



NEVERLAND'S LIBRARY

A Library Anthology

Introduction by Tad Williams

R.S. Belcher · Marie Brennan · Ian Creasey · Betsy Dornbusch · Keith Gouveia
Joseph Lallo · Jeffrey Mariotte · William Meikle · Peter Rawlik · Marsheila Rockwell
Jeff Salyards · Kenny Soward · Mercedes M. Yardley

Edited by Roger Bellini, Rebecca Lovatt, & Tim Marquitz

Series Edited by Alana Joli Abbott

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— INTRODUCTION —

Finding Fantasy, Again

THE FIRST TIME one of our cave-dwelling ancestors came back scratched up and bleeding from a rough day of hunting or gathering and someone asked, “What happened?” literature was born. But the first time someone painted something on a cave wall that nobody else recognized, and explained it by saying, “I saw it in a dream” –well, that was the birth of fantasy.

For a very long time in human history there wasn’t much difference between what we experienced and what we imagined. When blind Homer was reciting his poems about the Trojan War, did he think his semi-historical warriors like Achilles and Hector were more “real” than the gods who stand behind every scene in *The Iliad*? That’s a hard question to answer even today, when we call the creations of our mind “imagination,” and wall them off in a separate category from Truth. But what we see when we look at another human being is still only the tip of a great iceberg. What is in that human’s head is a lot bigger and a lot stranger than the physical reality. We used to know that better than we do now.

What we experience. What we imagine. For a long time the two were pretty much equal in importance. There were witches in our villages, monsters in the forest, and dragons at the edges of the maps.

The growth of Reason, a belief that the universe could be understood by sheer hard work, drove the first wedge between these two types of reality. You may have noticed that a great deal of fantasy writing takes place in pre-industrial settings. That’s because it’s not the trappings of industry that discourage fantasy (Steampunk does very well in that world) but the growth of understanding. Reason spawned science fiction, a literature of human doings and human interaction with a bigger universe, stories based on ideas that seemed as if they might be possible one day. Humans (some of them, anyway) began to believe that everything we saw and heard and touched might be part of a larger, logical system, that we might understand everything if we could only tease out the truth.

Fantasy, though, is a literature of things beyond explanation. It calls us back to childhood, either the childhood of our species, before we knew those map-dragons were imaginary, or our own individual

childhoods, when shadows held scary stuff, when things lived under our beds and in our closets or in that one part of our journey home where we had to walk through the dark woods.

The title of this anthology, “Neverland’s Library,” comes from Peter Pan, a famous story about not growing up—about continuing to see the world as children see it. We live in this modern age with a conflicting but ever-growing set of logical explanations for almost everything, for rainbows and eggs and evil. If somebody does something horrible beyond our understanding, we don’t just assume that person been possessed by a demon or touched by malign gods, we try to track the genes and influences that created the monster, to find out where everything went wrong.

But the childlike part of us will never be entirely satisfied with this modern world of reasons and explanations and facts. The child in all of us, the part of us that used to paint dreams on cave walls because dreams were just as real as the animals we hunted, still lives in that world, even in this era of instant information and high-definition science. Somewhere, deep down, we still want to believe in gods and monsters, because even if gods and monsters don’t explain reality as well as science does, they explain how reality *feels*.

Good fantasy writing takes us straight back to that important part of us—straight back to the past, straight back to childhood. The darkness beyond the fire becomes meaningful again, and the shadows under the bed are once more dangerous. But—and this is very important—if the danger and darkness are real, then so is the power of bravery, of hope, of simply being good. We don’t want an inexplicable universe that’s entirely against us, we want an inexplicable universe that might help us, too.

Ultimately, fantasy is about reducing the world to human size again, while expanding *what might be* to the greatest extent we can imagine. We can do it, because the human imagination is still the single biggest thing there is: it can encompass this entire universe, and several others beside.

Come and join me here, in a human-sized world that is much bigger than the everyday one we know so well. Read these stories. Come visit other places, other times, and other realities that only exist for certain in imagination, and see why we all need more than just “facts.”

Find fantasy. Be in awe again. Be afraid again. Be human.

Tad Williams
September 2013

— A SOUL IN THE HAND —
by Marsheila Rockwell
and Jeffrey J. Mariotte

IN THE DREAM, Kord *was* Panther. He moved through the trees like an unmoored shadow, lithe and black, paws lightly brushing the earth with each step. This was not the hardwood forest he had been born in, at the empire's edge, or the swamps he had come to know in later years. It was jungle, densely wooded, steamy, thick with life at every layer, from the worms and insects underfoot to the birds inhabiting the highest canopies, their plumage flashing, brilliant as it caught sunlight that only reached the floor as a muted and filtered green haze.

