapers. I give the Grange a push, shove it closer to her. “Go ahead. You going to kill an old life so you can save one that isn’t even going to last? I’m going to live forever, and that little girl won’t last longer than seventy years even if she’s lucky—which she won’t be—and you’re practically already dead. But you want to waste my life?” I feel like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff. Possibility seethes around me. “Give it a shot.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m giving you your shot. You want to try for it? This is your chance.” I shove the Grange a little closer, baiting her. I’m tingling all over. My head feels light, almost dizzy. Adrenaline rushes through me. I push the Grange even closer to her, suddenly not even sure if I’ll fight her for the gun, or if I’ll just let her have it. “This is your chance.”

She doesn’t give a warning.

She flings herself across the table. Her kid flies out of her arms. Her fingers touch the gun at the same time as I yank it out of reach. She lunges again, clawing across the table. I jump back, knocking over my chair. I step out of range. She stretches toward the gun, fingers wide and grasping, desperate still, even though she knows she’s already lost. I point the gun at her.

She stares at me, then puts her head down on the table and sobs. The girl is crying too. She sits bawling on the floor, her little face screwed up and red, crying along with her mother who’s given everything in that one run at my gun: all her hopes and years of hidden dedication, all her need to protect her progeny, everything. And now she lies sprawled on a dirty table and cries while her daughter howls from the floor. The girl keeps screaming and screaming.

I sight the Grange on the girl. She’s exposed, now. She’s squalling and holding her hands out to her mother, but she doesn’t get up. She just holds out her hands, waiting to be picked up and held by a lady who doesn’t have anything left to give. She doesn’t notice me or the gun.

One quick shot and she’s gone, paint hole in the forehead and brains on the wall just like spaghetti and the crying’s over and all that’s left is gunpowder burn and cleanup calls.

But I don’t fire.

Instead, I holster my Grange and walk out the door, leaving them to their crying and their grime and their lives.

It's raining again, outside. Thick ropes of water spout off the eaves and spatter the ground. All around me the jungle seethes with the chatter of monkeys. I pull up my collar and resettle my hat. Behind me, I can barely hear the crying anymore.

Maybe they'll make it. Anything is possible. Maybe the kid will make it to eighteen, get some black market rejuv and live to be a hundred and fifty. More likely, in six months, or a year, or two years, or ten, a cop will bust down the door and pop the kid. But it won't be me.

I run for my cruiser, splashing through mud and vines and wet. And for the first time in a long time, the rain feels new.

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A Place Where Stars Should Not Be

DAVID DALGLISH

“How many in there?” Arn asked.

“We can’t say for certain,” the Uplifted priest beside Arn said. He wore traditional crimson robes, and from around his neck hung an emblem bearing the Everlorn Empire’s symbol, a pair of red hands clasped in prayer. Together they peered into the cave, whose entrance was carved with dozens of markings in a language too old and foreign for Arn to read. “But the squad we sent in has not yet returned, and I fear for their survival.”

“They are almost certainly dead,” said Arn’s older brother, Dario. He crossed the yellow grass to join them at the cave entrance. Like Arn, he wore a heavy set of white plate mail. The two were paragons of Everlorn, the blessed warriors who led the vanguard against the heathen gods enslaving various nations upon the continent of Gadir. They bore similar short cuts of dark hair, their skin deeply tanned from the harsh sun that shone upon the river-filled nation of Onleda.

“How can you be certain?” the priest asked.

“Because I’ve been chatting with the prisoners you captured. Two of Lorka’s high priests are down there. A few soldiers don’t stand a chance.”

Arn crossed his arms with a rattle of plate mail. Lorka was one of Onleda’s three ruling gods. Before launching their current campaign to liberate her people, the Uplifted priests had lectured the

accompanying paragons on the land's gods, geography, and traditions.

"Lorka?" Arn asked. "He's their god of the sky and stars. Why would his high priests hide in a cave? Wouldn't they be weaker there?"

Dario smacked him on the shoulder.

"You seek wisdom and logic in the actions of heathens. Don't expect a good answer. Now grab a torch and follow me. Our soldiers may not be dead, but instead, held prisoner. If we hurry, we might save a few lives."

* * *

The cave had been worked to form a tunnel, its ceiling chipped away and widened in places where it might have closed in uncomfortably tight. Dario led the way, with Arn following behind. Each held a torch in a gauntleted hand. The brothers were both paragons of fists, meaning that unlike their brethren who wielded enormous swords, axes, and shields, they battled up close with gauntlets crafted of the finest steel and then blessed with the prayers of a hundred priests. A cruder, simpler instrument of death, but still perfectly capable of crushing the life from a heathen god.

"Why would the priests hide in here instead of helping defend Vulnae?" Arn asked as they walked, referring to Onleda's capital.

"Maybe because they know it will be an easy victory," Dario said. "Never underestimate a heathen's cowardice, little brother."

The ground sloped steeper and steeper down, and despite the depth, the darkness never felt oppressive.

"Something's off," Arn said, eyeing the cave walls. "The torches ... I don't think we need them."

Dario hesitated, and after a brief inspection, he used his fist to snuff the torch.

"I think you're right."

Arn mimicked the act, which should have plunged them into darkness. Instead, the stone glowed with a

faint, ethereal light. There was no apparent source, no lantern, not even a strange fungus Arn knew could sometimes illuminate the deep areas of the world. The softness of the light, its gentleness, it reminded him of

...

“Starlight,” Arn said. “The cave is lit with starlight.”

Dario nodded in agreement. He clacked his gauntlets together.

“This place is heavy with heathen magic. Stay on your guard.”

The tunnel curled a hard right and widened considerably, the floor growing more uneven the deeper they went. In the distance, Arn heard the faint trickle of running water. And in front of them, standing shocked still, was a pale-skinned man in trousers and a half-robe. He clutched a short, thick knife in one hand. Dario paused, blocking Arn’s way, as they stared at one another.

The stranger pointed with the knife.

“Shit.”

He immediately turned and fled deeper into the cave system, eliciting a laugh from Arn’s older brother.

“Towards to the last,” he said and sprinted in chase.

“Wait,” Arn said, racing after. “It could be ...”

Another hard turn, and then the tunnel became a cavern, the ceiling lined with stalactites. Beads of water dripped from their tips, which glistened in the unnatural light like faint stars. The cavern narrowed again at the far end, leading to a second tunnel. The man they chased fled for it, Dario in tow and easily gaining ground.

He would have caught him had the stone beneath him not cracked, then gave way completely. What had been a wide cavern was now a pit, and Dario tumbled through the false floor to a lower passageway. He landed with a splash within ankle-deep water. Four waiting men in matching gray trousers and shirts

assaulted him with long, curving knives, cries of 'Lorka' and 'Onleda' on their lips.

Arn pulled up shy of the pit, but before he could even think to leap to Dario's aid, two of the ambushers were dead, their heads crushed in with a single blow from his brother's gauntlets.

"Give chase!" Dario shouted up at him as the other two attackers retreated. "I'll check this tunnel for the priests."

Arn leaped over the pit, easily clearing it with the god-blessed strength of his legs. The eyes of the man they'd followed widened with panic. Instead of fighting like his brethren below, he quickly turned and fled.

Damn coward, thought Arn as he raced through the cave tunnel. Five steps were all it took to catch him. The man spun at the last moment, his dagger up and cutting. It bounced uselessly off Arn's plate mail. Arn didn't bother hitting him with his gauntlets. A single shove slammed the man against the cave wall, breaking bones and cracking his skull. His body went limp, and he gurgled something unintelligible as he collapsed.

Arn stepped over him, continuing through this strange starlit cave beneath the world.

"Just where were you going?" he wondered aloud.

The tunnel widened, becoming not a tunnel at all but a massive cavern, the ceiling lined with stalactites the color of amber hanging low like teeth, and matching stalagmites grasping up toward them, not quite able to reach. The bodies of four dead soldiers lay in a pool of blood at the entrance, their throats cut. Arn offered them a silent prayer as he continued along a cleared pathway leading to the far end of the cave. There the ground flattened considerably, and the ceiling vaulted dozens of feet higher.

Within that clearing awaited the two high priests of Lorka, Onleda's god of the sky and stars.

The pair wore black robes cinched at the waist with silver belts. The man knelt holding the woman, and by the way she lay in his arms, her legs sprawled behind her and unmoving, Arn wondered if she was paralyzed or if her legs were broken. Her face was covered with a thick black blindfold, her arms heavily tattooed with looping lines vaguely resembling feathers. The man bore no such tattoos. Instead, he clutched a knife with an obsidian hilt carved like a falcon claw.

"A paragon has come for us," the man told the blindfolded woman. She tilted her head toward him and her fingers traced his chin.

"Do it, Emil, or they'll kill us both."

The man hesitated.

"Ada, please..."

"Then give me the knife. If you lack the strength, I will do what must be done."

Arn exited the path through the stalagmites, taking slow, cautious steps to not startle the pair.

"There's no reason to do anything rash," Arn said. He did not consider eloquence or diplomacy to be skills of his, and he struggled for the proper words. "No time is too late to repent and turn to our God-Incarnate. He will accept you for all your faults and failures. Whatever act, whatever heathen ritual you seek to perform, abandon now. You can still save your lives, if not your souls."

Emil glared back in response to the offer. He was much younger than Arn expected. Barely into his twentieth year, by Arn's estimation. Uneven blond stubble marked his chin. His blue eyes gleamed in the unnatural light.

"No, Ada," he said. "For once, I can be strong enough for you."

Arn braced his legs for a lunge. Whatever they were planning, he could end it here and now if he was fast enough. Two quick punches would cave in both of their skulls.

