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This is his first novel.

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BY STEVEN SMITH:

THE TREE OF LIFE

The Map of the Known World

The Ordeal of Fire

The Last Days

This Sacred Isle

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STEVEN SMITH

THE MAP
OF THE
KNOWN
WORLD

monster field press

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Set in Garamond

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For Abby

- PROLOGUE -

The waves tossed Vortigern around like a rag doll. Seaweed entangled his legs and salt water blurred his vision. Weighed down by his sodden clothes, he waded the last few yards to the beach. The waves kept pulling him back but with a huge effort he broke free of their grip and collapsed onto the damp sand. There he lay, fighting for breath as the foamy surf lapped around his legs. The sound of the sea's constant wash and drag filled his ears.

When enough strength had returned to his body, Vortigern stood. He looked out to sea; a burning ship drifted on the dark water and the flames illuminated the waves with angry red and yellow reflections. Vortigern had sailed on the *Endeavour* for six months; now he watched its death throes. Anchored close to it was another vessel—an Ironclad warship.

One hour earlier, the Ironclad had emerged from the mist like a ghost. For the lightly armed *Endeavour* there had been no escape, Vortigern knew the crew of his ship would be dead by now. He remembered their faces as he prepared to jump overboard; the faces of men who knew they were about to die. He would have stayed and died with them but

the captain had insisted, 'You are the strongest swimmer. You must take the map to Lord Hereward. He will know what to do.'

So he alone had survived but the Redeemers would soon discover that he had escaped. Vortigern looked around, taking in his surroundings. He stood in a wide cove, towering cliffs rose in front of him but a steep path offered an escape from the beach. Digging into his last resources of will and strength he made for the path. His footsteps left a trail across the sand; an easy trail for the Redeemers to follow but he had no time to do anything about it.

He scrambled over the bank of pebbles at the top of the beach, the cold wind pushed his damp clothes against his skin and his teeth chattered violently. As he wiped his salt-stung eyes, he saw a band of men, their bearded faces turned demonic by their flickering lamps. Scavengers. Wrecks were common on the treacherous southern coastline and there were rich pickings for those who scoured the beaches. They carried pick-axes, hatchets, crowbars and ropes, and as they reached the foot of the beach, one scavenger noticed Vortigern and bellowed, 'LOOK YONDER, A SURVIVOR!'

Vortigern knew they were Nulled. They were enemies and they would tell the Redeemers that they had seen him.

With a new vigour born of fear, Vortigern ran.

PART ONE

The Black Wagon

Elowen Aubyn sprinted along the narrow street. She wore a linen dress, the skirt of which hung unevenly above her cheap leather shoes. Stitched onto her right sleeve was a piece of red cloth shaped in the letter 'P', the sign of a pauper.

The street, rutted and holed by countless horses and carts, sloped down to a central drain blocked with rubbish and horse droppings, above which swarmed a horde of flies. Washing hung on lines that ran from house to house, billowing in the fitful wind like the sails of a ragtag fleet of ships. A scrawny mongrel dog that had been happily sniffing around the wheel of a cart barked with alarm as Elowen hurried past. Sparrows pecking at scattered pieces of grain flew away. A lazy cat basking in the sun bolted for cover.

Elowen knew she was late. She tried to run faster but the effort gave her a painful stitch. A bitter, salty taste formed in her mouth and her lungs felt as though they were going to burst out of her body. Her knees ached from hours knelt cleaning the Orphanage latrines. She always got that job, she thought bitterly. She had been left alone to work, two hours of retching and gagging as she emptied the stinking

pails and scrubbed the filthy floor. The smell still lingered on her clothes and her hands. Now she was late and would get into even more trouble. It wasn't fair.

Elowen reached the town market square, known by all as the Shambles, where a crowd had already gathered. Opposite the church stood a wooden stand erected for the ceremony. Only the aldermen, the most important people in the town, were permitted to sit within the stand and, by Mayoral decree, the orphans were to work all day serving them food and drink. As Elowen reached the stand someone grabbed her arm; she was dragged to a halt and spun round to face a short boy with broad shoulders and a square body. His thick ginger hair stood up like the spikes of a hedgehog and angry spots and white-heads erupted all over his pale face. Around his waist he wore a black and white cloth sash, the sign of his authority.