Panther followed a scent trail he couldn't name. It was rich, heady, familiar and strange at the same instant. Whatever it was, the scent was clearer in this place than the few signs of passage left behind by his prey: a crushed leaf here, there a vine yanked free of a tangle. Panther's eyesight was sharp; he missed nothing. But odor was the only trustworthy guide, and Panther filled his nostrils with it at every step, confident that he was closing in.

That confidence vanished when a sudden surfeit of smells confused his senses. He tried to sort them, but he was unused to the jungle and most were scents he had never encountered before. The only ones he knew for sure were blood and human flesh. The trail he had been following had vanished into the olfactory chaos, and he didn't know which way to turn. One path would lead toward...something, he was not sure what. Something he wanted, at any rate. Any other path might make him something else's meal.

Standing still was not an option. He would have to choose a course and count on wits and strength to keep him safe. He decided to continue as he had been, always keeping the sun before him. Soon enough, he found it again, the trail he'd been following, and an image of the creature that had left it almost came together in his mind, but then blew apart like seeds in the wind. It was as familiar as home... but Panther hadn't had a real home in so long. He inhaled the scent and continued on. The scents of blood and flesh were stronger this

way, too, and he had not covered much ground when he saw why: a human arm, caught in the fork of two branches, with blood spattering the trunk and the leaves below and the soil beneath those.

Then a foot, ripped off at the ankle, a line of ants looking like stitches against its pale skin.

Most of a face, limp and curled like drapery, dangling from a thorny bush.

And Kord realized he was human, no longer Panther, and whatever had strewn these parts about—not the same thing that had left the tantalizingly familiar scent trail, surely?—wasn't far away, hunkered in the shadows, waiting.

He'd had a choice to make, and he had made the wrong one.
Story of his life...



A boot in the ribs woke him.

Eyes closed, he waited, listening.

When it came again, he caught it, an inch away. Its owner tried to yank free, but Kord hung on, looked up.

"Kordell. He wants to see you."

Kord released Bragga's foot. The man stomped down once, an oddly petulant gesture for someone of his size and station. Bragga, bearded and burly and missing more teeth than he had remaining, was the trusted Second to Captain Antrem, Commander of the Red Legion, Glory Squad, in service to His High Autarch, Celaeus of Glaeve.

Fancy titles these mercenary bastards gave themselves, Kord thought as he pushed himself to his feet from where he had been sleeping against a tree, on one of the few spits of solid ground for miles in any direction. Antrem was captain of nothing but hired swords, and was himself hired out to Celaeus, a noble with more gold than brains, who hoped to use his paid army to overthrow an emperor and to award himself the stolen crown.

"In his tent?" Kord asked.

"Aye."

Kord leaned close enough to smell the rot that always wafted from Bragga's toothless maw. "Next time, you'll lose the foot," he said. "Just say my name. I'll wake."

The tent was pitched at the farthest point from the murky water. The stink of the swamp was everywhere, fetid and thick. Cloying.

The smell carried him back. Years. Memories with every breath, some of them even good ones.

Kord nodded to the woman standing guard outside the large crimson tent, which would have looked more impressive had it not been stained with brown smears and patched in a hundred places. He didn't care that Antrem was spending his inheritance playing at being a wealthy officer, and he didn't care about the politics of the fight. It would make no difference in his life whether Celaeus succeeded, or if Puell held onto his title and his empire. All that mattered was that the coins he was paid each week still spent.

The guard stepped to one side and pulled open a flap, and Kord ducked inside. Antrem's pipe blocked the smell of the swamp with a sweet, woody scent. It less successfully obscured the odors of Carna, Antrem's woman (who stayed, Kord knew, for the same reason he did: a weekly pouch of coins to make the memories of Antrem's blunt hands and plump red lips fade), and Nestor, Antrem's First. Carna was always so perfumed she made Kord want to gag, and Nestor was a giant of a man who sweated enough in a day to refill the swamp outside.

Whenever Kord encountered either of them, together or—more infrequently—separately, he gave thanks to the gods of the Thirteen Mountains of Creation that Panther's senses only ever fully manifested in his dreams, for if he had to smell those two with the much more sensitive nose of his totem, he truly would gag.

The three of them sat together on silken pillows in the rosy gloom. Carna was nude, her long black hair braided and greased with rank tallow into an upright wedge. Antrem and Nestor were dressed in loose tunics and leather leggings. "You sent for me?" Kord asked.

