

The Grey Bastards: A Novel (The Lot Lands)

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"[A] fantasy masterwork . . . a dirty, blood-soaked gem of a novel [that reads] like Mad Max set in Tolkien's Middle-earth."-Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

Jackal and his fellow half-orcs patrol the barren wastes of the Lot Lands, spilling their own damned blood to keep civilized folk safe. A rabble of hard-talking, hog-riding, whore-mongering brawlers they may be, but the Grey Bastards are Jackal's sworn brothers, fighting at his side in a land where there's no room for softness.

And once Jackal's in charge-as soon as he can unseat the Bastards' tyrannical, seemingly unkillable founder-there's a few things they'll do different. Better.

Or at least, that's the plan. Until the fallout from a deadly showdown makes Jackal start investigating the Lot Lands for himself. Soon, he's wondering if his feelings have blinded him to ugly truths about this world, and the Bastards' place in it.

In a quest for answers that takes him from decaying dungeons to the frontlines of an ancient feud, Jackal finds himself battling invading orcs, rampaging centaurs, and grubby human conspiracies alike-along with a host of dark magics so terrifying they'd give even the heartiest Bastard pause.

Finally, Jackal must ride to confront a threat that's lain in wait for generations, even as he wonders whether the Bastards can-or should--survive.

Delivered with a generous wink to Sons of Anarchy, featuring sneaky-smart worldbuilding and gobs of fearsomely foul-mouthed charm, The Grey Bastards is a grimy, pulpy, masterpiece-and a raunchy, swaggering, cunningly clever adventure that's like nothing you've read before.

Praise for The Grey Bastards

"Saddle up the war boar and set off on a wild, gory thrill-ride that ends in an awesome climax and begs for a sequel."-Daily Mail (UK)

"Non-stop action, though not for faint hearts . . . the Grey Bastards live up to their name in all respects."-The Wall Street Journal

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Jackal was about to wake the girls for another tumble when he heard Oats bellow for him through the thin walls of the brothel. Ugly, early sunlight speared through the missing slats in the decrepit shutters. Jackal jumped from the bed, shaking off the entangling limbs of the whores and the last clouds of wine swimming in his head. The new girl slept right

through, but Delia groaned at the disturbance, raising her tousled red locks off the cushions to squint at him with naked disapproval.

"The fuck, Jack?" she said.

Laughing quietly, Jackal hopped into his breeches. "There is a large bowl of porridge calling my name."

Delia rolled her bleary eyes. "Tell that big thrice to hush. And come back to bed."

"Would that I could, darlin,'" Jackal said, sitting on the bed to pull on his boots. "Would that I could."

He stood just as Delia's fingers began to coax at his back. Not bothering to find his brigand, Jackal snatched his belt from amongst the girls' discarded garments on the floor, buckled it on, and adjusted the fall of his tulwar. He could feel Delia's eyes on him.

"Hells, you are a pretty half-breed!" she said. The sleepiness was gone from her eyes, replaced by a well-practiced look of hunger.

Jackal played along, purposefully flexing as he gathered his hair back and tied it with a leather thong. Giving Delia a parting wink, he threw open the door and hurried from the room.

The corridor was dim and abandoned, still clinging to the bleak stillness of dawn. Jackal walked through to the common room, not breaking stride as he stepped around the pitted tables and overturned chairs. The sour stink of spilled wine and sweat were all that remained of the night's revels. The door leading outside was cracked, the bright, intruding light already promising a sweltering day. Jackal stepped into the morning glare, clenching his jaw and eyelids against the assault of the sun.

Oats stood by the well in the center of the yard, the slabs of muscle on his broad back shining with water. Jackal jogged up and stood beside his friend.

"Trouble?"

Oats lifted his chin slightly, pointing with his spade-shaped beard down the dusty track leading to the grounds. Jackal followed his gaze and saw the shimmering shapes of horses approaching. Putting a hand at his brow to shield his eyes from the sun, he looked for riders and was relieved to find them.

"Not horse-cocks."

"No," Oats agreed. "Cavalry."

Jackal relaxed a little. Human soldiers they could handle. Centaurs might have meant their deaths.