He was Diggory Bulhorn, the head boy of the Orphanage.

'You are late,' he said in the slow, pompous voice he always used when trying to sound like an adult.

'I know. I'm sorry,' said Elowen between gasps, the apology added as an afterthought. She hated apologising to Bulhorn. She knew how much he enjoyed any chance to humiliate her but it was the only way to speed up the inevitable lecture and lessen any punishment.

'I was cleaning the latrines,' she continued, knowing that her explanation would fall on deaf ears.

'That is no excuse. You should work harder and faster. The Master will hear of this,' he said.

He paused, waiting for a reaction, waiting for any sign of fear. Elowen knew what he wanted. He wanted her to beg

him not to tell the Master, but she was determined not to give Bulhorn the satisfaction of seeing her grovel.

‘Do what you have to,’ she replied with a shrug, trying to sound unconcerned.

Faced with this unexpected resistance, Bulhorn opened and closed his mouth like a grounded fish. ‘The Master will deal with you. Now get to work and help with the serving. Useless girl.’

With that he marched up the steps.

Useless girl. People always said that about her.

A voice from inside her head said, ‘*You are useless. Everybody laughs at you.*’

It was a voice Elowen often heard. Sometimes it spoke with her voice, sometimes with the voice of other people. It sneered, criticised, mocked. It reminded her of all the humiliations she had ever endured and it echoed words and memories from past beatings, past abuse, past failings. She tried to fight the voice, she tried to ignore it, she knew she would never be happy until it went away. But it never left her. She doubted it ever would.

Elowen ran a hand through her scruffy dark hair and stared at the church. It was a grim, fearful building with a dull slate roof, angular windows and a spire that threw a heavy shadow onto the town. A stage had been built onto the church’s broad steps—a stage for the ceremony to come.

Somewhere within the church was Elowen’s best friend, Uther Bantling. Elowen wondered if he would enjoy his special day. Every May Day all the children who had come of age received the Holy Null, the mark of adulthood. At

fourteen, Elowen was still a year short but Uther was due to receive the Null that very day.

Beneath a fog of tobacco smoke the crowd grew restless. Like maggots left in a box, everyone in the crowd wriggled for a better position. They stood on tip-toes, necks craned and children hoisted onto adult shoulders, triggering loud protests from those stood behind. Through the crowd wandered tumblers, acrobats, jugglers and fire-eaters. One figure caught Elowen's eye, he carried a staff that reached his shoulders and around it were tied pieces of coloured ribbon. His eyes peeked out behind the strands of long red hair that fell over his forehead; a hat decorated with bird feathers perched on his head. His clothes were poor: a white shirt patched under the arm and torn and patched breeches made of rust-coloured cloth with tattered ties below his knees. He wandered through the restless crowd, telling jokes, singing songs. Some laughed at him, most ignored him. Elowen knew his name, *everyone* knew his name. Tom Hickathrift.

Hickathrift scratched out a living as a storyteller and singer in the taverns of Trecadok. He lived in the Old Tower, an abandoned watchtower on the town wall. Elowen often saw him marching around the town, his long shanks like the legs of some giant spider. He was strange, out of place in the greyness of Trecadok.

Elowen had no time to consider it further. The aldermen and their families demanded food and drink, and much of both. The orphan boys battled with heavy platters of roasted chickens, boiled mutton and hunks of rich cheese. The girls, including Elowen, carried ewers of sugared wine and

jugs of ale. Elowen struggled over seats, big feet, lazily discarded coats and hats. Flagons were filled, refilled, and filled again.

A smell of grease lingered under the roof, Elowen smelt it on her fingers, on the sleeves of her dress. It was a sickening, unsettling smell but the glimpses of bread and cheese also reminded her that she was hungry. Being hungry was nothing new in the Orphanage, meals there were poor and a rumbling stomach was her constant companion. But this morning was worse than ever; hunger made her stomach feel as though it was being knotted and folded.

