

A PILEAUS ANTHOLOGY



Edited by
Scott Colby

SYMPHONY NO.1: A PILEAUS ANTHOLOGY

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— INTRODUCTION —

Max Gladstone

We share stories.

When a joke gets us, we look for someone who hasn't heard it before, someone to whom we can tell it. When a tale shapes us, we're drawn to tell it again to others, or we tell new tales in response. We share books we love with the people we love. Myth cycles and legends gather this way, layer by layer: knights accumulate around King Arthur's table like rings in a tree, as successive storytellers take up the legend, and with successive tellings the legend gains the intricate simplicity called elegance.

The process is a little more complicated now, in the early 21st century, than it used to be. Modern copyright regimes have changed the conditions under which stories are told, by giving one teller (or—more worrying, to my mind—one multinational corporation) the legal power to say what the “real” story is. Of course, writers have been asserting creative control over their work in one form or another for a long time—my favorite example is how dedicated Miguel de Cervantes is, throughout Part 2 of *Don Quixote*, to read for trash what we might now describe as

a “fan-authored sequel” to Part 1. But if I want to write a story starring Raymond Chandler’s detective Phillip Marlowe, I can’t—barring the permission of the Chandler estate or the slow entry of the Marlowe stories into public domain.

There are a few possible responses to this challenge. One is the modern invention of the “subgenre”: I can write a story that’s *practically* a Phillip Marlowe story, or *practically* The Lord of the Rings, in terms of style, structure, affect architecture, as long as I don’t use any of the same names or plagiarize the literal text. Another strategy is fan fiction: write what you want to write, even if it stars Luke Skywalker and Captain Kirk, but don’t sell it in the general marketplace, and recognize that your work is unlikely to become part of the story that’s passed on in the mainstream culture.

One of my favorite responses to this pressure is the joint project. An idea comes together, a world, a concept—but it’s more than one person’s vision, one person’s story, and that’s the point. The initial creative impulse builds room for others to engage with and enlarge not just the fictional setting—the collection of things present in the world of the story—but its creative and emotional possibilities. Joint projects can have many different modes of organization and many different relationships to copyright, but when they do function, they create something uniquely shared and, as a result, uniquely welcoming to readers. Rather than a single tree growing outward ring by ring, you have a banyan, prop roots and vines spreading around and through.

Which brings us to Pileaus and the stories you’ll find in this volume. When I first encountered the world of Pileaus, I was struck by how much room it offered for invention, mystery, and strangeness. Joint fantasy worlds so often take their cues from Dungeons and Dragons, not necessarily in terms of their world building, but in terms of their main interaction metaphors—the things characters *do* on a moment to moment basis. They go on adventures. They hit spiky critters with sharp sticks. They cast

spells and gather gold pieces to fund their next adventure. It's a fun model, but it limits itself to certain kinds of stories.

Under the moons of Pileaus, music is magic, fae hunt violinists, and bards weave plots as well as spells. Empires tighten their grip and rebels resist, while in the dreamworld, faerie lords and ladies cavort and scheme. Certainly, there are adventurers here, as there are in real life. But just as striking to me are the people—a desperate musician, a half-fae child, a failed rebel, a skyship pilot haunted by a strange discordant song—trying to live, to find a place for themselves in a world that obeys fairy-tale logic more than the logic of adventure fantasy: a world in which the hero is not the hawk but the mouse, the small and clever and scared being trying to survive, to grow, to remember, to carry on, and, occasionally, to sing. A world, in that respect, not unlike our own.

Under a single author's pen, no matter how expansive the initial vision, all these stories would tend to circle back around to a single coherent theme—even the wildest of us tends to feel the gravity of meaning and significance. But while the stories in this volume are guided by a unified editorial vision, Pileaus is flexible and mysterious enough to be shaped to its authors' many interests and obsessions. It can be a hard-bitten barfight, it can be the lonely and the lost banding together against impossible odds, it can be a broken man desperate to make amends, it can be an explorer's obsession. When I was first introduced to Pileaus, it felt like something I'd dreamed—and, rarer still, it felt like someplace big enough to dream in. A place, in short, to share.