His lunge halted when Emil leaned down and kissed Ada. It was so slow, so surprisingly gentle. The young priest of Lorka wept as she returned the kiss. Her fingers drifted to his wrist, helping him even then. It was during this moment of Arn's awkward hesitation that Emil plunged the dagger into Ada's breast. Arn shouted in protest, but there was no stopping this now.

The dagger tore low, opening her from breastbone to sternum. Ada screamed. Emil sobbed.

Slowly, tenderly, Emil lowered her to the ground. Blood soaked his hands and robe. He turned to Arn, hate and fury deeply etched upon his young face.

"The sky will have you," he said and lifted a bloodstained hand. "For you do not deserve to walk this earth, you wretch of a foreign empire. We want not your salvation, only your slaughter."

Ada's body exploded into dust and light. Lorka had come to answer his prayer, and a falcon cry marked the arrival of his power. The dust and light hardened, becoming stars that burned with a cold fury. They swirled around Emil, a lustrous tornado, and then with a wave of the priest's hand, they flew.

Arn's armor was heavy plate and blessed with a thousand prayers of priests loyal to Everlorn's God-Incarnate. It could withstand arrows shot from the mightiest of longbows but against these stars, it was but brittle wood. He gasped as they battered his body, his armor crumpling inward as he staggered on unsteady feet. More stars slashed across his body, bleeding him, burning him. He managed only two steps into that torrent before they curled back like a flock of birds to swirl once more around the furious priest.

"Is this all?" Emil asked. "Is this the best your empire offers?"

Arn braced himself for another attack. He saw no way to reach Emil without enduring the rage of the stars that protected him. Perhaps if he could move fast enough ...

In came the wave of stars, and though it felt pointless, Arn crossed his arms and prepared for the hit.

“What madness is this?” Dario shouted, leaping in front, and accepting the barrage meant for Arn. He glared back at him, forcing out words even as he grimaced against the pain. “Never hesitate. It will be your death.”

The stars retreated, and in their absence, Dario burst into motion. He sprinted straight for Emil, and though his speed was great, he could not outrun the false stars themselves. They battered him, denting his plate mail, splitting his lip, and twisting his legs so he faltered. In the momentary stumble, the stars gathered back together, becoming a feather thrice Dario’s size. A single swipe and it blasted Dario through the air. He flew across the cavern, far off the path, and careened through the stalagmites and stalactites, shattering them beneath his tremendous weight.

Seeing his brother thrown aside finally spurred Arn into action. He crossed his arms over his face and charged, legs churning. Let the false stars slam his armor and tear his flesh, he would still find victory this day. The thunderous whirl heightened, the wind billowing directly against him. Buildings might crumble against such power, but Arn was a paragon of Everlorn, and he would not be stopped. One leg in front of the other. Charge the heathen. Fight the magic born of blood sacrifice and slaughter.

The second cry of a falcon made Arn lower his arms to assess the coming threat. The stars had gathered together, shaping into what could only be an image of Lorka himself. The falcon dove toward him, thrice Arn’s size, the wings spreading the width of the cavern. Four human arms grew from its breast, each clutching a shimmering collection of light and stars. The falcon’s beak was open wide, shrieking, biting, eager, and hungry.

I am the might of God-Incarnate, Arn prayed. I am the hand of the righteous. I shall not be broken.

Golden light burned across his body, granting him the protection of his God-Incarnate. Arn braced, reared back, and plunged into that starry image's throat with his fist leading. The stars crashed across his armor, some denting, others breaking through to sizzle his flesh, but he would not be stopped. Before him, all other gods must break.

Emil stood on the other side of the image of Lorka, his hands lifted skyward, an unceasing prayer on his lips. Arn burst through the stars, bloody and ragged and furious, and slammed his fist right into Emil's chest. The man's ribcage caved inward. Blood shot from his mouth as he doubled over, finally ending his prayer. His knees went weak. He hitched, unable to breathe, then collapsed onto his back and lay still.

With Emil's death, the magic ceased. The whirlwind of stars blinked away into nothing. With it went the roar of that unnatural wind and all its accompanying light. The dark silence was strange and oppressive.

"Where's the other?" Dario asked. His brother extricated himself from the stalagmites and was busy wiping rubble from his armor. Despite the savagery of the blow he'd received, he seemed mostly together. Such was the benefit of a paragon blessing. "There were supposed to be two of them."

"Sacrificed," Arn said, still trying to make sense of the battle. His heart pounded, and the excitement of conflict slowly faded from his veins. "He ... he sacrificed her to create that ... storm."

His brother glared at Emil's corpse and shook his head.

"Sick bastards," Dario said. He wiped blood from his cut lip and then spat a glob at his feet. "The sooner we free Onleda's people, the better."

"What do we do with the body?"

“Our priests say they practice sky burial, so leave him here beneath the stone. A fitting fate, wouldn’t you agree?”

Arn looked at the corpse, felt blood trickle down his arms and chest.

“Yeah,” he said, following his brother out from the cavern. “I suppose so.”

* * *

Once night had fallen and the moon was high, Arn exited his tent, offered a greeting to the soldiers keeping watch at the outer edge of the encampment, and returned to the cave. No armor. No gauntlets. There would be no need for either. He wore trousers and a plain leather coat. If not for his muscular bulk, he could pass for any wandering stranger.

Alone, he passed through dark tunnels, the ethereal light that had once pulsed through their stone now faded. It was easy enough to leap over the pit. Harder was convincing himself he returned to the cave for justified reasons.

Everyone deserves a burial, he told himself. A poor lie. It would fool no one, not even himself, but he told it anyway. The lie gave him the flimsiest of excuses to keep his feet moving, to walk the carved pathways to the inner chamber. The ground sloped steeper. The air grew colder.

Alone, he approached where the two priests of Lorka had held their heretical sacrifice. What once had been well-lit was now shadowed from the light of his torch and was meager by comparison. So close now. Into the widening tunnel leading into the massive cavern. Through the stalagmites, toward the waiting body.

It’s not too late to turn around.

Was he afraid?

Yes.

He was.

Alone, Arn returned to a place where stars should not be. Emil's body lay in the circular clearing at the heart of the cavern. 'A fitting fate,' his brother had claimed. Perhaps, but Arn liked to believe they were better than that. It was the excuse that guided him here, though he did not first go to the body. Instead, he walked a circle around it, his torch raised and his eyes to the slick stone above.

No stars. No lights. Nothing twinkled or sparkled unnaturally. There was only the glow of his torch and the faint shadows cast across the uneven surface.

"Of course not," Arn said, yet he was apprehensive, nonetheless. He turned to the body. Emil lay on his back, his chest a concave mess. His mouth gaped in a forever scream. His eyes were open, seeing nothing. His arm, though, how had he not noticed it before? The priest's hand was lifted toward the ceiling, palm open. The limb was locked rigidly in death. Arn stood over him, and he looked once more to the ceiling.

"What were you hoping for?" he asked. "What did you think awaited you?"

There was no salvation for the heathens. Even their eternities would crumble in time, when the mortal world reached its end and the God-Incarnate launched his Epochal War to overthrow the various heavens and hells the heathen gods lorded over. Arn shouldn't care for their rituals. He shouldn't care the body would rot, denied the sky. But he did.

"You were a right bastard," Arn said. "But you still deserved better than this. Let's get you outside."

Arn bent beside the body and slid his free hand beneath to lift it. The moment his fingers made contact, the air chilled. The corpse trembled. Arn retreated, confused, and thinking he had sprung one last macabre trap. Confusion turned to fear when the corpse's rib cage opened like a grotesque flower, only no blood or organs spewed forth. Instead, a substance

swirled into the air like white sand or powder caught on an unfelt wind.

His hands shook. His breath caught in his throat. His understanding of the world quivered on unsteady foundations.

No. Not sand.

Arn's torch flickered and died. No natural light would despoil this moment.

The powder unleashed into a sparkling storm. The particles gathered together, growing in density, growing brighter. Stars, first dozens, then hundreds, flew about the cavern. Blue-white tails faded behind them. Though he felt no wind, he heard it roaring in his ears like a sudden, ferocious storm.

Arn crossed his arms and braced for the worst as they whirled passed him, but they did not cut. They veered about as if containing sentience of their own. They swirled higher, higher, tightening into a singular funnel. The roaring wind deepened. The ground cracked, and Arn feared the entire cavern system would soon tremble before this unleashed power of Onleda's god of sky and stars. The brightness grew, the stars now a singular mass of light, and then they exploded outward.

The roar ceased. The movement ended. Arn lowered his arms, and his mouth fell open in the silence. The stars expanded outward to the farthest reaches of the cavern. They twinkled in replication of a true night sky, and sure enough, Arn could make out the many constellations that guided their ships and caravans during their marches across the continent. He turned in place, taking in the wonder. Here, the Wanderer, there, the Navigator. The cave itself receded away, becoming darkness as if the stone had surrendered to Lorka's desires. These stars, these luminous things that had torn Arn's flesh and made a mockery of his armor, they were so beautiful in repose.

Curiosity overtook him, and despite the risk, he reached out a hand and caught the nearest star as if it were a firefly. The moment his fist closed around it he felt sweeping vertigo, blacking out his vision. New sights replaced it, that of Emil and Ada amid a heavily trafficked seaside market. The cool cave became the scent of fish and salt, the silence of the cave became the murmur of a crowd, but piercing through it all was Ada's laughter, her green eyes twinkling at a joke that Emil had made.

The star slipped through his fingers, leaving behind only a fading warmth. Arn watched it rise, his throat tightening. These stars. These memories. They were wondrous.

A low, soft sigh escaped the lips of the corpse. The hand, all its skin and muscle and bone, dissolved into the faintest light that drifted upward, to blink out into nothing. The dissolution continued, traveling down Emil's arm, past the crook of his elbow, and to his chest. Everything Emil had ever been, his flesh, even his clothes, crumbled away.