An unpleasant shout broke her thoughts. ‘GIRL! MORE WINE!’

The shout came from the town magistrate, Horatio Morvel. He sat in his full black gown with long hanging sleeves. Morvel’s wife, Melder, sat next to him scowling at the crowd and picking at her ceruse filled pockmarks. The couple were accompanied by their daughter, and the apple of their collective eyes, Borra. She sat perched on the end of her seat, chin lifted, nose in the air. To her good fortune she had not inherited her mother’s looks. Her hair tumbled down in chestnut curls and faint freckles dusted her pretty face, yet Borra’s delicate beauty concealed her true nature. Borra attended the same school as Elowen and never passed an opportunity to tease or torment her. Her lashing tongue frightened all the girls and Elowen, as a lowly orphan, always received the worst of it. Elowen looked down at her feet and avoided meeting Borra’s sharp glances.

Morvel held up his empty mug. ‘Don’t tarry, girl. I’m dying of thirst here.’

Elowen grabbed an ewer and picked her way across to him, all the time conscious of Borra's sneering stare. Melder Morvel, who had clearly not noticed Elowen, yawned and stretched out her flabby arms, banging into the ewer. Elowen managed to stop it falling but a small dribble of wine splashed onto Melder's white ruff.

Morvel shrieked and leapt to her feet, a look of pure anger on her face. Everyone in the stand turned round to look. Elowen froze, wanting the earth to swallow her. Meanwhile Horatio, adept at reading his wife's fiery moods, sunk low in his seat. Melder leant forward and showed Elowen the stained ruff. 'You have *ruined* this.'

Elowen stammered an apology. Borra smiled, cruel pleasure drawn all over her face.

'There is nothing you can say or do to repair the damage,' said Morvel. Then she smacked Elowen across the face. 'You are an imbecile. Master Cronack will hear of this!'

Her face red and throbbing, Elowen stepped back, nearly falling over the seats behind her. But if she thought her day could not get any worse, she was sorely mistaken.

'Elowen Aubyn!'

A harsh voice caused her to turn round, a harsh voice she knew well. A cold creeping fear gripped her; at the top of the narrow stairway stood Cornelius Cronack, the Master of the Orphanage.

Cronack ruled the Orphanage like a king and Elowen spent every day in fear of him. In his presence she lost the ability to think calmly, leading to more stupid mistakes. For Cronack the Orphanage was not just his kingdom but his saviour. To the despair of his late father, Lieutenant-

Colonel Cronack of the Penwyth Regiment, the young Cornelius proved too weak and cowardly for the army. Instead luck and patronage steered him to the vacant stewardship of the Trecadok Orphanage, a position previously held by the perennially aged Darius Deadlock who performed his functions scarcely less effectively in death than he had done in life.

Cronack found in the Orphanage a vocation that suited his nature. The many beatings he had endured at his father's hands transferred to the children in his charge. The outside world may have defeated Cronack but within the Orphanage he found a world he could control, a world he could shape in his own image: cold, cruel and paranoid.

Cronack strode down the stairs; he walked with his head up, his chin out and one hand holding the other behind his back. Being short and bowlegged, Cronack could not risk losing vital inches by slouching. He wore a thigh-length cloak over a black doublet and grey breeches, a broad rimmed sugarloaf hat concealed his baldness.

His icy grey eyes looked Elowen up and down, examining each detail like an explorer poring over a map. He doffed his hat to Melder Morvel. 'Madam, is there a problem?'

Elowen's heart pounded, she felt as though she was sinking into the earth. Morvel showed her ruff to the Master. 'Look at the damage this wretch has done! Look!'

With exaggerated care, Cronack examined the ruff and made a suitably horrified expression. With his tongue he moistened his lips. 'Her behaviour is shameful. This is a particularly idle and sinful girl, a constant source of trouble to me.'

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