"Ignacio?" he mused. "I swear that pit-faced old drunk can smell his payment from all the way at the castile."

His friend said nothing, continuing to scowl at the approaching cavalcade. Jackal counted eight men, one clutching a banner that no doubt bore the crest of the king of Hispartha. That blowing bit of silk meant little in the Lot Lands and Jackal kept his gaze fixed on the man up front.

"It's Bermudo," Oats said, a second before Jackal picked out the captain's identity through the dust.

"Shit."

Jackal found himself wishing he had not left his stockbow under Delia's bed. Glancing over, he noticed Oats was completely unarmed, the well still clutched in his meaty hands. Still, the brute's appearance was often enough to discourage a fight. As was said amongst the members of the hoof, Oats had muscles in his shit.

Jackal was no stripling, but his friend was a full head taller. With his bald head, ash-colored skin, corded frame, and protruding lower fangs, Oats could pass for a full-blood orc as long as he hid the Bastard tattoos that adorned his powerful arms and back. Only his beard marked him for a half-breed, a trait Jackal had not received from his human half.

As the riders fanned out around the well, Jackal grinned. He might not be able to pass for a thick, but he was big enough to give these human whelps pause. Their clean crimson sashes, brightly polished helmets, and petulantly brave faces marked them as fresh arrivals. Mustachios must have been in fashion in the courts of Hispartha, for drooping from every upper lip was something akin to a furry horseshoe. Every lip except Bermudo's. He looked like one of those long-dead tyrants found on the old Imperium coins, all long nose and close-cropped hair.

The captain reined up.

He took a moment to survey the yard, his attention lingering on the stables Sancho maintained for his guests.

Jackal lifted his chin in greeting. "Bermudo. Breaking in some new boys, I see. What, did they demand proof that a man can still get some quim in the badlands?"

"How many are with you, Bastards?"

It was an offhand, almost lazy question, but Jackal did not miss Bermudo's concern.

"Not here to ambush you, Captain." "That is not an answer."

"Certain it is."

Bermudo turned to catch the eye of one of his riders and flicked a finger at the stables. The chosen cavalero hesitated.

"Go check the stables," Bermudo said, as if instructing an idiot child.

The man snapped out of his puzzlement and spurred his horse to the west side of the yard. His compatriots watched his progress. Jackal watched them. All held demi-lances and round steel shields, with scale coats for further protection. Five of them had grown tense, betrayed by the tautness in their reins. The last one looked bored and produced an overwrought yawn. The errand runner had dismounted, tied his horse to the post, and now strode into the stables. A moment later, Sancho's stableboy stumbled sleepily into the glare. The cavalero followed not long after.

"Three hogs and a mule team," he reported when he rode back. "The team belongs to three miners," Jackal told Bermudo. "From Traedria, I think. They're not here to ambush you either."

"No," Bermudo said. "They have dispensation to prospect in the Amphora Mountains. I know because I issued them the writ. You, however, have no such dispensation."

Jackal looked at the empty surrounding sky with awe. "Oats? Did Sancho's place get spirited into the Amphoras while we slept?"

"The peaks look smaller than I remember," Oats said. "Invisible, even."

Bermudo remained humorless. "You damn well know my meaning."

"We do," Jackal said. "And you damn well know Captain Ignacio allows our presence here."

"Did he assure you of that before leaving here last night?" Oats's face clenched. "Ignacio wasn't here last night."

It was true, but Jackal would have preferred not to give that away just yet. The captains hated each other, but that didn't explain Bermudo biting at Ignacio's name as if it were bait. It also didn't explain his presence at the brothel. The noble captain did not employ Sancho's girls and was rarely seen this far from the castile.

Jackal attempted fresh bait. "Don't let us stall you from getting inside. Sure you're all eager to relieve some spend."

Bermudo sniffed.