The piercing keen of a falcon marked its end. The stars faded. The stone returned. Complete darkness overwhelmed Arn, lasting but a moment before his torch sputtered back to life where he'd dropped it. He gasped in a breath. It felt like waking from a dream. He wiped his face, found tears.

"A burial for your beloved," he whispered, wondering if Lorka were listening. "Even those lost beneath the stone."

Arn carried no body, but his arms sagged and his movements were heavier.

"Is everything well, paragon?" one of the two soldiers keeping watch asked him upon his return to the encampment.

"As can be," Arn muttered and made for his tent.

Tomorrow, they would cross the miles of muddy fields between them and the capital city of Vulnae. This

particular forward encampment was but a sliver of their total forces. Among their number were fifty thousand footmen, ten thousand archers, two hundred Uplifted priests, and a vanguard of twenty paragons. It was a force that had slain gods and conquered dozens of nations. It was a might never before defeated in the Everlorn Empire's glorious history.

'An easy victory,' Dario had promised, but now Arn stared at the sky, sleep escaping him, and waited for the stars to fall.

David Dalglish graduated from Missouri Southern State University in 2006 with a degree in Mathematics. He's self-published over fifteen novels, as well as had thirteen books traditionally published through Orbit Books.

He also has a lovely wife and three beautiful daughters, with all four being far better than he deserves.

An Interview with Gourav Mohanty

MIHIR WANCHOO

Gourav Mohanty has the tagline of being India's first traditionally published Grimdark author. Earlier this year, he published his epic grimdark fantasy debut *Sons of Darkness*. With an eclectic background of being a lawsuit by profession, a comic by evening and a writer by choice, he seems to be trailblazing his path across the fantasy genre.

I was lucky enough to be able to chat with him about how he got started writing, the world that he has created in the Raag Of Rta series and his love for darkness of the written word.

[MW] Welcome to *Grimdark Magazine*, Gourav, Your debut novel *Sons Of Darkness* was published in June of 2022. Before we talk about the book though, can you tell us a bit more about yourself, including when you knew you wanted to be a writer, and why you write?

[GM] Thank you for having me, *Grimdark Magazine*.

I am a lawyer by profession, and was toiling away in the mines of a law firm for five years in Mumbai before *Sons of Darkness* was published. I am currently on sabbatical to experiment with standup comedy and public policy.

I have always been guided by my golden compass of bucketlists, and in my final year of law school, ticked one off by writing a chapter I had always wanted to read but had not found in any book. The desire was to

read a Game of Throne-sque chapter set in an Indian fantasy world.

I still remember my first chapter—it was an imaginary sword duel between a male and female character from Vedic mythology. The chapter turned out alright, and soon, the threads of a story began to knit a sock in my head. With the pressures of adulting taking over once I graduated, ‘*knitting socks*’ became my way to escape and immerse in a parallel world after office-hours. Before I knew it, the dust of my dreams had crystallized into a paperback.

As to the question of why I write—I write because it brings me sheer joy. I like the journeys the characters conjured by my creativity and by our mythology take in my head, and writing allows me to share the joys of my twisted imagination with others.

[MW] Could you elaborate more on the journey you went through in finding a publisher, and what you think the publisher saw in your book?

[GM] Finding a publisher was the worst part of writing to be honest. In India, it is far worse—for the fantasy genre doesn’t really exist in India despite having a lot of readers. Publishers here are wary of word count like the plague unless it is a nonfiction book about a plague.

I had three publishers reject me because I refused their suggestion of splitting my book into half. The quest was tough but then I am glad it took the time it did. For it allowed me to add finishing touches to the book without which I am sure the book would be shite.

I think when it comes to Leadstart—which had prior experience with mythological retellings—what worked was that they called me for a meeting and heard what I had to say. My Editor later confided in me that the zeal with which I spoke of fantasy as a genre allowed me to paint rather than show my vision to them, and

well, impress them. Convincing them to gamble on a chonky book was tough but my editor was my biggest champion. She saw, and I quote “*how revolutionary this book will be in India*” for Leadstart and that helped the book tide over the wordcount trap.

[MW] How does the tagline of being India’s first traditionally published grimdark author feel?

[GM] It feels like I have secured a VIP gate pass to Valhalla.

Let me try Neil Armstrong-ing this answer further by saying I hope this one small step for Grimdark turns out to be a giant leap for the fantasy genre in India. The genre as a whole is in dire need of resurrection in India, which is tragic considering I believe India to be the birthplace of the genre. The awareness that *Sons Of Darkness* has a chance to breathe new life into this ancient legacy—well, I feel the same nervousness Melisandre must’ve when they asked her to revive Jon Snow. Here’s hoping it works out for me the way it worked out for her.

[MW] Besides the exciting action sequences and the authentic characterization, what I liked best about your books was the mythology. For the readers who might not know about Indian mythological epics or the Mahabharata, how can non-Indian readers learn/know more about this rich story?

[GM] Thank you so much. While I deliberately crafted the book in way to appeal equally to all readers, their knowledge of Vedic mythology notwithstanding—I believe that *Sons Of Darkness* will definitely serve as a window to the wonderful world of Indian lore.

Take *Song of Achilles* for example—it sparked an interest in Greek mythology, and new readers found their way through it to the *Mythos Series* by Stephen

Fry and *Women of Troy* by Pat Barker. The Mahabharata is enormous, and can make Sanderson's books resemble tiny comics. But I also fashion mythology enthusiasts as deep-sea divers—be it through Wiki or modern renderings, they will find a way to learn about our rich mythology. One of the most recent examples I can give is that of Petrik Leo, a famous booktuber, who so kindly reviewed *Sons of Darkness*, is now reading a copy of the *Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering* by Ramesh Menon.

[MW] What drew you to the epic of Mahabharata for you to "... take the wonderful characters of the Mahabharata and tossed them into a parallel dimension that was pervasively bleak and nihilistic"?

[GM] The reading of *Mahabharata* is a quintessential Indian tradition. The *Mahabharata* is akin to *Moby Dick*—a classic read to Indian children, sometimes even as a story-lullaby by their grandmothers. While the original epic is lauded across the world as a source of what is *dharma* (righteous code of conduct) in a world filled with evil, I believe its timelessness lies in the grey shades that hues all its characters. This is unusual for a holy text from that ancient period which firmly believed in the Tolkiensque concept of good versus evil.

I sought to amplify this echo of grey in Mahabharata and fill a book with it, especially through the eyes of characters who were considered to be on the wrong side of Dharma. In this process of lifting the 'villains' to the light, the world around them organically grew darker and bleaker—something that I strongly felt would have been the reality of that world if real history is any indication.

[MW] Talking about the *Sons Of Darkness*, How would you describe it and what things influenced you when you were writing the book?

[GM] Through a carousel of colors, multiple characters and cutthroat political intrigue, *Sons of Darkness* will take you on an exotic cruise through the vibrant spicelands of ancient India. Your heart will burn slow at first—the best swords spend the most time in a forge, after all—and then if I have done my job right, it will char your soul.

Forgive me for blurbing my own book above; I have poetic fits from time to time.

As to what influenced me while writing, I think I can safely thank George R.R. Martin for inspiring me to write (my dream is to thank him in person in full Padawan style). The other factor that influenced me was to write a book that consciously did not project ancient India from a colonial lens as a village stuck in the Age of Wheel and obsessed with wooden arrows.

I mean, c'mon. Our myths boast of non-linear time, flying machines, fetal incubation, test-tube babies and cloning. That Age cannot be viewed from the lens of mud-huts. No. I wanted to read a book set in India that had murder trials, Machiavellian politics, swords, morningstars, battle-axes and war-hammers, castles, siege engines, ports and temples, all festering in a vibrant civilization whose underbelly seethed with magic, murder and mayhem.

All I can hope is that it is reflected in the writing.

[MW] There are a number of authors out there who are writing grittier, darker, more realistic fantasy books or are blatantly attempting to defy traditional tropes like Joe Abercrombie, Mark Lawrence, Richard Nell, Anna Smith Spark, Michael J Fletcher etc. What are your thoughts on this movement, the audience's response to such books, and fantasy tropes in general?

[GM] I think culture and counterculture will always exist like matter and antimatter in the world of literature. They keep alternating in trends. Before the moralistic lions of Narnia, we had the grimdark world of Ovid and Dante. The wheel of time has turned again. It is just now that the taboo associated with gore, violence and disturbing reality has dimmed due to slow but delicious poisoning by creators around the world—be it through movies or paintings or books. No wonder the audience is consuming this genre with clawed hands—it has given them the ‘something new’ that they did not know they were seeking. What has helped is all these amazing writers you have mentioned in the question are using grimdark as a feature of the world rather than an inorganic way of showing gratuitous violence.

It isn't growing popular due to a Gladiatorsque show of blood spilling. What I think is working for it are the flawed characters—which is something typical of grimdark—which allows us to see ourselves in the fantasy world, a world where the heroes are pursuing their quest for revenge, personal glory or under a labor instead of selflessly saving the world. These days, escapism into grimdark becomes a lot easier for despite magic, it feels like a world that we know all too well of.

That being said, there is a reason tropes have stood the test of time, and I don't believe a hero's journey to save the world will ever go out of fashion.

[MW] For some authors it's easier writing their second novel, while for others it's more difficult. How are things going for you with book two and did you learn anything when writing *Sons of Darkness* that helped prepare you for the new book?

[GM] My writing speed has amped up for *Dance of Shadows* (Book 2). It has a lot to do with the process I

followed back while writing *Sons of Darkness*—I took it one chapter at a time, never wondering about where they were leading me. It was just a world I escaped to when I returned from office, building it block by block. But I attended Sanderson’s classes on YouTube and tried a variant of the outline method. It immensely helped me in shaping the foundation and milestones of *Dance of Shadows*. So, I am traveling a lot faster but fueled with the love received for *Sons of Darkness*, I have run into a few insane and ambitious ideas for the second book. So ... Impostor’s Syndrome attacks now and then but you just shake it off and find your way back.