"I did." Antrem—*Captain* Antrem, Kord had to remind himself—was a slender man, wiry and tough, with a reedy voice. His quick movements were reminiscent of a snake's flicking tongue, and Kord could not help but wonder if one of those cold reptiles were the man's totem. Or if the self-styled leader of men were even in touch enough with that part of himself to have one.

Antrem relied on casual cruelty, base cunning, and the loyalty of Nestor and Bragga rather than on his own fearsomeness, to keep his crew in line, but it worked all the same. "I'm told you know these swamps, Kordell."

"Like you know Carna's breasts," Kord said, knowing the words were flippant, and not caring. "I grew up in them. Not as an infant; that was in the coastal forests to the north of here. But as a boy, until

my fifteenth summer." He tilted his head toward the southwest. "Not ten miles that way."

"So I've heard," Antrem said. "You were tutored at the scriptorium there?"

"Yes."

"By Murdis himself?"

"That's right."

"Murdis?" Carna asked, her wedge of greasy hair rising off the pillow, where it had left a dark stain. "He's the one who's dying, right? The one with the Hand of—"

Dying?

Nestor's huge hand landed on her thigh and squeezed. She flinched but stopped speaking. Nestor's hand stayed longer than necessary, and his fingers stroked her once as he took it away, leaving Kord to wonder if Antrem shared her, and if so, whether he knew it.

"He's quite the scholar, Murdis," Antrem said.

"So people say."

"And you can read? Cipher?"

"I can."

"And yet, here you are, earning your keep with your shoulders and back instead of your brain."

"I go where someone will pay me," Kord said. He was tired of standing while the others sat, but had not been invited to join them. "These days, more are hiring soldiers than scholars."

Nestor chuckled, a sound that rose from deep within his massive chest, and came out sounding more like a belch than a laugh.

"Such will always be the case," Antrem said. "Where there are human beings, there is strife. Where there is strife, killing will always be more valued than learning." He ran a thin finger up Carna's cheek. She didn't quite shudder at the touch, but she didn't look far from it. "Loving will, no doubt, always run a close second. Learning, I'm afraid, comes rather far down on that list."

Kord was getting impatient, and the masking effect of Antrem's pipe was beginning to wear off. He didn't know which was worse, Carna's perfume and the grease in her hair that the fragrance of over-ripe fruit was inadequate to fully cover, or Nestor's sour musk, but he knew he'd rather breathe swamp fumes than stay in the tent much longer. "The swamps?"

"Right, yes," Antrem said, as if he had entirely forgotten why he'd sent for Kord. Given the way he was gazing at the fresh bruise rising on Carna's thigh, he probably had. "I understand that there's a

detachment of Puell's soldiers somewhere in the vicinity. There can't be many routes through this forsaken hellhole that could accommodate such a large group. Get with Bragga, figure out the likeliest place, and plan an ambush."

"If they have skiffs—"

"Assume they don't."

"There are easily six or seven passable routes through—"

"The *best* one, Kordell. I'm sorry, you prefer Kord, no?"

"Whatever your pleasure, Captain."

"That's better. Go." He put a hand on the same thigh that Nestor had earlier, and waved his other toward the flap. "I've more pressing matters to attend to."

The smile that worked its way across Carna's face wasn't altogether convincing, but neither was it entirely false. As Kord left the tent, he didn't hear Nestor being similarly banished. Maybe the sharing was approved, then.

Maybe it was the whole point.

Antrem's guard would never say. Only women protected the captain's person, and they all sacrificed their tongues before being granted that privilege. Kord had never learned what they got in return for pulling the worst duty, and at such a cost.

He hoped he never would.

As he walked along the narrow, sandy, bark-strewn stretches looking for Bragga, he remembered what Carna had said about Murdis having "the Hand." Could he really? He had long sought it, Kord knew. And what other sort of hand could interest a woman as mercenary as any of those who sold Antrem their swords and perhaps their lives?

What other sort of hand, for that matter, would Nestor want kept quiet?

And perhaps most germane, what other sort of hand would Murdis want to possess?

There was, Kord thought, one good way to find out.

After all, he was only a hired man. He owed Celaeus nothing, nor Antrem, and Bragga and Nestor even less.

But he owed much to Murdis, and it had been years since he'd seen his old mentor. He'd sworn he'd never return, but if Carna was right and the old man really was dying, then Kord wanted to be there—though whether to mourn Murdis's passing or to spit on his grave remained to be seen.

He glanced at the sky. Hours yet before sundown. He kept looking for Bragga, determined now to plot out the best ambush he could. It would, after all, keep the Glory Squad of the Red Legion busy. And if Puell's troops could kill some of Antrem's, and maybe the captain himself, so much the better.