Go slowly here. Pileaus is a world of multitudes—moons, species, curses, societies, magics, languages. It may help to follow a single thread, as when we listen to a single instrument in a symphony: a single character or concept or even author can be your compass. Music is an excellent starting place. Listen to the many forms of music, here—music as flight, as dream, revelation, music as vision, as drug, music as liberation and as an instrument of control.

It twists, surprises, conceals, and reveals. And you might find yourself humming a few bars—or walking over to a friend with your headphones out: “Hey. You’ve *got* to hear this.”

These are old stories: not by the standards of *stories*, by which they were practically written yesterday, but by the standards of the internet world in which they took root and in which they have grown. The authors—including me—are older and we would hope wiser now than they were when they first dreamed these characters and wrote these words. But there’s a bright freshness to the work, of leaves not yet unfurled, of bright clear notes drawn from a new-strung fiddle. Hear it. Take it in. I hope you find something here to pass along.

NO MATTER
— HOW YOU HIDE HER —

Alana Joli Abbott

Rhia shrugged further into her cloak. The moment the sun sank, the air turned cold, and she could see her breath hovering on the fog in the air.

“Fair Dilys, I saw smiling,” sang the girl behind her shoulder, breath catching much like Rhia’s had, but then dancing through the fog, almost in time with the notes. Rhia hummed quietly along, allowing the music to calm her, which was certainly what Dilys had intended. The girl’s hand slipped into Rhia’s below her cloak, and Rhia squeezed back.

Neither of them wanted to be here.

Rhia’s gaze cast about, trying to make the shapes in the fog become the people she’d been sent to identify. If they were people the Lady was interested in, Rhia was fairly sure she didn’t actually want to know them. It was safer to stay in the shadows, out of the Lady’s attention, but it was far too late for safety. If only she’d never caught the Lady’s eye—but it was too late for that, too. Now, she was what she was, and Dilys was with her.

"I see them," Dilys said, the girl's long and graceful arm extending through the fog, parting it like a shroud.

There were four shapes: three man-shaped, though one was by far shorter than the others, and one woman shape that appeared to be carrying a light or lantern of some kind. Or perhaps she just glowed. Rhia fingered the beads on her bracelet, hanging into her palms beneath her cloak, and murmured a charm against evil.

"What do you see?" she asked quietly.

"Five, like fingers, the little one's the thumb," Dilys sing-songed. She gripped Rhia's hand, starting to pull forward, but Rhia held back.

"Where's the fifth?" she whispered, squinting against the fog.

Dilys' arm dipped, and Rhia saw a small shape, no more than a child, between the tallest man and the glowing woman. But the fog shifted, and Rhia couldn't make out the shape any more than she'd been able to when she first saw the group.

Then they stopped, the tall man giving instructions to the others, and they separated, forms drifting into abstraction as the fog covered them. Rhia bit the tip of her tongue, wanting to avoid the leader, because surely that was who the Lady was really interested in. Better to do the job simply, get enough information to please the Lady without actually complying. There was little enough she could do to rebel, not like the old days.

Dilys started off after the tall man, but Rhia yanked her back, and they followed the short man instead.



From his seat at the bar, Llew watched the short man enter, the smile on his face too broad for him to be up to any good. They'd been in town for a few days already, looking for something, and Llew was as curious as anyone to know what it might be.

No less because there were apparently folk willing to pay good coin for the information.

Beads clattered around his ears, tumbling forward with his hair, as he slammed his mug down, barking for another, despite the fact that he'd slopped most of the last one on the bar's surface. The bartender—a Pilean import as much as his whiskey—took the pay without noticing, and Llew's eyes wandered over the crowd. Few of them wore their colors anymore and not openly. The beads that had once decorated the hair of every man and woman there had now been relegated to smaller decoration—a bracelet here, an embroidery there. The people of Norrington were hiding amongst themselves, waiting. All except Llew, who'd never bothered to hide from anyone.