Yes—as I highlighted above, outlining the basic contours of a chapter definitely helps me write better now. *Sons of Darkness* followed the discovery process of writing, and for that reason, took a lot longer to write, and lot longer to trim back because I had veered off the cliff of wordcount in a thousand and one ways.

[MW] Speaking of the series, how many volumes are projected, how far along are you in the next book, and is there anything you can tell us about book number two?

[GM] As of now, the ambitious plan is to have a five-book series with a few spin offs here and there in the World of Vedan. The second book in the series, The Raag of Rta, is called *Dance Of Shadows* and is halfway complete.

Okay—so this is the first place where I am going to reveal this: *Dance of Shadows* will have a convergence event in the form of a *drum roll please* heist.

[MW] In epic fantasy, some authors like to put an emphasis on characters or worldbuilding; others on storytelling. Where do you fit in this picture and what do you feel are your strengths as a writer?

[GM] While the cliché is true: that everything is equally important, I do believe that a book can survive with good characters and bad worldbuilding, but definitely not the other way around.

I wish I was self-aware enough to know my strengths but putting myself in the shoes of a third party, I do believe I am able to humbly manage writing from the POV of multiple characters while plying them with different motivations. With so many POVs, it sometimes is an exercise to pull the hat of one and put the bandana of another but I enjoy the backstage dress-shakeups.

[MW] Character-wise, you write from several different point-of-views including characters both major and minor, human and (seemingly) in-human, and by doing this I think you really capture just how diverse the world can be and how individuals' perspectives may vary. Yet, not everyone agrees with this kind of setup. What are your explanations for the way you write your characters and what are you trying to accomplish through so many different viewpoints.

[GM] Thanks, again.

As to not everyone agreeing with the setup, I believe that is the beauty of literature: every reader likes something different, and there is a book for each reader. I have always enjoyed the cinematic way of storytelling which boast of a multiple star-cast. For I strongly believe the spiritual concept that decrees every individual to hold a universe of emotions within himself. In reality no one is a true Gryffindor or Ravenclaw or Slytherin but a mix of everything. I enjoy putting parts of me in the different characters I write, and since writing is such a personal pleasure for me, I don't intend to change that any time in the future.

Barring the personal pleasure aside, writing from different viewpoints offers several advantages. It allows me to physically place different cameras in a scene to allow the reader to experience it in 5D—not just physically but emotionally. Think about it. The same event can be interpreted so drastically by two different people on the opposite sides of a battle: I enjoy the duality of this phenomenon, and I love bringing this out on paper. When the last battle takes place in *Sons of Darkness*, I wanted to dive into the minds of the soldiers of each platoon, to show how exactly the army pierced the enemy in a pincer flank. The idea of writing it from a perspective of a hawk in the sky did not appeal to me. I liked Dunkirk-ing it and approaching it from the perspective of soldiers on the ground.

Multiple characters also help make the world grander, allowing me to climb over the lack of knowledge of one character and use another character's knowledge to show the world around them.

And lastly, it offers such a palate of favorite characters to choose from. I love how readers of *Sons of Darkness* are already divided into Team Karna and Team Krishna with a strong faction for Team Satyabhama. Here's hoping for more such teams in the second book.

[MW] In a previous interview you've mentioned that worldbuilding has been one of the most enjoyable aspects in writing your debut. Personally, I think you've done a fantastic job, but how do you feel about the world that you have created, and is there a particular aspect that you are most proud of?

[GM] I love the world I have created. I know the world inside is grimdarkish but I think there is beauty enough for someone to want to take a trip in time to Aryavrat. I am particularly proud of the map I created from

accurate historical sources—the map you see in the book is in many ways the actual map of long-lost city states of Vedic India. I enjoyed crafting the peculiarities of the caste order as well as the intricacies of the legal system followed in the continent. But my favorite part of the worldbuilding was the way I introduced readers to Indian cuisine. The swayamvar (wedding) boasts of a grand feast, and I am so glad the buffet presented in the chapters made readers hungry and thirsty.

[MW] Speaking of influences, I noticed there were quite a few familiar fantasy elements in your book like feuding noble houses, epic war battles, nefarious Gods, court politics, etc. How much of the book was influenced by current fantasy literature and by whom?

[GM] In terms of inspiration, I think everyone writes, unconsciously or not, from the sources they loved, and this book ended up being my creative smorgasbord of Malazan Series, *First Blade* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*. I am not saying *Sons of Darkness* will necessarily read like those books. But geopolitical dramas mixed with brutally cruel choices is something I loved about all of those works, and I really hope that's reflected in the writing.

[MW] Thank you for your time and answers, where can readers find you on the interwebz and when should they expect forthcoming news about the sequel?

[GM] I am active on Instagram as @thekingbeyondthewall where you can see me spit facts on Vedic India, dance on a number or two and just get hammered on ale when I am not posting about the kind reviews received by *Sons of Darkness*.

I am new to Twitter @mohantygurav7 but am I enjoying marinating in the kind, wholesome community of Book Twitter.

I created my own website too: www.gouravmohanty.com after a lot of tutorials on YouTube—so you can head there to see whether I was a good student or not.

Right now, MUM is the word on the Sequel. I do hope to share news of it, soon.

Gourav Mohanty is an Author, Lawyer, Stand Up Comedian, Papercut Survivor, Pretend Swordfighter, Recovering Burgers Addict. As evident, his life has many tabs open.

Though he was doing well as a lawyer in Mumbai, he is now pursuing the infinitely more unattainable dream of being the first 'epic fantasy novelist' of India. A connoisseur of mythologies and momos, he enjoys channeling 'The Rock' and writing author bios in third person.

Sons of Darkness is Gourav's first novel. Give it a shot for the poor author owes considerable gold to goblins.

Review: The Golden Enclaves by Naomi Novik

BETH TABLER

The Golden Enclaves and the entire *Scholomance* series by Naomi Novik have been a long dark road full of twists and turns. What started as a run-of-the-mill dark academia story pushed and expanded past the bounds of the genre and became a gripping grimdark story with a prickly morally gray heroine that you may not like, but you can certainly get behind. Because while the story has solid side characters, especially in *The Golden Enclaves*, the journey is that of Galadriel, or El as she likes to be called. El, the would-be dark sorcerous who can make mountains bow before her, and all mothers of the world cry out in weeping anguish, wants nothing more than to be left the hell alone. To quote the original Galadriel, "*Instead of a Dark Lord, you would have a queen, not dark but beautiful and terrible as the dawn! Tempestuous as the sea, and stronger than the foundations of the Earth! All shall love me and despair!*"

That is, if she chooses to go down that path, which is the crux of the story and her nagging fear.

The Golden Enclaves starts out just as we left off in *The Last Graduate*. El and company having just fought a host of nightmarish maleficaria hell-bent on their destruction. El released her inner power with a spell that could crack the Earth. Instead, it split the Scholomance plane off from this one, and hopefully all the demons with it. Did it work? As the book blurb can attest, "*Ha, only joking! Actually it's gone all wrong.*"

Someone else has picked up the project of destroying enclaves in my stead, and probably everyone we saved is about to get killed in the brewing enclave war on the horizon. And the first thing I've got to do now, having miraculously got out of the Scholomance, is turn straight around and find a way back in." Why EI needs to go back in is part of why this novel packs such a gut punch. She did everything right, she escaped. But the sticky Lovecraftian tendrils of the Scholomance's inhabitants grasp at her here, where she should be theoretically safe.

EI is out of the immediate danger of Scholomance but has been thrust into an entirely different sort of danger, that of intrigue and guile. As she puts it, *"my own personal trolly problem to solve."* This is where her friends and the novel's supporting characters truly shine. EI might be unimaginably powerful, but she sucks when it comes to people. She has had to have a wall of outright unapproachability to protect others. *"My anger's a bad guest, my mother likes to say: comes without warning and stays a long time."*

Her having to play nice with the different enclaves to achieve a single goal is very new. And this is where Liesel, of all people, steps in. We met Liesel in earlier books. Liesel is a social climber and so practical in her approach to things it skirts on being robotic and sociopathic. She sees angles in everything and, in her blatant practicality, is immune to all of EI's "charms." Because only the outcome matters. She is the embodiment of all EI has hated her entire life. But EI discovers that while Liesel's nature of brutal practicality is off-putting; she has developed it to survive, much like EI has developed her cantankerous shell. As much as EI hates it, they have a lot of similarities. The first and foremost is surviving Enclave life.

Plotwise, *The Golden Enclaves* is not the type of book one can talk about without ruining it. But I can tell you that *The Golden Enclaves* soars to the finale. It is

a mile-a-minute story where every page is revelatory, and things can and do change from chapter to chapter. Instead of crashing at the end of this series as many authors do, their stories spent and the characters tired, Novik soars and rages. Her characters felt like they were just getting started. I loved *The Golden Enclaves* and am so glad I took the journey through Scholomance with Novik. It was a hell of a ride.

A Future Without Fiction: Dragons and Book Bans

JASON (DAVID WONG) PARGIN

I don't want to be an alarmist and imply that the United States is on the verge of a *Fahrenheit 451* scenario. If a candidate ran for president on a book-burning platform, they'd likely lose by, I don't know, five or six points? It would depend on how the economy is doing, I suppose. But I do worry that a hundred years from now, you'll find a society in which truly free expression barely exists. To explain why, I need to take us back to the invention of the dragon.

Weirdly, nearly every culture on earth independently conceived of some version of dragons. As to how this happened, experts only have theories (my favorite is that humans are genetically predisposed to fear certain types of predators—large felines, serpents and birds of prey—and that our brains just mashed them together, then modified the result into a “dragon” per our innate predilection for things that are badass). Now note that these cultures all thought dragons were real, eventually figured out they weren't, then *kept telling dragon stories anyway*.

