

THE HANGED MAN

Book 2 of the Tarot Sequence

By KD Edwards

CHAPTER ONE

Sun Estate

“—ing, testing, testing, one, two, thr—” I stopped talking in the middle of the word, but moved my lips. I tapped the ear bud with a badly exaggerated gesture.

Across the weed-choked parking lot, Brand stared at me.

“Did I break up again?” I asked innocently. “Sometimes it does that.”

“Rune, oh my fucking gods, you will *not* pull this shit with me.”

“What?” I said.

“You will keep that thing in your ear, and you will maintain a running commentary, or we will have *words*.”

I didn’t want to have words. I wanted to use walkie-talkies, like we always did, which made it easy to edit out the parts I didn’t want to share with Brand. But Brand’s fascination with headsets and “running commentary” was a new thing, now that we had money to afford the equipment.

“Okay,” I said. “I promise. But I think the problem may be—” I stopped. “—ive solar interference.”

Brand dropped the duffle bag he was holding and started walking over to me.

I decided to move to the other side of our beat-up old Saturn so that its hood was between us. When he was close enough that I could see his genuinely pissed expression, I held up my hands. “I promise.”

“What are you planning?” he said.

“Nothing.”

“*What?*”

“Fine,” I said. “There are going to be monsters. There are always monsters. I don’t want you running after me because you think I can’t take care of myself. We’ve talked about this, Brand. You don’t walk onto haunted ground, not like this, not unless you’ve got sigils. And I don’t have the right spells stored to cover both of us. I’d spend as much time watching you as I would watching my own back.”

“How is this new?” he said in exasperation. “You know I won’t run after you. How many treasure hunts have we done?”

Past us rose the iron gates of Sun Estate, topped with rusting fleur-de-lis. A graying sky framed the blunted tips, announcing dawn.

“Sometimes it’s worse than I let on,” I finally said. Which was true, if not the real reason I was being so uncooperative today. “But it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“You think I don’t know that? Rune, keep the damn earbud in. I know you can do the job.”

I lowered my head into a nod, and stepped to the edge of the rough cobblestones. Once, it’d been the visitors’ lot. Dead weeds had long since cracked the rock. It was the closest I could get to Sun Estate without actually being on its land, which made it a good staging area for my periodic scavenging forays.

“It’s dawn,” Brand reminded.

“Yeah,” I said.

“So are you ready, or just fucking waiting for a little kid to start singing nursery rhymes in a spooky voice?”

I smiled at him—a real smile. He rolled his eyes back at me, which was his real smile.

I touched my mother’s cameo necklace and released its stored spell. Magic shivered loose, tugging at my arms and hair, fluttering my T-shirt beneath my leather jacket.

One step into midair became two, and then three, and then I floated over the two-story fence.

Sun Estate had been one of the very first translocations to Nantucket, decades before the mass translocations of the 1960s and 1970s when Nantucket became New Atlantis.

My father had stolen a Long Island mansion called Beacon Towers back in the 1920s, bewitching land developers into thinking they’d bulldozed it. This was back in the days when we operated in secret, before the human and Atlantean worlds collided.

Atlanteans had always had a fondness for old, ornate buildings. It took decades of emotional trauma to ripen stone. What better, then, than a mansion from Long Island’s Gold Coast? Beacon Towers had been the inspiration for Gatsby. It’d been home to Vanderbilt and Hearst—storied American families who bled unrest.

The original structure was more than 140 rooms under a gothic, turreted roofline. Victorian sensibility bred with Moorish citadel. Even in ruin, it was gorgeous.

Every year or two, I made an armed foray onto the abandoned grounds, looking for useful salvage before the specters and wraiths got too stirred up. Nice clothes, preserved in cedar; an undamaged painting worth a year’s rent; a set of tarnished silver hidden beneath a floorboard under the butler’s desk. Once I’d found a sigil hidden in the dead seneschal’s nightstand. I keep that particular sigil concealed under my pants legs, though.

I wasn’t there for a treasure hunt, though. Not today.

It’s only why Brand thought I was there.

I hovered above a knot of peeling brown roots, once rose bushes that framed the servant cottages, and stared at the gilded remains of my birthright. The mist had broken up, the closer I got to the mansion. It was an arresting image.