He ordered an additional second drink, the same slew that the short man with the axe had just ordered, and waited for the opportunity to offer it to the fellow. If habits from the previous night continued, the short man would begin telling stories of his own glorious exploits, which practically begged for people to buy him drinks. Llew would be ready.

And then Rhia came in, and his plans flitted off. The girl came in behind her, a waif of a thing in a too-big cloak, nearly thirteen but still slender as a reed. People rarely noticed Dilys in Rhia's shadow, and Llew would hardly have seen her himself if he hadn't known to look. But he'd learned that watching Rhia was a danger of its own, and so he kept his eyes locked on Dilys as Rhia let her cloak fall down around her shoulders, showcasing her slim figure and amplifying her curves through a gauzy dress in the Mana'Olai style.

Llew saw the way Dilys looked around, searching for familiar faces, waving with a grin as she saw people who recognized her and faltering when she noticed they were too busy staring at Rhia to make eye contact. Dilys almost resigned herself into a pout until she seemed to feel his gaze—Llew watching her so he could ignore the way that Rhia tossed her hair, the way she searched the room for her mark. Llew mirrored Dilys' shy wave, and she giggled.

Rhia's face broke out into a dazzling smile that even Llew could not manage to ignore, and she approached the bar, Dilys in tow.

But they did not approach Llew—instead, they made their way toward the short man with the axe. Dilys tried to heft herself onto the too-tall barstool while Rhia touched the short man's shoulder lightly. The bartender, enchanted by Rhia as much as the next man, called for music without her so much as asking.

Llew cursed as Rhia and the short man made their way out onto the dance floor.

"Bad words do not a good man make," Dilys' voice lilted at his side. He swallowed a second curse for not having noticed her sneaking up on him, then offered her a hand.

"What does the fair Dilys wish to drink this evening?" Llew asked quietly, darting his attention between the girl and the man he'd hoped to be the source of his coin.

"Apples and sky, all mixed together," she giggled.

Llew reached out and touched the beads the girl had woven into her braid. They weren't family colors—they were a myriad of blues and oranges and golds that echoed the hues in the girl's eyes. "You're too young for cider," he warned her.

"You're too old for wine," she countered. "No matter how you hide her—"

"She's never hard to find," Llew intoned along with her. He barked at the bartender again, ordering the weakest cider in the house. It was cleaner and safer than the water had been since they'd lost Mydess to the Pilean invaders and hardly enough to give her more than a warm feeling in her stomach. Rhia would still kill him. "You be good, Dilys. Keep your eyes open."

She wrapped her small hands around the cup, those blue and orange and gold eyes looking up at him, sparkling. "I see more when they're closed."

He pushed away from the bar, affecting a stumble, and Dilys giggled. It didn't take long to spot Rhia and the short man on

the dance floor—as usual, all attention was on Rhia, her tumble of auburn hair, her too-well-revealed figure. From the barmaids to the singer to the patrons, everyone watched her, some with animosity born of jealousy, others with unseemly interest. As Llew staggered through the crowd, spilling the drink he'd brought with him, he thought of what she'd looked like as a child, not so long ago, when they'd run messages together under the noses of the same Pilean soldiers who now policed them: mud-covered, freckled, lanky Rhia whose legs were too long for her body. If he could see that image, he could ignore whatever spell it was she wove around herself—true magic or not.

As she spun, laughing, in the short man's arms, Llew lurched into them, sending all of them tumbling off balance. Llew's mug flew and clattered on the ground.

"Sorry! Sorry!" Llew said, slowly and loudly enough to maintain his appearance. He offered a hand to help up the short man, but Rhia took his arm instead, pulling herself up too close to his chest to be coincidental.