Now let me hit you with a sci-fi thought experiment: If aliens came to earth, would they find it strange that we did that? Would they think the whole concept of fantastic stories, of transmitting accounts of events that could never actually occur, was just an evolutionary glitch? *

After all, it would actually be hard for the average person to explain to the alien what practical purpose these stories serve. We might say that heroic tales of space and magic inspire us to be great, but why would a *fake* story of heroism do that? What's the benefit of asking a child to imagine themselves as a knight slaying a dragon—a job that no longer exists and an animal that never existed—instead of encouraging them to imagine life as a meticulous bricklayer? If your answer is that this would be extremely boring for the child, then the alien's next question is obvious: "Don't they only consider real life tedious because they compare it to your impossible tales?"

The justification we'd land on, I think, is that stories persisted as a way to convey important cultural norms in a format that sticks in the mind. It's boring for a kid to remember which berries are poison, but package it as a harrowing folk tale of how touching deadly nightshade will bring you face-to-face with the devil, and you've seared the information into a terrified child's mind. At this point, our hypothetical alien would likely nod and say, "Considering the crucial role stories serve, storytellers are surely carefully trained and controlled by your authorities." And if we're honest with ourselves, our reply would be, "Not yet, but we're working on it."

If you follow the news, you know we're in another book-banning era. Politicians are loudly pushing to eliminate certain titles from libraries and the typical rebuttal is not that they shouldn't be banning books, but that they're banning the *wrong* books. Opposing factions will declare certain works to be problematic, obscene or blasphemous, but all seem to agree on this much larger, stranger premise: that fiction writers are now in charge of shaping public morals. Otherwise, what problem is a "problematic" book threatening to cause? Who cares if a novel is obscene if not for the assumption that obscenity can ruin a human mind?

The claim of blasphemy is the most astonishing of all: not even an almighty creator can stand up to the raw, destructive power of the wrong words typed in the wrong order.

Meanwhile, those who are not directly pushing for restrictions still judge stories entirely on how effectively they transmit the right social and political messaging. In my other browser tab, redditors are currently debating how well a recent work is conveying the precepts of modern feminism. The work in question is a TV show about a female lawyer who is also an Incredible Hulk.

I'll just say it: As a professional novelist who spins gruesome (and frankly, implausible) tales of time-hopping demons, I am *not* up to the task of shaping collective morality, especially if I'm primarily answering to corporations who cater to whatever group is yelling the loudest that week. But I'm also a hypocrite; if a fan says my last book made them a better person, I'll happily accept the compliment. I can't have it both ways. If my stories hold that kind of power, I have no argument against regulating them. Likewise, if I read a novel about, say, a race of alien slaves who learn to love their slavery, I'll join the voices asking how in the world such a thing was approved for publication.

If you think it's a ridiculous leap to suggest that fiction will soon be regulated into a tasteless paste, please remember that our current state of affairs—in which everyone is drowning in an ocean of cheap media—is incredibly recent. There are people alive who remember when television was brand new, and their great-grandparents likely had friends who never learned to read. Suddenly there's this exponential explosion of storytelling, resulting in the control of cultural norms being yanked from politicians, priests and parents and handed to a bunch of weirdos like me. The traditional powers in society haven't yet had time to adjust.

I believe they are adjusting now.

If fiction really does have the power to mold minds, it means it also has the ability to erode faith in institutions and foment radical change. That means the institutions that survive will be the ones that convince the population that stories are dangerous, that they must kick creatives out of the cockpit and let someone else take the controls. The result will be a world in which the only permissible fantasies are morality plays and propaganda, in which audiences read and watch bland feel-good messaging, feel nothing, but applaud anyway lest the surveillance drones detect their lack of enthusiasm.

If I'm to choose between that and a collective agreement that stories don't really matter all that much, I'd prefer the latter. I mean, in theory, we wouldn't have to choose if we could build a society in which it's safe for creators to play with even the most repugnant ideas because their audiences have gained enough critical thinking skills to realize fictional stories aren't marching orders. But I try not to let my ridiculous fantasies get away from me.

**Yes, I realize this was the plot of Galaxy Quest.*

Jason Pargin's new book If This Book Exists, You're in the Wrong Universe, is on shelves Oct 18, 2022.

Jason "David Wong" Pargin is a New York Times bestselling author whose work has been read by tens of millions of people worldwide. Granted, most of those people did not in fact pay for said work, as they read it for free on Cracked.com where Jason served as editor for twelve years and wrote essays like *6 Harsh Truths That Will Make You A Better Person* and *How Half Of American Lost Its Fucking Mind*.

He is also the author of five alarmingly successful novels, the first of which, *John Dies at the End*, became a feature film. This was followed by a sequel called *This Book is Full of Spiders*, which was followed by *What the Hell Did I Just Read*. The fourth book is being written as we speak and will have an equally stupid title. Each novel is about a pair of frequently unemployed twentysomethings who accidentally take a drug that allows them to interact with the unimaginable horrors that secretly inhabit our reality, with increasingly disastrous results.

Then there is his other, more critically acclaimed series of sci-fi adventure novels (the award-winning *Futuristic Violence and Fancy Suits*, and the follow-up, *Zoey Punches the Future in the Dick*), which is currently in development as a TV series. These novels are about a team of professional liars with military PSYOPS training who must use the power of deception to run a lawless city full of criminals and vigilantes who've been given superpowers via the magic of technology. The team is led by Zoey Ashe, a young barista who accidentally inherited her father's crime empire and also owns a cat that smells like shit.

Jason is married and owns a dog. He has no hobbies. He has never adjusted to success and thinks all of this is a little weird. He is writing this himself, in the third person.

An Interview with Dyrk Ashton

BETH TABLER

Not long ago I was recommended the *Paternus* series by a good friend. It had been my first foray into the wild world of self-published fantasy. To say that *Paternus* by Dyrk Ashton is one of my favorite series is an understatement. *Paternus* is a great read from start to finish. It has excellent pacing, magnificent action and humor. It shows just how incredible self-publishing really is.

I had the great honor of interviewing Dyrk this month, and hopefully some of you will give the *Paternus* universe a swing.

[GdM] You've been deeply involved in the film industry; where did you get your start?

[DA] I developed a love of movies at a young age and in high school started to think I wanted to be a filmmaker. When college rolled around I went for something that made more practical sense and studied business for my first two years. While in college my first year I met a few of the filmmaking students at Ohio University and helped them with one of their projects and loved it. I stuck out a second year studying business, this time at the University of Toledo, after which I was convinced a career in business wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. I transferred to the film program at The Ohio State University, where I got my bachelors in film and video production, and stayed for

my masters, during which time I produced the first feature length film that had been done within the department. That was an ultra low budget but kind of arty horror film called *Beyond Dreams Door*, which was actually picked up for distribution on video.

While going to film school I worked as a production assistant on locally shot commercials and industrial films, and worked my way up to grip, then did some assistant directing, and ended up mostly production managing and producing. After school I kept at that while working on low budget creative short films and a feature film, and some friends of mine and I started our own production company. After a time I moved to Los Angeles where I worked on shoot in about every capacity you can imagine while writing and submitting screenplays, none of which really went anywhere, though I did have some read by Scott Free Entertainment and New Line Cinema and had a TV series proposal championed by American Zoetrope Television, which was later turned down by the financiers.

Oddly enough, the vast majority of my income in Los Angeles came from acting. I'm a terrible actor, but really good at auditioning. I don't know if I can call it a start, but the first professional "acting" gig I had was years before I'd gone to L.A., as the Truck Zombie in the 1990 remake of *Night of the Living Dead*.

[GdM] In what way do you think your background in films has helped you craft stories? Is there a way that it has hindered you?

[DA] My background in film has definitely had a huge influence on my writing, from the way I plot and structure to how I begin and end chapters and the way I use tense and POV. That comes from directing and editing as well as screenwriting. The only thing I can think of that hindered me was it took me a long time to

figure out how to tell stories with a lot more words than you do with a script.

[GdM] Did you find yourself sketching and approaching scenes the same way a cinematographer would? I noticed this was especially true of the fight scenes in the novel.

[DA] I'm a TERRIBLE artist so I didn't sketch, but I definitely use a filmmaker's approach to envisioning the space and movement within a scene while I write. When writing I know that I'm always at least half-conscious of the angle and shot on the character, even if I don't describe it. Basically I'm choosing camera angles, shot size, camera movement, and character blocking all the time.

[GdM] I need to know how you have written so many books. Every great series that has ever been written and will be written will have the name Dyrk Ashton attached.

[DA] It's a hard life, or at least started that way. It began when Michael R. Fletcher stole my pants then locked me in a cage in his basement and made me write all of his earlier books. Then I escaped and put him in the cage, then kidnapped Rob Hayes and put him in there, and made both write books for me. I've added about two dozen authors since. At this point I don't even know which ones I write myself or under their names anymore. *Sigh*.

[GdM] How did *Wizards, Warriors, and Words* come about?

[DA] That was all Jed Herne. He contacted me, Mike Fletcher and Rob Hayes (which wasn't hard, since they're in my basement), and asked if we want to give

it a shot and see how it went after a few. I honestly don't know how it happened, but now we've been doing it for two years and have over a hundred episodes! Really, though, it's really weird to look back and realized we've come that far.

[GdM] How has the book community on Twitter helped and hindered your writing?

[DA] The only thing that hinders my writing is me. I'm really a sloth in a Fletcher skin suit. The Twitters have been truly great. I believe a very large number of my readers would never have heard of the book without all the wonderful folks there.

Is there a particular example of a piece of writing you discovered just how powerful the written word could be?