"Observe, men," he said, his gaze resting on Jackal and Oats while also ignoring them, a skill only noble-born humans could master. "A pair of half-breed riders. From the Grey

Bastards hoof. You will learn to distinguish them from their hideous body markings. Some you will come to know by their absurd names. Despite the allotments, they all think this entire land belongs to them, so you will find them in places they do not belong, like this establishment, blatantly ignoring the fact that it rests on Crown land. It is within your power to expel them in such instances. Though it is often best to allow them to sate themselves and move on. Unlike a pair of rutting dogs, it takes more than a bucket of water to discourage half-orcs in heat. They are . . . slaves to their base natures."

Jackal ignored the insults. He looked beyond Bermudo and smiled at the cavaleros arrayed behind him. "We do love whores. Pardon. We enjoy seeking our ease with willing company. Reckon that's how you'd say it up north. Either way, Sancho and his girls are always hospitable."

Bermudo curled his mouth with distaste, but it was the yawning cavalero who spoke, his mouth now settled into a comfortable sneer.

"I would never pay for a woman willing to lay with half-orcs."

"Then you best start fucking your horse." Oats rumbled.

Jackal smiled as the eyes of the new cavalero grew wide. "He's right. You won't find a whore in the Lot Lands who hasn't been spoiled by us. I'm sure they would take your coin, but don't be offended, lad, if they fail to notice your pink little prick is even in."

The man visibly bristled. Looking closer, Jackal noticed his mustachio could not quite conceal a harelip. The other six were casting uncertain looks at the back of Bermudo's head, searching for guidance. The captain's helmet was hanging from his saddle, and he carried no lance, but his hand had drifted to the grip of his sword.

"Make trouble," Bermudo said, his face turning flinty, "and I will drag you behind my horse all the way back to your lot, whatever arrangements you have with Ignacio be damned."

Jackal hooked his thumbs in his belt, getting his hand closer to his own blade. He could posture as well as the captain. "There is no quarrel here."

"Not unless you make one." Oats put in.

Bermudo's eyes flicked between Jackal and Oats. Was he actually considering spilling blood? Would this arrogant ass risk a feud just to save face in front of a gaggle of outcast nobility with new saddles and wet dreams of heroism?

Bermudo's jaw bulged as he chewed on his pride, but before he came to a decision the harelip rode up to the well.

"You there," he said to Oats, gesturing with his lance. "Fill yonder trough."

Jackal let out a snort of derision and watched as a ripple of uncertainty passed through the recruits, every eye on their outspoken comrade.

Bermudo shot the man a warning look. "Cavalero Garcia-

The youth waved him off. "It is all right, Captain. We have half-orc servants at my father's villa. They have to be kept well in hand or they turn mulish. Clearly these two have gone undisciplined for too long. A lack of humility that is quickly remedied. It is all in how you address them." He looked languidly down at Oats. "I said fill the trough. Step to it, mongrel."

Jackal heard the strained creaking of wood as Oats's knuckles paled against the bucket. This was heartbeats from coming to blood.

"You want to get your new arrival in hand, Captain," he said. It was not a suggestion. "He might not know what an angry thrice-blood can do to a man."

Bermudo's haughty manner was showing cracks at the edges. He saw the situation turning ill, same as Jackal. But he set his jaw and allowed the insubordination.

Shit.

Nothing to do but control whose blood was spilled, and how much. "So, Captain," Jackal said, "what did this fop do to be banished here? Gambling debts? Or, no, Oats had it before, didn't he? Your man got caught with his father's favorite stallion. Riding it without a saddle.

Inside the stable."

The smug cavalero stamped the butt of his lance into Jackal's face. He did it so casually, so lazily, that Jackal had plenty of time to avoid the blow, but he let it land. Pain overtook his vision and he reeled back a step, snapping a hand to his throbbing nose. He heard Oats snarl, but Jackal reached out blindly and laid his free hand on his friend's trunk of an arm, stopping any retaliation. Spitting, Jackal waited for his head to clear before straightening.

"You will keep a civil tongue," Cavalero Garcia told him. "Speak with such impudence again and I shall have you horsewhipped in the name of the king."

Jackal looked directly at Bermudo and found nervousness infecting his face. But there was also a creeping look of satisfaction.

"King?" Jackal said, sucking the last film of blood from his teeth. "Oats? Do you know the name of the king?"

"Such-and-Such the First," Oats replied.