That’s as close as I planned on getting to the main house, though.

As soon as I was out of sight of the visitors’ lot, I floated down an access road that ran by the beach. The passing years had caked it in sand and dirt, recognizable only by the parallel line of scrub on either side.

The tide was out, the waves lost in a bank of fog as thick as walls. Only the weakest of spirits fluttered about me. Dawn was a time of day called the gloaming, when the more serious spectral threats were crawling in or out of bed. These harmless ghosts simply flickered in my peripheral vision, trapped in their last moments.

I avoided looking at them.

The carriage house was on the north side of the estate, near an ornamental lighthouse. Its stucco had gone gray, peeling in large, scabrous chunks. The line of stable doors had rotted and fallen into the dune grass. The main room—the base of a two-story, crenelated turret—sat behind a rusting iron door.

I hovered above the dirt path that led to it.

And couldn’t make myself go closer.

In all my forays, I'd never come to the carriage house. I'd always known I'd need to; but even now, two decades after the slaughter of my father's court, after the night I'd been held and tortured, the memories were too raw.

Three months ago, I'd discovered the identity of one of my abusers from that night. He was dead now, but the revelation was a loose thread, begging to be tugged on. I'd become convinced that I might find something inside the carriage house that would give me more threads to unravel.

And yet, I just stood there, and continued to stare at the iron door.

"Rune?" Brand said in my headset.

"Sorry. I need to be quiet for a little while. I'm trying to maneuver toward that attic stairway. Give me a minute?"

The earpiece went mute.

The door . . . I wouldn't even need a spell, it was so brittle. I could break through with a good kick.

They'd kept me in there for hours while the staff was slaughtered. Women and children. All the live-in help. People I'd known my entire life. *My father*. Barely identified by dental records.

I hadn't been spared violence, but I'd been spared. Why? I hadn't been tortured for information. I'm not even sure it had been entirely for their pleasure. I think they had me there for a reason.

I couldn't move closer to that door. Just stood there, floating. I tried to move forward, but I couldn't. What had happened in that building had infected every part of my life. Everything—everything good, everything new, every success and defeat—existed only in the context of that night.

"Minute's up," Brand said.

His voice was gentle, which instantly had me on alert.

"I'm fine," I said, clearing my throat. Maybe he sensed my hesitation through our Companion bond? He was good at picking up nuances, if I wasn't shielding tight enough.

"Rune," he said. "You know I won't let you go in there, right? Not without me. That's not something I'm going to let you do alone."

I rolled my eyes upwards, as if I could see the earbud. "You know where I am?"

"Of course I do. I've got a GPS app on your phone."

"Oh. Wait. *What?* When the hell did that start?"

"Just since fucking forever."

I ripped my phone out of my pocket with such force that I almost dipped onto the dirt-covered road. I didn't throw it, though, because all my games were on it. I turned it on and swiped through all the apps.

"Do you honestly think you're going to figure how to reprogram it?" Brand said.

"Spying," I said, with four syllables worth of outrage.

"How about we discuss that later. Rune . . . If you try to go in the carriage house without me, I'll be one step behind you with a sledgehammer and matches. There are better places to look for stuff. We don't need to go in there."

I sighed and put the phone back in my pocket. At least he didn't suspect *why* I was there. Our Companion bond was getting stronger as we aged, but it still wasn't telepathy, no matter how good Brand was at reading it.

"Okay," I said. "I'm going to go back and see if there's anything in the attic."

I covered the ground back to the mansion in half the time. Half an acre ahead of the visitors' lot, I made a soft turn and climbed higher, putting the dead shrubs of a hedge maze underneath me. Not

much stirred except for those glass-like ghosts I'd seen earlier, though I checked them out anyway to make sure they weren't something more dangerous. Daytime haunts were almost always translucent, unlike the lumbering, obvious threats of night haunts.

Before I got within twenty yards of the mansion, *almost always* churned out an exception. A daytime haunt—a physical, shuffling creature—staggered around the frame of a greenhouse. I moved a finger over my gold ring, and waited.