Though he had told Antrem there were several passable routes through this part of the jungle that Puell's men could use, most of those were only known to natives of the area. If Puell hadn't been able to buy or coerce a guide—no mean feat in these parts, where remnants of the Wild Ones still dwelled—then his men really had only one choice.

The road to Murdis's scriptorium had been paved with stones from the nearby Godsbreath Mountains, so-called for the dense fogs that wreathed their peaks even in the dry season. The old man had paid for the work himself, a decades-long project that saw completion when Kord was still a Spring Child. At the time, he'd imagined the construction had taken all the years and backs and coin in the world, but he knew better now, and the thought of Murdis spending so much of his own money just to ensure the safe passage of manuscripts to and from his care no longer filled Kord with wonder, but with a vague, unsettling distaste.

And perhaps, if he were honest with himself, with a bit of envy as well. With wealth like that, Kord could retire from the soldiering business himself, pay off well-appointed thugs like Antrem to either leave him alone or do his bidding, and embrace his true love—the texts Murdis had introduced him to as a child, when he first found him wandering the streets of Uxelte and brought him in as a foundling.

But Murdis, for all his generosity, had never offered to share anything more than his knowledge and his home with Kord. As a child, that had been enough. As a young adult, it had no longer sufficed.

Kord shook the bitter thoughts out of his head as he rounded the corner of a tent and saw Bragga harassing another mercenary, a youngster by the name of Julion, recently joined up and sending what little coin he made home to an even younger wife, pregnant with their first child.

"Bragga," he barked, distracting the older mercenary from a blow that would have left Julion's lip split for no reason other than the bearded man's dim amusement. "Leave the new blood alone and come help me round up some men. The captain wants to serve up a little surprise for Puell and his troops."

Bragga's eyes narrowed as they darted from Julion to Kord, and back again.

"Unless you want me to tell Antrem you were too busy pleasuring yourself with this boy to do his bidding? Because that works for me, too."

The other man's eyes narrowed further, becoming mere slits, and he muttered something vile but not quite decipherable into his beard as Julion cast a grateful look Kord's way.

"Fine." Bragga looked at the younger mercenary, who'd already wisely used his reprieve to back out of arm's reach. "I'll settle up with you later."

Then he looked over at Kord.

"What do you have in mind?"



It was a simple plan, really, but then, Kord was hardly a tactician. Planning ambushes wasn't generally a task that fell to a lowly mercenary, regardless of whether or not he had devoured Kalomte's complete *Treatise on Warfare* as a book-loving youth.

Simple, but sound, and easy to implement besides. Antrem would be hard-pressed to argue with his recommendations, and wouldn't realize the danger it would put his own men in until it was far too late.

Or so Kord hoped.

Puell's officers were no fools; they'd know following the road would leave their men open to attack, and would be especially alert where it funneled them through various chokepoints along the way. But even they would not anticipate an ambush where the road crossed through an open expanse of swamp, along the only firm ground for a quarter-mile stretch. The emperor's troops, having passed through the more dangerous jungle in seeming safety, would relax their guard as they entered the tree-free portion of swamp. Not much, of course—they were battle-hardened professionals, after all—but enough. And if they did look for trouble, their eyes would go naturally to the high

canopy that ringed the cleared section, or to the dense trunks that lined it.

Not having been raised in the swamp, they'd never expect an attack from below it.

Antrem approved the plan without question upon hearing it, and even Nestor and Bragga could find little fault with it, though neither of them was particularly enthused about having to lie in wait just beneath the surface of the mucky swamp water, with only thin reeds and moss crammed into their nostrils to keep them from drowning. But since Kord would be there in the mire with them, they could hardly complain.

What Kord didn't tell them was that they wouldn't be the only ones in the water. As long as they were still, they'd be unmolested by the swamp's somnolent inhabitants, but once they swarmed up out of the muck and the blood of Puell's men began to fill the water, the sleepy alligators would rouse and enter the fray, and they'd be indiscriminate about who they feasted upon. Human blood and flesh foot, all tasted the same to them, untainted by that human's alliances or aspirations.

And what the alligators didn't eat, the Wild Ones would pick off with their bows, for Puell's men were right to fear the canopy, even if they weren't correct about who hid therein.

Some of them would get away, of course, but that wasn't Kord's concern. Both Antrem and the empire would suffer losses, none of which could be pinned directly on him. And with any luck, when the survivors couldn't find him, they'd assume Kord had perished in the ill-fated ambush, his remains filling the belly of a satisfied gator, or perhaps adding to the strata of life and death that made up the muddy bottom of the swamp.