Jackal shook his head. "No, he died. It's So-and-So the Fat."

Oats gave him a dubious squint. "That don't sound right."

"Wretched soot-skins!" Garcia exclaimed.

Jackal ignored him, throwing his arms wide in a mock flummox. "The name escapes us. Anyway, he's some inbred, overstuffed sack of shit that weds his cousins, fucks his sisters, and has small boys attach leeches to his tiny, tiny prick."

This time, Jackal caught Garcia's lance as the man thrust and used it to yank him from his mount, angling him to collide with the well's roof on the way down. The horse shied away, whinnying. Garcia floundered in the dirt, sputtering wordless rage as he tried to stand. Jackal grabbed the cavalero's cloak, pulled it over his head and punched his face through the dusty cloth. He fell flat.

The horses were balking at the disturbance, but the men were stilled by shock. Bermudo had visibly paled.

Jackal motioned at the fallen Garcia. "I think that's a good lesson for these virgins, Captain. You agree?"

Bermudo was no fool. He saw the chance being offered. With a curt nod, he took it.

Garcia, however, was still conscious. And less wise. Sitting up, he yanked the cloak from his head, revealing a mouth dripping blood and venom.

"Captain," he seethed, an accusing finger sweeping between Jackal and Oats. "I demand these two be brought back to the castile and hanged."

Jackal laughed. "Hanged? You're not dead, frail. A trade of insults, you bust my nose, I smash your teeth. That's it. It's done. Now go inside, get your cod wet, and forget it."

Garcia was deaf to good sense. His vengeful stare shifted up to Bermudo.

"Captain?" He spoke the rank, but it sounded far from the respect due a superior.

Jackal and Oats shared a look. What was this? Certainly not the first time cavaleros and hoof riders had come to blows. It happened at Sancho's more often than anywhere. It was time for everyone to ride on.

A gem of sweat studded the center of Bermudo's upper lip. He looked torn, chewing on a choice that was making him angry.

"Bermudo . . ." Jackal tried to get the man's attention, but was shouted down by Garcia.

"You will languish here forever, Captain!"

It was a threat. And it made Bermudo's mind.

"Take them!" he commanded.

Bermudo tried to draw his sword, but the bucket took him in the brow before the blade was half free. Oats had thrown with such force that not a drop of water spilled until the bucket smote the Captain's skull. He fell from the saddle, unconscious before he even struck the dust of the yard.






Jackal kicked Garcia under the chin, sending him sprawling before he could squeal further. Rather than intimidate the other riders, the violence against their comrade steeled their courage and all six lowered their lances. Jackal drew his sword and tossed it to Oats in one motion, keeping hold of Garcia's lance and leveling it against the impending charge.

Before the cavaleros could spur their horses forward, their gazes snapped up to stare wide-eyed. A voice rang out from behind Jackal's head.

"Think twice, you prickly lipped eunuchs!"

Jackal smiled. The voice was ill humored, commanding, an...

Other Books

Monster-Monster Rusak (Broken Monsters), Sudah banyak mayat yang dilihat Detektif Gabriella Versado, tapi yang satu ini unik, menurut standar Detroit sekalipun: setengah bocah, setengah rusa. Seiring ditemukannya mayat-mayat lain yang makin aneh dan meresahkan, bagaimana kota itu bisa tetap berpegang pada realitas yang saat ini pun telah nyaris hancur? Jika kau Layla, putri remaja Detektif Versado, kau "main-main" dengan orang yang bisa jadi merupakan predator online. Jika kau Jonno, jurnalis parowaktu yang putus asa, kau akan rela melakukan apa saja untuk mendapatkan akses eksklusif terhadap kisah yang mengerikan. Jika kau Thomas Keen, dikenal di jalanan sebagai TK, kau akan melakukan apa saja supaya keluarga tunawisma-mu tetap aman---dan menemukan monster yang terobsesi mimpi untuk menata ulang dunia dengan kejam.      . Sudah banyak mayat yang dilihat Detektif Gabriella Versado, tapi yang satu ini unik, menurut standar Detroit sekalipun: setengah bocah, setengah rusa."