If it sensed me, it was indifferent. It was a rare type of skeleton—the proper name escaped me. Formed of the bones of mass murder victims from noble houses, it walked in an unending loop, passing by all the places its component parts had died. I saw the rib cage of a child; the hipbone of a woman; the rawhide skull of what may have been a large man.

“You stopped moving,” Brand said.

“I will throw it away and get a burner,” I said in exasperation. “Just see if I don't.”

“Are. You. Okay.”

“There's a . . . go-ryo. A go-ryo. I didn't know the estate had one.”

“What's a go-ryo? Is that bad?”

“No. It just is. It's not a threat.” I realized—if I had the stomach for it—I could get a better sense of where my people had died by analyzing the go-ryo's bones and comparing them to the places it paused. It was an idea of grim forensic value.

I continued along the outside of the mansion. Salt flavored the morning mist, sharp on my lips. I brushed hair out of my eyes, hesitating, and then turned back toward the go-ryo.

Something—some back-of-the-brain awareness—was niggling me. I didn't know what, until I saw that the go-ryo's uneven gait was caused by the bones of a clubfoot.

A stable boy. He'd tended my father's horses. A bully, in truth, who'd made my life very difficult until Brand became a bigger bully. Those were the bones of Gregor.

There was no easy value in knowing that.

I moved my hand to the pewter ankh around my neck. A touch sprang the stored spell loose. The magic shivered around my fingers, making the knuckles swell. I held out my hand, and magic streamed at the go-ryo.

The spell made a sound like cracking glass. Not a shattering, just a single, sharp, fragile snap. The go-ryo fell apart into pieces. The remains rippled and dissolved, and the wind carried them away as bone meal.

During my time in the Westlands a few months ago, I'd left a lot of ghosts in my wake, but also accrued a lot of favors. I'd bartered one of those favors for an audience with Lady Priestess, the ruling Arcana of the Papess Throne. She'd taught me a deceptively simple spell—at great expense—to lay shades to rest.

It had taken me the better part of a day to duplicate the magic. Each use contained only a single charge. It was not a practical defense for an estate as haunted as mine. Nor had it been a practical bargain. But I was not always a practical person.

“You've stopped again,” Brand complained. “This shit is getting old. Is this how you always work when I'm not around? Did you find a sofa?”

“I put the go-ryo to rest.”

“I thought it wasn't attacking?”

“It wasn't. I used a spell Lady Priestess taught me.”

“Why didn't you save it for something that was attacking? You're not even inside the mansion yet.”

“I just wanted to see if I could do it.”

Through the Companion bond we shared I felt the echo of his emotions. Anger. Resignation. Maybe a little shame.

“Rune, you’ve got eight sigils,” he said carefully.

“I do.”

“You wasted one of them on something that wasn’t even a threat. That’s . . . I know you’re upset, but you don’t have the luxury of wasting spells.”

Most scions stumbled through life with an armory of sigils behind them. My own ragtag collection was small. “I’m here,” I said, floating up to a weathered green door draped in dead rose vines.

“I can change the subject back just as fucking easily, you know.”

“If I run into trouble, I’ll abort. I won’t take any risks. I promise.”

“You’ll abort if our connection fails, too.”

“And I’ll abort if our connection fails,” I agreed. “I’m heading in.”

We owed this approach to Max, our teenaged ward.

A couple weeks back—insisting he wanted to be more useful to us—he researched old, undigitalized blueprints of Sun Estate in the New Atlantis Archives. He discovered that a structure we’d always assumed to be a shed was actually the entrance to a back stairway that led straight to the smallest attic. In all the decades since Sun Estate fell, I’d barely made forays into the first two floors. I’d never got as far as the attic level. The very nature of the estate’s haunting limited my excursions to only a handful of minutes.

The back stairway was both a plus and a minus. On one hand, it gave me direct access to an unplundered level. On the other hand, while I was in it, I was more or less boxed into a fifth-story coffin.

Excepting Lady Priestess’s spell, I’d filled my sigils with some of my more aggressive magics. I was confident I could get out of a tight spot, but smart enough not to be cocky about it.

The warped, peeling door cracked open with a tug. Autumn sunlight fell into a narrow space, tangling in spider webs and clouds of dust. I murmured a cantrip—a quick, common form of magic—and a ball of butterscotch light manifested above my head. I sent it up a flight of rickety stairs that were nearly as steep as ladder steps.