[GdM] What was the original nugget of an idea that *Paternus* is based on?

[DA] Two old goofy ideas, really. One was about a group of vampires who thought they were ancient and powerful, until they ran into some much more ancient and powerful, and so on, until they find out there's the original vampire that had been watching them all, wipes them all out and starts over again. I think I was twelve when I came up with that. It evolved over the years, thank gods.

The second was I love mythology and always toyed with the idea of making up a kind of unified field theory for mythology that would tie them all together, traced back to where they came from and what really happened that spawned them all. Taking very loosely from those two ideas germinated the starting point for *Paternus*.

[GdM] How did you plan such a detail-oriented story? Are your walls covered in post-it notes?

[DA] I have literally HUNDREDS of pages of notes and enormous spreadsheets of information all put together while I was brainstorming and refining the idea and story. I probably spent a few hundred hours outlining for the three books, at least.

[GdM] Which myth did you have the most fun twisting around?

[DA] Norse Mythology, definitely. I'm not saying it's my favorite mythology, but what I was able to do with it to serve the story and worldbuilding was really, really fun.

[GdM] Are there any "darlings" that you would have loved to have had in the story had they worked?

[DA] Not sure what the question is exactly, but I'll assume this is about myths; stories from myths or characters from myths. And, wow, there are SO many I wouldn't know where to start. The hardest part of selecting characters wasn't deciding who to put in the books and how much story importance they'd have, but having to not use so many others that I love.

[GdM] You have a rabid fanbase of myth geeks, myself included. When you wrote the Paternus series, did you know how well it would do with the reading public?

[DA] I absolutely did not. I knew the first book odd and oddly written, but I did it that way on purpose because I wanted to write the book I wanted to read. I just crossed my fingers and hoped some people would like that too. I didn't have very high hopes, though.

[GdM] What is next? What are you working on?

[DA] Right now I'm having an absolute blast writing the first book in this crazy-farmboy-outcast-makes-good-magic-military-dragon-rider-school-epic-progression-fantasy tentatively titled Kraken Rider Z. Yeah, that :D
Thank you for having me!

Dyrk Ashton is a writer, educator, filmmaker and former actor active in story telling and media making. Born and raised in the American midwest, he currently resides in Ohio, but the fantasy landscape is the place he calls home.

Review: A Gamble of Gods by Mitriel Faywood

JOHN MAURO

A Gamble of Gods is the highly imaginative, world-hopping debut by Mitriel Faywood. With this ambitious novel, Faywood has established herself as an exhilarating new voice in speculative fiction.

Faywood's debut is a genre-defying story, impossible to categorize using conventional literary classifications. The experience of reading *A Gamble of Gods* is more like watching a blockbuster movie: a hugely entertaining, immersive experience, where the heart-pounding action is balanced by a cheerful levity and even some romance.

The story is told from the first-person perspectives of three main characters who come from very different worlds spanning both science fiction and fantasy.

First, Kristian del Rosso is a university lecturer from a futuristic planet. Kristian's sci-fi world is teeming with robots, artificial intelligence, and even teleportation. Kristian lives a reclusive academic existence, unable to move past the trauma of a friend's death several years ago. But when his entire research group is mercilessly slaughtered by an identity-changing madman, he must leave the university to hunt down the killer. Kristian's no-nonsense, matter-of-fact attitude is a bit reminiscent of Philip Marlowe from the works of Raymond Chandler.

In marked contrast to Kristian's serious demeanor, Conor Drew is an effusive playboy adventurer who hails from a more traditional medieval-type fantasy

world. Conor is tenacious in his quest for treasure and perhaps even more relentless in his pursuit of women.

The third point-of-view character is Selena Soto, an office worker from a near-future London who is seeking therapy for her anxiety attacks. She lacks self-confidence in both her professional career and her personal life. Of the three main characters in *A Gamble of Gods*, Selena undergoes the most satisfying growth over the course of the novel.

Mitriel Faywood has created a distinct voice for her three main characters, making it easy to identify the narrator of each chapter without even looking at the chapter headings. I particularly enjoyed seeing how the paths of the three characters intersect and how their relationships evolve over the course of the book.

Faywood is best known to the grimdark community as the long-time beta reader for Mark Lawrence. Given her extensive work with Lawrence, it is natural to expect some influence on Faywood's debut. Mark Lawrence's influence is most evident in Faywood's crisp writing style, especially in the chapters narrated by Conor Drew. Conor's womanizing and exuberant sense of humor reminded me a lot of Jalan Kendeth, the narrator of *Prince of Fools* and the rest of Lawrence's Red Queen's War trilogy, but with Jalan's cowardice replaced by Conor's assured bravado. Like Jalan, Conor does not try to hide the significant shortcomings of his personality.

Kristian's mentor, Dr. James Montgomery, also reminds me a bit of Lawrence's recurring character, Dr. Elias Taproot, the time-traveling physicist extraordinaire. In a fun Easter egg, Faywood even quotes Dr. Taproot's catchphrase, "Watch me!", in the latter part of her novel.

But the similarities stop there. While it's also tempting to compare Faywood's blend of fantasy and science fiction to that of Mark Lawrence's trilogies, the two authors take very different approaches. Whereas

Lawrence's work typically focuses on the fantastic elements sitting atop a more subtle sci-fi core, Faywood immediately brings the sci-fi elements to the forefront in *A Gamble of Gods*.

Overall, Mitriell Faywood has done a great job absorbing a broad range of influences but then turning them into something so original that I cannot really point back to say that the book follows anyone's particular mold or style. Her approach reminds me of the movie title, "Everything Everywhere All at Once," but of course, with a completely different plot.

Faywood somehow keeps up the fast-paced action throughout *A Gamble of Gods* without ever having a dull moment. There is truly something here for everyone, and I particularly enjoyed the lighthearted comedy throughout much of the book. I laughed so hard during one scene at around the 75% mark that it almost caused me bodily injury. Let me just say that you should definitely look a gift horse in the mouth, especially if that horse is an AI-powered robot.

In the end, *A Gamble of Gods* gives the reader a satisfying conclusion while still setting up for a sequel. Faywood's worldbuilding is full of details that will reward multiple rereads. My only minor complaint is that many aspects of the worldbuilding are not fully explained. You just need to accept them and enjoy the ride. A book spanning so many genres—science fiction, high and low fantasies, comedy, romance—could easily have become an unfocused mess. But Faywood pulls it off brilliantly, making *A Gamble of Gods* a joy to read.

So, grab yourself a big vat of popcorn to munch on as you enjoy this blockbuster debut. *A Gamble of Gods* is a rollicking good time.

Sticks and Stones

DANIEL POLANSKY

1.

Lain the Eight-Fingered had all ten of his original set, plus the eponymous strung along a piece of beaded hemp he wore as a necklace taken in lieu of coin from negligent debtors. A heavy for the Dead Rat Mob, he was better with his knife than he was at dice, though that night it seemed he couldn't lose, running up the tab of the scarred, ugly man across the table.

"Raise you two hundred," said Lain.

The Twice-Told Wife was a low-class dive situated just east of Beggar's Rampart, bogland that flooded in the summer and stank year-round. The whole place wasn't worth two hundred, and the rest of the bar—stumble drunks, good-for-nothings, weak cousins, and recklings escaped the kill—watched with eager excitement.

The man smiled crookedly. "Raise fifty."

"Double."

"Double back."

Lain pulled the cup off his dice to reveal a proud pair of sixes.

His opponent kept his hand on his dice cup, but he flipped his smile. "Look—"

But Lain was already out of his chair with his knife against the man's throat. "Don't be telling me you came down here empty?"

"It's not like that—"

"Cause Lain the Nine Fingered has a nice ring to it."

"It's like I'm trying to explain, I'm good for it—"

“Or maybe I’ll go for double digits?” Lain added, making a little flourish with his knife. The rest of the bar had stopped to look at the brewing violence, rows of scarred faces, flat sneers, and dead eyes.

“I don’t have the coin on me,” promised the man, “but I’ve got something better.”

“Better? What the fuck is better than money?”

The crooked grin returned to the man’s face. “More money.”

“Keep talking,” said Lain, though he didn’t set aside his knife.

2.

The third undercard on the Cochrane-Corolinus fight was well attended, and the crowd went mad when the challenger put the champ through the ropes with a fortunate-seeming hook—though it is fair to say that none matched the enthusiasm of Lain the Eight-Fingered, who suddenly found himself rich beyond his admittedly paltry dreams.

Twenty-six hours of riotous debauchery—mostly cheap whores and expensive narcotics, though at one point he had thrown coins into a gutter to watch a beggar pick them up—had erased the better portion of Lain’s winnings. He was back at the Twice-Told Wife nursing a weak beer and mulling how to waste what was left when the two men entered and took the seats across from him. The first was a bright-eyed, overdressed ponce. The other was a hard-looking youth with a shaved head who Lain took for the muscle.

“Luck’s a funny thing,” said the ponce. “Let’s say one of these hanging lanterns was to fall on your foot right now. You might think that’s some real shit luck there, right? But then again, it didn’t fall on your head.”

Lain was having trouble following. He had reached that stage of sleeplessness where stray thoughts carry the same weight as external events and was

preoccupied trying to remember the name of the dog that had bit him as a child.

The ponce took his hat—which was long and pointed and had a colored feather in the front—and laid it on the table. “Or let’s say that you were to go to a boxing match and lay a heavy bet down on a long shot. And let’s say that shot hit. Good luck, right?”

Lain tried to bring himself back to the present, with limited success. The crowd at the bar—almost identical to the night before—watched the trouble brew with anxious excitement.

“But what if that long shot was a fix—and what if the people who had put that fix together came looking to find you? Then your windfall would turn out to be bad luck after all.

Lain finished the rest of his watery beer. “You look like a dockside streetwalker. Fuck off, before I add another finger to my necklace.”