"No trouble," said the short man, making his way back out of the crowd, looking at both of them with suspicion. He patted his purse casually, quickly enough that a common passerby wouldn't have noticed, and kept watching as he started back toward the bar.

"Aw, let me 'least buy you a drink!" Llew tried, hiding his desperation, but Rhia had grabbed his hands, wrapping one around her waist as she closed the other around her fingers.

"Dance," she commanded, and he did as he was told, watching his fortune walk away.

Rhia was tall enough that her mouth buzzed right next to his ear, her warm breath tickling as they swayed to the music. "Who are you working for this time?" she murmured.

"Freelance," he grumbled back into her hair, remembering to stumble. She compensated, spinning away before pulling herself back into his arms. "You?"

She had the good manners to blanch. "I don't know what you're talking about."

That meant she was working for her, Losa, the Black Queen, the one who had taken their freedom, their nation, out from under their feet. "I wish you didn't," Llew growled, pinching her fingers in his hand. The beads she wore on a bracelet, identifying her family line, her heritage, her place among their people, clattered against his wrist. "What does she want with them?"

He thought for a moment she wouldn't answer. The tempo picked up, and he staggered through the steps again, but she held on, her chin resting on his shoulder despite his jerky motions.

"Same as everyone else, I imagine," she whispered. "I only have to learn a little."

There was an "or" hanging after the sentence, but both of them knew what the "or" meant. Rhia had had the bad luck of being noticed by the Black Queen and there was no way for her to avoid that scrutiny now.

"What if these are the type of people we need?" he said into a crescendo in the music. They both stamped along with the drum beat, he a bare moment off the heavy rhythm. "There's something about them, Rhia. What if they could help us?"

The music stopped and she smiled with only her lips, an expression that still captured those who had been watching them, despite the sadness that Llew saw lurking behind it. "It's over, Llew," she whispered, her body language implying that she was telling him something far more secret, something full of promise. "We lost."

He couldn't stand to look at her, and he turned, pushing through the crowd as another patron asked her to dance. The music started up again as he reached his seat and ordered another drink with the intention of actually drinking this one. He looked over to the seat the short man with the axe had occupied for the past two nights, and then glared at its emptiness.

As his drink arrived, he noticed the empty cider glass on the bar. The seat next to him had been abandoned. Ignoring the new mug and forgetting his pretense of being drunk, he searched the crowd openly, looking for Dilys, knowing that she'd be nowhere inside. Rhia saw him and he jerked his head over his shoulder, without anger, and headed out into the night.

The air was cool and full of fog; his breath caught in the chill and hung in front of him. The street lamps glowed in small rings, balls of lit moisture rather than useful illumination. But they were enough to show him two figures walking away: the short man with the axe, hand in hand with a slight girl, skipping in the darkness.

Rhia pushed out the door behind him, wrapping her cloak around her hurriedly. "Where is she?"

Llew pointed. "Looks like she's better at this job than either of us," he said. Rhia pushed forward but he held her shoulder. "Let's see what she can find out."

Rhia snarled a curse and clawed at Llew's hand on her shoulder. "She's just a little girl," she said, practically begging.

"We'll follow," he offered, pulling his hand into his jacket, suspecting she'd grabbed at him hard enough to draw blood. "We'll keep an eye on her, so she won't get hurt. We'll keep her safe."

"But we'll let her do our work," Rhia said tersely. "I don't like it."

Yet as they followed, keeping the shapes in sight without giving away their positions, she didn't object again.



Dilys felt through her hand that the short man with the axe was a good man somewhere deep inside, but he had trouble with being good. He liked gold and women, but he was taking her to the blue man, because he was loyal too, and she wasn't supposed to know about the letters on the blue man's arms. She wasn't sure why. They were so pretty that she'd had to ask about them.

“What do they call you?” she asked him.

He looked down at her, and she felt the novelty of the action in his expression.