Other than my sigils, my most powerful weapon was my sabre, one of the few weapons I retained from my childhood. It was currently curled around my wrist in the shape of a wristguard. I shook my hand, and the wristguard softened and stretched, scraping over my knuckles. I shaped it into a sword hilt. As it settled in my palm, I extended a blade of garnet-colored metal. Innate fire magic made it spark with fat, drifting embers.

“Still with me?” I asked, as I used the sabre blade to burn the cobwebs from my levitating path.

“Still with you. Any beasties?”

“No.” I peered upwards to where the stairway switchbacked. “If this works, we may have to start paying Max an allowance.”

“Let’s see what’s in the attic first. If we’re taking this risk for an armful of old *National Geographics*, I’m going to be pissed.” There was a pause, and Brand swore softly. “I’ve got movement from the drone.”

“The what now?”

“I bought a drone.”

I stopped floating up the stairs. “You’re spying on me with drones too?”

“Are these really the questions you need to be asking right now? There are ghouls in the

orchard. Doesn't look like they know you're here, though. And I'm not spying on you, I'm watching your *back*, you ungrateful shit."

"I can't believe you bought a drone without telling me. How much did that set us back?"

"Well, I bought it at the discount department store down the street, not the one in 19-fucking-89. Do you even know how cheap drones are now?"

I continued floating up the stairs, slowing at all the turns. The blueprints were right so far; there was no access to any other floors. "Attic door ahead," I breathed.

"The ghouls still aren't moving. I'll keep an eye on them. Sound off every thirty seconds, okay?"

"Roger." I tried to open the door open-handed, but it was jammed in the frame. "I'm touching down. I can't do this while levitating."

"Roger," he said back at me.

I drew the Levitation spell back into me, and lowered to the ground. As I connected with the dusty floorboards, I kept my senses—my willpower—extended, trying to see if anything had reacted to my presence. Nothing pinged. I put my hand back on the doorknob and applied my shoulder. The top panel made a brittle splintering sound, but I was able to scrape the door halfway across the threshold.

A home as big as Sun Estate had more than one attic. This was the west wing's attic, above the family suites. Brand and I had had rooms on the third floor, once upon a time. My father had opted to occupy a tower on the other side of the compound. I'd heard my mother had lived in this wing, too; but she'd died before I was even capable of conscious thought. I had little of her in my life, not even a memory. Just a sigil shaped into an antique, yellowing cameo necklace.

The attic was at least a hundred feet wide. It was the smallest of them, but you could have still stacked ten of my current bedrooms side by side, with space to spare. It wasn't sectioned—just a wide, cavernous space rising to a crossbeamed peak. The hardwood floor was littered with dirt, animal scat, and mice skeletons. The walls were shadowed with water stains. Mother nature hadn't been as hard on the roof as I'd feared; there were no outright holes.

I wondered if the estate would ever be anything other than salvage. The effort to reclaim it was so far beyond my current resources, I didn't even know the shape such a recovery would take.

"Did you find another goddamn sofa?" Brand asked.

"No. Just checking for exits."

"Sure you are."

"Three doors. The one behind me; the one that leads down to the fourth floor; and the servant stairs. The servant stairs are blocked. Looks like a beam fell. See. I was checking. Tell me you're impressed."

"Not everything you do needs to be stuck on the refrigerator with a fucking magnet." But I sensed a warm flicker of approval through our bond.

I whispered a cantrip to send two more balls of light above my head, and ran a gaze across the sparse clutter. There didn't seem to be much except two rows of cedar wardrobes, likely for seasonal clothes. I went to the first one and tested the door. It opened in a waft of worm-eaten wood and mothballs. Winter jackets—expensive felts and furs—were arranged on cedar hangers.

"Clothes. Many clothes," I said. "We need a coat for Max, don't we?"

"We're not risking your life for a coat." He paused. "Is my old leather jacket there?"

"The one that made you look like an extra in an '80s action movie? With lots of power ballad soundtracks?"

He ignored me. "Any chests or strongboxes?"

“Oh, tons of them. I just decided to check out the coats first.”