“I bet you go fall back on that one a lot,” said the ponce.

The bald one—the one that Lain figured was muscle—spoke for the first time. “Who gave you the tip?”

But Lain was already moving towards violence. One does not acquire a necklace of eight fingers from an excess of self-control. Lain figured if he took care of the bald one quick, he’d have time to linger over the ponce, and he went to draw.

Lain was wrong, though—the bald one was not the muscle. Lain’s knife was halfway out his sleeve when the ponce struck him with a gloved fist—a short, swift shot, the movement executed with such neat perfection as to shatter Lain’s cheekbone and send him supine.

“Bad luck,” the ponce said, smiling.

It was so late at night that it had become early in the morning. Aunt Stell was in the kitchen, working on a tray of cinnamon buns when her nephews arrived. Christoffel at least had the good sense to look sheepish, carrying the squiggling sack over his shoulder, but Wynan remained as impossibly innocent as a child sticky-mouthed with stolen chocolate.

"Who is this?" Aunt Stell asked, coring the last apple and slicing it apart with neat motions of her paring knife.

"This is the asshole who won big off our fix on the Cochrane undercard."

"Language," Aunt Stell corrected. "I didn't raise you to talk like that."

"Sorry."

"Why is he bleeding out on my floor?"

"He tried to stab Chris," Wynan explained.

"I didn't ask why he was bleeding, I asked why is he bleeding on my floor. Rather than, for instance, wherever you found him."

"The Twice-Told Wife," Christoffel explained.

"The what now?"

"The Twice-Told Wife. It's a bar."

"A charming establishment, no doubt. Why'd you move him?"

Wynan and Christoffel exchanged glances. "There's a hitch," said Christoffel, setting the bag on the floor with a grunt.

"Turns out he's a lieutenant for the Dead Rats," Wynan explained.

Aunt Stell sighed, then turned to the oven, removing a pot of sugared almonds. "Do they know?"

"I didn't make a point of sending them a letter, but we were near the Rampart when we picked him up, so—probably?"

Aunt Stell sighed once more, then snapped her fingers. Christoffel opened the bag, spilling Lain the Eight-Fingered onto the floor. He was somewhat worse

for having been beaten up and slung into a sack, and his necklace had gone missing during the tumult.

“You got anything to say for yourself?” Aunt Stel asked.

“Fuck you, you fat fucking cunt,” Laine spat. “That’s what I’ve got to tell you.”

“Lovely,” said Aunt Stel, then turned to Wynan. “Do you know how much this is going to cost?”

“How was I supposed to know he cuts for the Rats?”

“What did you think, he was a banker? He ran a sweet store?”

“Let me out of these bonds, I’ll give you something sweet,” Lain added.

“I’d say that’s plenty,” said Aunt Stel.

Christoffel crumpled Lain to the ground with a swat from a square fist.

“We didn’t know, honest Aunt Stel,” said Wynan.

“Honest,” agreed Christoffel.

“You didn’t know because you didn’t think,” Aunt Stel snapped. “With everything else we’ve got going on right now, you’re starting trouble with the Dead Rat Mob? Edward the Mad is dead, Low Town is open for expansion, and this is how you want to waste our energies?”

“I’m sorry, Auntie,” said Christoffel.

“Now I’ve got to go down to the docks and beg forgiveness from Alasdair.”

“I’m sorry, Auntie,” said Christoffel.

Wynan picked a sugared almond from the bowl and popped it into his mouth.

“Don’t do that,” said Aunt Stel, “they’re for breakfast.”

“They’re good.”

“Of course, they’re good, I made them—and flattery doesn’t excuse theft. Do you have any idea how annoying it is when someone comes by and steals your ingredients while you’re cooking?”

“No,” said Wynan, stealing another almond, “because I never cook for anyone.”

Aunt Stel did her best not to smile. Wynan was the son of her brother Pietr, the best-loved of all six of her siblings, each of whom had been killed in the Great War, leaving Stel to take over the family business. Whatever else one could say of the Rieters Mob, they were good patriots. In the years since Stel had served as matriarch—enough time to see her fecund family pitch out another generation of heirs—Wynan had remained her sun and moon. A mother must love all her children equally, but an aunt can play favorites.

“Reach out to Alasdair,” she said finally, “explain the situation and let him know we’ll make amends. Who gave him the tip, anyway?”

“He wouldn’t say.”

“Hey, friendly,” said Wynan, prodding Lain with his boot, “you want to stave off that meeting with She Who Waits a while?”

But Lain was already on his way to that eventuality, Christoffel’s blow having unraveled some stray strand within his skull. He began to jackknife against the floor, smearing a sudden nosebleed onto the polished wood, then went suddenly still.

Christoffel grimaced at Wynan. Wynan did the same at Christoffel.

“Sorry, Auntie,” said Christoffel.

“We’d have had to pay the gelt anyway,” Wynan pointed out.

After a moment, Aunt Stel rolled her eyes and offered the bowl of sugared almonds to her nephews. “Get a mop,” she said.

4.

“It don’t look good, Stel,” said Alasdair from where he sat across the table, flanked by Coffin Nail.

It was late afternoon, and the pastry shop near the city center was mostly empty. The sun trickling in

through the windows was the same sun they had by the docks, but the glass pane was so smooth and clean it seemed somehow brighter, and her scone would have cost a stevedore a day's wage.

"Lain was on the payroll," Alasdair added. Thin, acne-scarred, and with an oversized throat apple, there was nothing impressive about him, nothing to make you think he could have kept a grip on the miles of shantytown and thousands of cut-throat kinsmen that inhabited the western docks.

This, of course, was part of what had allowed him to maintain said control. "Half the docks are on your payroll," she pointed out.

"Half the docks don't collect on my behalf. Lain took care of dues from the Beggar's Rampart to the bay. Lots of folks knew him."

"Lots of folks walking around the shore singing death odes to Lain the nine-fingered?"

"Eight-fingered," corrected Coffin Nail from where he sat beside his boss. Half his teeth were broken, and his nose was a dimly identifiable pulp of flesh. One ear was cropped completely, the other a few pieces of torn cartilage peeking through his tangled hair. His shirt was torn, and wine-stained, and he gave off an identifiable odor even amid the airy quarter of the coffee shop. He might have been thirty, or forty, or fifty. He had been what he was for a long time.

"I'm sure he'd have gotten to nine at some point," Wynan responded.

"No question. Lain really liked fingers, it was getting to be something of a problem. Come in five minutes late with the take and he'd already been going for his butcher's knife."

"I guess we did you a favor."

Coffin Nail cackled, showing the stubs of his teeth.

"You pulled him out of a dockside bar, Stel," Alasdair continued. "You know how many people saw you do that?"

“Most of the people inside, I’d gather,” said Wynan.

“How’d you manage it, exactly?” asked Coffin Nail.

“Lain’s fashion choices aside, he was quick with his knife.”

“I dragged him out by his necklace,” Wynan said, examining his fingernails

Coffin Nail laughed again. “This Pietr’s boy?” he asked Aunt Stel.

“Yeah.”

Coffin Nail gave Wynan an appraising look. “You’re smaller than he was.”

Wynan scowled.

“It don’t look good, Stel,” said Alasdair again. “I got half the docks thinking you’re making a move on me.”

“How long have we been making money together?”

“Long time,” admitted Alasdair.

“And how long we been at peace?”

“Same length of time.”

“You ship it in, I ship it out. Same deal we’ve had for ten years. Why would I jeopardize all of that for a couple of coins?”

“I didn’t say you did, I said it don’t look good. I got mine the same reason you got yours—because no one thinks to buck. My men start ending tits-up in the bay, people will be thinking otherwise.”

The scone was dry. How was it you could come all the way uptown, pay a fortune, and still find yourself eating a dry scone? You couldn’t depend on anyone to do anything, Stel thought. Forty-five years spent learning that lesson, it still managed to disappoint her. “You’re telling me that your hold on the docks is so weak the disappearance of some inbred halfwit necrophile is going to lose you your head?”

“This is a horrible apology,” Coffin Nail pointed out.

“Killing Lain the nine-fingered—”

“Eight-fingered,” Coffin Nail corrected.

“Can we quit the commentary from the penny seats?” Stel snapped. “Or were you hoping this would go on all day?”

Alasdair made a quieting motion to his bodyguard.

“Killing Lain the eight-fingered was a bit of bad luck, pure and simple. Nothing to ruin our relationship over.”

“You still haven’t told me what I want to hear,” said Alasdair.

Stel sighed and ate the rest of her bad scone. “How much?”

5.

For a few years after the Great War, the city was a buyer’s market on killers. The capital thronged with decommissioned veterans who never learned or couldn’t remember how to do anything but cut a throat. Yephet had been one of these, thugged for an eastside mob before mustering out a second time, taking his various blood monies and buying a half-share in a teamster outfit in the distant northern suburbs of the city. He’d gone straight, and he’d have stayed that way if one of his wagons hadn’t been stolen, and two of the mules took sick, and the hoax upped their take.

When the offer came along it was like a rope to a drowning man, and he hadn’t wondered about the why’s of it, just called some of his old unit in a quiet spot near the border with Low Town. “Half an hour, maybe more—but not much more. We need to be off the docks before light.”

“What about the guard?” asked Avraham. Unlike his old sergeant, he’d never made any attempt at honest labor, though the fact that he was still alive and working freelance as a knifehand spoke to a sense of caution beyond the professional average.

“What about them?” asked Yephet. “They get paid not to notice things, I’m sure they won’t be killing themselves tracking down a missing shipment of junk.”

“How’d you hear about this?” asked Isaac, a small, hard man with half his face ruined from a crossbow bolt.

“Does it matter?”