“Pile,” he said, his voice flat, like he was waiting for her to bite him.

“It must be hard to have to look up to the whole world, Pile,” she said.

He stopped, blinked at her twice, and then laughed. “Boruin’s going to like you,” he said, and she could feel his fear go away, though she hadn’t meant what she said as a joke.

They went into another tavern, this one with many rooms, and a sad old man playing an over-large fiddle in the corner watched the door. She wagged her fingers at him, breathing in the way he felt like the Fae. He’d danced with them long ago, but their scent on him was acrid, and she knew all at once that they had taken something that belonged to him. Pile led her over to him.

“What have you got there?” he growled. His beads, blue and orange and white like the sunset, hid at the collar of his shirt in the gray wisps of his chest hair.

“Girl who sees things,” Pile said shortly. “Where are they?”

“Upstairs,” the sad man answered.

“I’m sorry they stole from you,” Dilys said.

The fiddler looked at her and his jaw clenched, his bony fingers tightening on his instrument. She cowered behind Pile.

“I’ll get them,” the sad man said, and left.

She continued hiding as a woman came down the stairs. Sin Eater, her mind whispered, and images of darkness and suffering filled it. She almost cried out with pain as the woman touched her hair. Pile crouched next to her, making himself shorter again, and she clutched his shirt tightly. “I just want to see the blue man,” she said.

The woman looked at her again and turned away. It wasn't until she moved that Dilys could see the blue man and the boy at the foot of the tavern stairs.

She waggled her fingers at the boy. He waved back.

The blue man came over finally, and now she could see that the patterns weren't blue, just black, each symbol a word, a meaning, an image, a possibility. She reached out, letting go of Pile, to trace the marks up and down his arm. He almost pulled away, she could sense it, but he let her run her fingers along his skin. She closed her eyes, seeing the images more clearly now, as the potential behind them danced along her lids. Information flooded into her, and she knew more than she thought her brain could hold, words rushing on top of words too fast for her to understand.

Her eyes snapped open again and she looked into his, crystal blue, clearer than sky and water.

"I'd like to visit your library," she said. "But it's yours to keep."

"Tell me what you saw," the blue man said.

And she did.



The short man found them, hovering behind the window, in part because their breath spiraled up like smoke, giving them away. Rhia pulled her cloak more tightly around her, feeling Llew coil, ready to spring forward in their defense—or run. With him, she was never sure.

"I thought you two were on the grift," the short man said with a smirk.

"It isn't like that," Rhia said, before Llew could answer.

"No," the short man agreed, surprising her. "I can tell it's not. My friends say your girl's part Fae. Is that true?"

Rhia's heart clenched as she automatically shook her head in protest, but Llew grabbed her arm.

"What if she is?" Llew demanded, and the short man shrugged.

“No difference to me,” he said. “I’d like to know who’s interested in us, though. In case either of you should know.”

Rhia wondered for an instant if that was a threat, but dismissed it when Dilys came out, dancing, then wrapped her arms around the short man’s waist from behind in a hug. He patted her head, but never stopped looking at Rhia and Llew, waiting for an answer.

“The Black Queen,” Rhia said, her fingers automatically touching the beads on her wrist, and she made the sign against evil. “She’s curious about you.”

“Well, we’re curious about her, too.” The short man pulled out a small purse and handed it to Dilys, along with a piece of parchment, sealed. “The payment is so you see this gets delivered to her.”

She could almost hear Llew growl behind her. “And what about Norrington?” he said, too quietly, and the tension in his words was palpable. “What if you could help us out from under her?”

It was open dissent, and Rhia made the sign against evil again.

But the short man only shrugged. “We’re just travelers here.”

Dilys danced over and tugged Rhia’s hand. “Time to go.”

The short man nodded curtly and went back into the inn. Llew stormed off into the darkness, and Rhia felt the weight of the coins in her hand as heavily as she felt the Lady’s orders on her heart.

“Time to go,” she echoed.