Then I reached the end of the wardrobes and saw three cast-iron, filigreed chests. They could literally have been a Wikipedia picture in an article on buried treasure.

“You just found chests, didn’t you?” Brand said.

“Three of them. It looks like there are . . .” I bent down and looked at the latch. There wasn’t a traditional lock, just a shallow indentation on a deceptively fragile clay disc. “Bloodline wards. They’re sealed with bloodline wards.”

My mouth went dry. Bloodline wards were expensive ways to seal family secrets. I can’t imagine any of my father’s people using them, and it was my family attic. Which meant these chests likely belonged to my father.

“Wait!” Brand said, as I transmitted my sabre back into a wristguard, to free up my hands. “Could they be trapped?”

“I’m not sensing any. Just the ward. Why trap it? Only someone keyed to the bloodline can even open it. I’m going to try.”

“Be careful.”

I put my finger on the clay disc. The hard surface seemed to warm and soften. I pulled my finger away, and saw that the clay retained the oils of my fingertip. I heard—or felt, really—a whirring. The chest clicked.

“It worked,” I breathed. I put my hands on either side of the chest, and pushed the lid up.

The air inside was not stale. It smelled, for just a moment upon release, like the last person who had sealed the ward, and the last day on which it had been sealed. Freshly cut grass and rosewater cologne.

I gently ran my hand along the top of the contents. There wasn’t much. No precious gems, or stock certificates, or bars of gold. Yet for all that, it was a treasure of sorts.

There was a strange sort of pillow, with a belt-like elastic strap. There were crisp, sepia photographs. Some beaten brass jewelry—old, old things, from the days when metal was as rare as diamond. They didn’t have the tingling hum of sigils, though. I experienced a brief, stuttering disappointment. What would it have been like, to open a chest filled with sigils?

“Rune?”

“Just . . . mementos, I think. And some old jewelry. I only opened one chest.”

“You should open another. You can come back for mementos another time. *Shit*. The ghouls are moving. I’m firing a distraction. Get ready to run, just in case.”

From my crouch, I shuffled to the next chest, but only after I pocketed a couple pieces of the jewelry.

“Launched,” Brand announced. He’d come armed with a grenade launcher filled with flesh-bombs we’d borrowed from Lord Tower’s head of security, Mayan. Flesh-bombs had as much stopping power as water balloons, but were filled with bits of blood and fat from the butcher shop. They hit the ground and created a very intoxicating blast radius for things that didn’t get fresh meat often. “They’re pulling towards it. You’ve got to start making your way out.”

“Just let me check the other two chests,” I said. I disengaged the next bloodline ward, and opened the lid. Snow? It smelled like snowfall. And . . . ambergris cologne?

My father’s scent. The flesh on my arms tingled. I flexed my fingers nervously, as if they’d gone numb.

Inside were stacks of clean, manila folders. The tabs were numerically coded.

I picked a few at random and fanned them open. Copies of property deeds—long since irrelevant, in the aftermath of my court’s fall. Copies of reports from the Arcanum.

A photograph fell from the third folder. It landed faceup. My brain had trouble making sense of what I saw, because it was Brand, but he was much older than we were now. And then I thought that maybe the picture had been age-progressed, which also made my brain hurt, because it was a stupid thought.

I picked up the picture and realized I was staring at a photo of someone related—biologically related—to my Companion. I thought I was looking at a photo of his father.

I opened the folder.

Reports from private investigators. Medical records. Birth certificates. *Addresses.*

“What’s happening?” Brand demanded. “Rune, you’re freaking out. Tell me what I’m feeling.”

“I . . .”

“*Rune!*”

I shut the file and took a shaky breath. “It’s okay. Just . . . a lot of pictures. There’s a picture of my father.”

I hesitated for a moment, then kept the file before sealing the chest shut. I shoved the file down the back of my pants, and pulled my shirt over it.

“We . . .” Brand trailed off. He wasn’t very good at verbalizing sympathy. “I know it’s tough. But you don’t have time to linger. Pull out.”

“Roger,” I said, and leaned over to shut and seal the first chest too. It wasn’t a good angle, though, and I pinched my finger in the lid. Swearing, I shook my hurt hand, just as blood began to well from the cut.