Either way, he'd be free of the mercenary life—free of Bragga's bullying, of Antrem's posturing and machinations, of the rank and petty existence that he shared with a hundred men just like him. Men who, like him, might have once had dreams beyond the sword and the battlefield, dreams that had long ago withered and died in the face of practicalities like having food and a bed, and maybe someone to warm it occasionally.

Dreams that might yet live again, if he could reconnect with Murdis, the man who'd taught him to hunger for such things in the first place.



The ambush was easily set, with thirty men on either side of the reinforced roadway, their positions at arm's length from one another masked from anyone who might bother to look by the patches of reeds that grew sporadically throughout the swampy water.

Kord was one of the last to slide his head below the muck, after shoving enough tree moss up his nose to make him feel like he'd been buried alive. Usually, the stuff was porous, but when mixed with the bluish clay-like soil that blanketed much of the jungle, it hardened into a waterproof plug that the men would have difficulty removing when the time came. Especially since Kord hadn't bothered to share with them the little trick of coating the inside of their nostrils with snail slime first.

He took one last look around, listening through the ever-present buzz of insects for the telltale bird calls that would signal the presence of the Wild Ones. Though he heard none, he could still feel the weight of their regard on the back of his neck. He hadn't been sure they'd come, of course, so he'd taken the precaution of having the other men paint their faces with streaks of the azure clay. Camouflage, he'd told them, and that was true enough, as far as it went, for the swamp water here was slick with a film of the bluish sludge. But the real truth was that the Wild Ones—primitive tribesmen who still adhered to the ancient customs of their long-abandoned homeland—considered the clay to be sacred, and if the mere presence of Antrem's men hadn't already attracted their attention, and their ire, the outlanders' liberal use of the sacrosanct clay would.

As Kord slipped beneath the surprisingly cool water, he noted several bumpy logs near the tree line—logs that would prove to have legs, and tails, and large maws full of very sharp teeth when the time came.

The thick water oozed around him like the unwelcome but insistent embrace of a spurned lover, sending chills through him. He shrugged them off and eased forward until his hand touched one of the large chunks of stone that had been sunk here to provide a solid foundation for this stretch of what he had come to think of as Murdis's Folly. Kord was at the end of his line, closest to where Puell's men would enter the open space. Since he could neither see nor hear beneath the swamp's brackish surface, he had to rely upon feel alone to tell him when the emperor's men were nearing. When he felt the vibrations in the stone that heralded their approach, he would reach out to touch the next man in line, as would his counterpart on the other side of the roadway, and the signal would get passed down from each soldier to

the next until they were all ready. He would send a second signal once the main body of Puell's troops had passed his position, and Antrem's men would surge up out of the water to attack, first with long spears, and then with swords, should they become necessary. Those who'd already crossed the expanse would be unable to turn back to help their comrades, and the empty road behind would provide an easy escape route for Antrem's forces once they'd done their damage.

If the gators and the Wild Ones didn't get to them first, that was.

Kord felt the first shivers in the cold stone that bespoke the impending arrival of Puell's men. They became steadily stronger until his fingertips felt like they were being pricked by a thousand tiny pins and needles, and he fought the urge to snatch them away.

Then he felt the barest slackening in the vibrations, and knew the end of the column had passed. He reached out to the next man in line and then counted to thirty, one second ticking off for each man who passed the signal down.

And then he burst out of the brackish water with fifty-nine other men, the majority of their spears finding targets in the groins and thighs of Puell's men.

But unlike his fellow mercenaries, once Kord's first blow struck home, he didn't draw his sword for a second. As his target cried out and grasped at the spear now piercing his leg just behind the knees, Kord slipped back into the water and swam for a thick stand of rushes he'd marked when Antrem's men had first entered the cleared section and begun taking their positions. The long stems would hide him as he climbed from the water into the jungle overgrowth, masking his escape from anyone who might glance his way.

He took a route that would keep him well clear of the alligators he knew would already be heading toward the roiling, bloodied water and reached the rushes without incident. There, he pulled the plugs from his nostrils and took a great gulp of air. As he did so, he heard the shrill cry of a scarlet macaw and the answering whistle of arrows being loosed from a multitude of strings. He climbed up the bank on his hands and knees, fresh screams filling the air behind him. Only when he was well within the cover of the jungle itself did he risk a glance back, just in time to see a blue-faced man take an arrow through the eye. As the man fell into the water, nearly into the gaping maw of a waiting alligator, Kord realized it was Julion, the young mercenary he'd tried to protect from Bragga.

He felt a momentary pang of regret, then quickly pushed it aside. If he got what he wanted from Murdis, he could make it up to Julion's