“It matters if we show up at the docks and find a ship that’s supposed to be full of pixie dust has a cargo of salt pork or scrap iron,” said Avraham.

“Or if it’s guarded by two dozen hard men bouncing off their own supply,” Isaac agreed.

Yephet shook his head. “The word is legit. Comes from a guy in my first unit.”

“I thought you said everyone in your first unit died?”

“I wasn’t being literal.”

“And what’s he getting out of it?”

“Don’t worry about that either,” said Yephet. “This is wartime rules, boys, you aren’t here to think. You’re here to kill. Only difference is, tonight we’ll be well paid.”

6.

Sergeant Griswald watched the bodies of the men bobbing beside the slip where their dhow had been the previous night. The rest of the hoax was making a pretense of investigation, but as the senior-most member of the city guard, Sergeant Griswald didn’t need to bother. He took out a pocket flask, sipped from it, then put it back into his pocket.

“This is going to be trouble for someone,” he guessed.

7.

“They never get any older,” said Aunt Stel, after Wynan had left the kitchen in a huff.

Stel was making cinnamon buns with Rajel, one of her now innumerable nieces, pretty and sharp and near enough to womanhood to start learning how things were. “Of course, most of them die young, but even if they get older, they don’t get older. They might

as well still be in swaddling clothes. Pinch up the seam on that roll,” commanded Aunt Stel.

Rajel pinched the seam.

“Men have it easy. Worse comes to worst they can always go ahead and get themselves killed. We’re the ones who make sure the house doesn’t burn down, and the children don’t starve. Honor! Eat honor. Kindle it for fire when you’re cold. Take it down to the pawnshop and see what it gets you. Your idiot cousin wants to go to war with the Dead Rats so the city can see he’s as tough as the father he never got to meet.” There was an instant where it almost seemed Stel would lose her temper, but it only lasted that instant and when it ended, she was back to rounding the neatest collection of cinnamon rolls any child ever ate. “It used to bother me, but at some point, when you see so many of them, you come to understand—it’s just the way they are. It’s like being mad at a fish for swimming, or a cockroach for eating filth. They don’t know no better.

“Yes, Auntie,” said Rajel.

“Men can be brave, and men can be tough, and here and there a man might even be clever. But no man can ever be wise, not really. How could they be? They think in hours, in days, in weeks. We think in generations. A woman knows she’s a link between the dead and the unborn, between what isn’t and all the things that might be. That’s a weight no man could comprehend, not really. Only blood is worth shedding blood over,” she said finally, finishing off the rest of the rolls, “nothing else.”

7.

“It don’t look good, Stel,” said Alasdair.

“Not for either of us this time,” Stel pointed out. “It was my shipment that got stolen.”

“It was my boys that got killed.”

“My money means as much to me as your boys do to you.”

“More, maybe,” Wynan put in.

“He’s got ideas to go with that hat,” observed Coffin Nail.

“What’s he mean, Stel?” Alasdair asked.

Stel shot her nephew a look of warning that he pretended not to see. “Rumor is that you weren’t so close with the boys watching our shipment on the docks,” Wynan said.

“That what you been hearing?”

“Rumor is that you got to thinking you’d take two birds at a shot, cut some competition while you choke down our drugs.”

“That’s funny,” said Alasdair, though he wasn’t smiling, “cause all the stories I’ve been hearing are about how I’m getting rooked for a mug, and that I should let my dogs off leash.”

Aunt Stel waved to the waiter, who came hurrying over. “Would you send out your chef, please?” she asked.

After the first meeting, word had gone round about the identities of their peculiar guests, and the staff had met their return with excited terror. The waiter retreated into the kitchen to pass Aunt Stel’s request on to the chef—who had, as it happens, berated him earlier that morning regarding an overturned tray of cutlery.

“They talked a lot about your pop, when I was coming up,” Coffin Nail told Wylan.

“Did they?”

“You know how folk get to gossip—hit a few people in the head with a hatchet, they make out like you invented murder. Still, I was always a little sorry we never got to have a go.”

“You have my condolences.”

“Thanks. Just bad timing. I’m sure if he hadn’t joined up, we’d have managed something.”

“Think about all the things you’d have missed out on—fifteen years of hot meals and springtime flowers.”

“Lot of trouble for nothing, you ask me. There were plenty of people around here who would have stabbed your dad in the stomach, saved him the trouble of a ship ride.”

“He was a patriot,” snarled Wynan.

Coffin Nail cackled blackened gums against broken teeth. Patriotism was a joke to Coffin Nail. So was innocence, sympathy, and hygiene.

The chef came out from the back. Like all good pastry chefs, he’d been shipped in from across the bay. His knowledge of the language and local customs was limited, and he, alone among the staff, was unclear on the gravity of the situation. “You asked for me?” he said gruffly.

“Did you taste the scones this morning?” Aunt Stel asked.

“Excuse me?”

“How about yesterday?”

“If there is a problem with the scones—”

“The problem is that whatever underling you have creaming the butter isn’t doing it long enough, and so the sugar isn’t mixed in. It’s like swallowing sand.”

Perhaps it was Aunt Stel’s indefinable aura of strength, or perhaps it was that Wynan and Coffin Nail were both carrying steel but for whatever reason, and against the innate arrogance of his caste, the chef took the rebuke in silence.

“Anyone can do something once,” said Aunt Stel, “or even a handful of times. But doing it every day, week in and week out—achieving stability—that’s the real task. Life despises stability and loathes balance. As soon as you start getting used to something—” Aunt Stel slammed the table with the flat of her hand, “you find it’s been taken from you, and no way to get it back.”

The Chef stammered an apology. Alasdair was silent, Wynan chagrined, and even Coffin Nail seemed uncharacteristically subdued.

“You need to taste your yield every day,” Aunt Stel said to the chef before turning her gray eyes on her rival. “And you, Alasdair, need to stop listening to gossip. We’ll split the losses on the shipment, and you’ll keep your people civil—because if there’s ever trouble between us, it won’t start with any sideways swipes. I’ll march down to the docks at sunset with the whole city watching, and I’ll stack the bodies of your kinfolk like I was storing cordwood for a winter.”

8.

Goncalve owned the sort of corner store where a heavy layer of dust hung over the stock and odd men could be seen entering at odd hours. It was well-known that what he sold from behind the till came from the Dead Rats and rumored likewise that he had gotten his hands on a crate of the pixie’s breath that was stolen off the docks not a week back, top shelf buzz at a cutthroat price.

This was what Wynan had heard, at least, and the reason that he was in Goncalve’s that night, and the reason that Goncalve was laid over the counter, his face a bloodied pulp. How exactly Coffin Nail had heard that Wynan was in Goncalve’s—well, who can say? Rumor as well, presumably.

Wynan turned as heard the door open. “Come for some penny candy?”

“Or maybe a quart of milk,” said Coffin Nail. “That man you’re holding on to belongs to us.”

“That’s good to know,” Wynan said, “because the back of his shop is filled with stock from the ship you stole.”

This didn’t make sense to Coffin Nail, but he also knew they were well past the point of reason, that violence had become a certainty, one best brought

about as rapidly as possible. He took off the dirty, heavy coat that he wore and, still smiling, tossed it at Wynan, coming in close behind it.

Wynan was pretty and Wynan was foolish but Wynan was also quick, sidestepping Coffin Nail's charge and giving him a scratch on the arm with his suddenly drawn side sword. Coffin Nail treated his newest wound with indifference, freeing a crooked hatchet from his waist and drawing a punch knife to match.

Outside in the moonlight, it might have been different, but in the confines of the shop speed meant less than it might have, and neat footwork was all but impossible. Close fighting was Coffin Nail's specialty, and when Wynan half-stumbled on an overturned broom it was over, a strike from his axe severing three fingers from Wynan's hand silk-gloved hand.

Wynan screamed and fell to the ground and Coffin Nail stamped his life out onto the floor, laughing his toothless, mirthless giggle.

9.

It was as Aunt Stel had promised—they came at sunset, all the might of the Rieters, brothers and cousins and uncles marching west with trench blades and hand axes and side swords, with half-pikes and hobnailed boots and blunt iron cudgels. They tore through the slums, breaking windows and busting up juke joints and killing every Dead Rat they could find, as well as a fair number of people with no immediate connection.

Coffin Nail put up a spirited defense of the dockside brothel of which he was part owner, indeed would never have been taken alive if it wasn't for a lucky shot with a slingstone, and his fellows too cowardly to defend him or finish him off. Crippled, Christoffel dragged him into the street and Stel did him right there with her kitchen knife, a hacking, unprofessional effort,

two dozen cuts that offered no salve to Stel's hate-maddened heart.

10.

It was all anyone could talk about at the bar that night. The docks were at war, with Alasdair retreated to the shelter of the Beggar's Ramparts and sending teams of thugs out to burn juke joints and tear up wyrm dens. The price of breath had doubled, the streetwalkers lay asleep in their beds, and you couldn't find anyone to take a bet from Glandon to the west coast of the bay.

"Heard she went mad, tore his throat out with her teeth," said Card. Card was the sort of gossip who made up in melodrama what he lacked in fact.

"Did she?" the bartender asked. He was a giant of a man wearing a dark stretch of cloth over his one ruined eye.

"Unnatural thing, a woman holding power," Card added, "like a dog wearing boots."

"I'll mention that to my wife," said the bartender.

"Way things are going, even the nobs are sure to notice. You mark my words," Card continued, "it won't be long before Black House steps down on Stel. Can't have the docks up in flames like this—bad for everyone."

"You ought to be careful what you whisper," said the ugly man seated beside him, smiling a crooked smile. "A word in the wrong ear can cause all sorts of trouble."

Daniel Polansky is the author of the Low Town trilogy, Empty Throne duology, the Hugo-nominated novella *The Builders*, and *A City Dreaming*. He can be found in Los Angeles, mostly.

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