“Oh shit,” I said.

I could almost feel the house vibrate. It was not a physical sensation; it was just the way my willpower interpreted the stirring of spirits. The ghouls outside were very suddenly the least of my problems. There were things inside the house that smelled my blood, and now knew I was there.

“I cut my hand,” I said, springing up. “It’s bleeding. I’m not going to be alone for long.”

“*Extract,*” Brand ordered.

“Tell me twice,” I said, running for the stairs. I squeezed through the half-open door and began to skip, sideways, down the steep steps, the better to keep my balance. At the first switchback, I came to a dead stop. My magical senses were useless—I’d stirred up too much activity to spot any single threat. But my normal senses told me all I needed to know. From somewhere below me—and not far—came ragged breathing. There was a gentle scraping sound, like broken fingernails running along wood grain.

If I needed another sign, spiders and beetles began skittering up the stairwell, disappearing into the safety of the attic.

I ran back upstairs with them. I could hold my own in a firefight, but the mansion couldn’t. Needing to blow a hole in the stairwell wall would only hasten the ruin.

Since the servant stairs were blocked, I jogged toward a larger stairway that led down one floor, transmitting my sabre back into hilt form as I did. I ran through the floor plan in my head, the memory of it cleaner and brighter than the reality of the molding wallpaper and rugs. At the bottom of the steps, a wide hallway lined with tarnished light fixtures led in two directions—a small schoolroom and chapel on one end; a desanctified sanctum and conservatory on the other end. I started toward the conservatory. There were windows there, a good egress.

As I passed the larger stairway that led to the third floor, a wight crawled up the rotting green runner.

Wights were decaying corpses, undead creatures that enjoyed a sort of painstakingly conditional immortality. They survived as long as they fed. The abandoned estate had no shortage

of vermin, though, and the wight had eaten recently. Blood smears from a messy feeding had rejuvenated whatever skin it touched. The decaying monster had smooth, red lips; a single dimpled cheek; and one clear green eye opposite a shriveled socket.

It saw me, and sprang.

I ran a finger across my white gold ring, releasing the Fire spell I'd stored in it. I threw a sphere of superheated air in front of me. The wight passed through it, and its hair and clothing burst into flames. It hit the ground in a panicked roll.

"Wights," I said, before Brand could ask. "If there's one, there will be more. I'm going out a window."

"Go," Brand said.

I ran for the conservatory, hearing coughing gasps from the stairway behind me as more wights closed in. The hallway veered left, and brightened with a tepid gray light. Through a doorway ahead, I spotted a bank of dirt-stained windows. One out of every three panes was broken and covered with dead ivy.

Before I could cross the threshold, my foot broke through a bad floorboard. I managed to recover in a roll while brushing fingers across two of my sigils—my gold ankle chain, the circlet attached to a leather strap around my thigh. The sigils' stored spells flooded loose. Flight and Shield—their release balancing into a gassiness crossed with a bright, fractal light that shimmered around my body. I drew the Flight magic into me for later use, and let Shield sink into my body with a warm glow.

I shifted Fire into my sabre hilt, bolstering its own innate fire magic, so that when I shot the nearest wight with a firebolt it had the potency of a blowtorch flame. It went through the creature's head and it dropped like an emptied sack.

Six other wights, including the one I fought first, were crawling over each other in a seething, cautious approach.

I shot one in the heart; another through the mouth. More wights staggered from the bend in the corridor, joining the mob.

"The ghouls are moving toward you now," Brand said. "They know you're there."

"Almost out," I said. There were too many wights for combat. I scooted back from the threshold, into the conservatory proper. With a raised hand, I peeled the Shield magic from my body and threw it across the open doorway, fastening it to the worm-eaten wood.

I'd have to make my exit from this room. Easy enough. Walls were just a suggestion, really, when you were strong enough to blow them apart.

I ran a finger across my emerald-diamond ring. The Shatter spell slid loose, vibrating along my fingernails. I studied the bank of windows as I walked toward them, hand outstretched. The broken panes had already done enough weather damage; fingers of mold and fungus spread from the openings.

Behind me, the wights beat against my Shield. Their blows made faint crackling sounds.

Lifting my arm, I punched through the wall with Shatter in an explosion of brick and metal and vine. Glass shards sparkled in the light of the rising morning. In the smoking aftermath, fresh air seeped into the room, and I walked to the opening I'd made.

Before I reached it, someone coughed.

Sitting at a leaf-strewn desk at the back of the room was a wight, a very old one. Its posture was prim and unnervingly proper, as if it waited to conduct a lesson. It possessed a vanity unusual for wights—it had spread blood across its entire face, restoring it to a full, mocking beauty. Violet eyes narrowed at me.

It launched itself with the speed of a bullet.

I barely had time to pivot. It landed on the wall, clawed hands and fingers digging into the soft wood. I sent my willpower into my sabre. The garnet blade extended. The Fire spell made it burst into flame, setting floating dust afire.

I ducked under its next leap, bringing my sword in a backhanded slice. A line of fire cut across the creature's rags. It shrieked and hit the ground in a crouch. Before I could regain my balance, it jumped at me. Its claws raked along the sleeve of my jacket. The wards in the leather held; but the wight's nails created deep, bleeding wounds along my wrist and the back of my hand.

My blood spattered the dirty floor. Something in the distance screamed. I felt the focus of the estate's diseased life pressing in on me.

I grabbed my sabre with both hands for a powerful downward thrust. It sliced along the side of the wight's head, shearing off an ear, cutting through brittle skull. The wight went batshit. Pain drove it to abandon all caution, and it came at me with claws extended. I let my sabre blade crumble into a stiletto for close combat and stabbed its neck, then its collarbone on the back draw. Its claws dug flesh out of my own neck, but snagged in the collar of my jacket.

I finished it with a quick thrust through its withered heart. It fell to the ground. Its hands, covered in my blood, clung to the hem of my jeans. As I watched, the skin brightened until they were smooth and lovely, like a concert pianist.

There was a creaking sound. The wights outside the room were digging around my Shield, crumbling the old wood of the lintel.

I reached inside me and brought out the Flight spell. I let the buoyancy surround me. My clothes fluttered, as if caught in a strong wind.

I moved to the hole in the wall, stepped onto the sharp, broken rim, and shot into the air like a superhero.

"*Fuck*," Brand said when I landed in the visitor's lot. He was standing next to my car, putting a cat-sized drone into the duffle bag.

"I've had worse," I said, gingerly touching the gashes on my neck. I transmuted the sabre into wristguard form to free my other hand.

"You've got a Healing spell?" he said.

"I do," I said, and ran a thumb across a platinum disc slotted to my leather belt. I touched the wounds on my neck and hands, wincing as the flesh reddened and sunburned, and itched shut.

Brand studied me quietly.

"I've had worse," I said again. "It's okay."

"We can't do that again," he said. "Not without backup."

"I got out. It's fine."

Brand climbed on top of the hood of my car, ignoring my sounds of protest. He clambered to the roof, and shaded his eyes with his fingers to stare at the mansion. I didn't have to ask what he was looking at. He'd have seen the wall explode from here.

"Aren't we planning on living there again?"

"The windows were already broken," I protested.

"That's your room now."

"It's the *conservatory*. The windows were already broken. It . . ." I sighed. "You're right. It's all going to hell in there, Brand. The mansion is breaking down. I'm not sure it'll stand much longer."

"So we reclaim it."

“How? You just said yourself I can’t go too deep into it without backup. One big fight, and it all falls down.”

Brand looked down at me, eyes still shaded. He gave me a rare, small smile. “You’ll find a way. You’re a stubborn little shit when you want to be. Come on, let’s go home. I bet Queenie baked cookies.”

About the Author

K.D. lives and writes in North Carolina, but has spent time in Massachusetts, Maine, Colorado, New Hampshire, Montana, and Washington State. (Common theme until NC: Snow. So, so much snow. And now? Heat. So, so much heat.) Mercifully short careers in food service, interactive television, corporate banking, retail management, and bariatric furniture has led to a much less short career in higher education. *The Last Sun* and *The Hanged Man* are the first two novels in his debut series, The Tarot Sequence. K.D. is represented by Sara Megibow at kt literary, and Kim Yau at Paradigm for media rights.