

MALEDICTE

LANE ROBINS



BALLANTINE BOOKS



BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK

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*To Jane Gunther for always asking—did you get any writing done?
There wouldn't be a book without you*

Why should you love him whom the world hates so? Because he loves me more than all the world.

—*Edward II*, Act I, sc. iv Christopher Marlowe

• ACKNOWLEDGMENTS •

*N*OTHING IS CREATED in a vacuum. So, thank you to my family, who never once said, You want to do what? To Odyssey Workshop and Jeanne Cavelos for showing me that I not only could write day in day out, but love doing so. To Larry Taylor for endless patience and invaluable critiquing when I needed it most. Thanks also to Caitlin Blasdell and Fleetwood Robbins for their enthusiasm, support, and excellent efforts on my behalf. All of it is deeply appreciated.

• PROLOGUE •

The Stirring of Wings

IN THE SOUTHERNMOST TIP of the island kingdom of Antyre, a carriage set a rapid pace through the city streets of Murne. The horse-and-four racketed down the broken cobblestone street, shuddering and jolting on the uneven surface. Midmorning sunlight lanced off the blue-lacquered carriage, lighting it like a jewel in a tarnished crown. On either side, narrow houses listed and shed fragments of their façades, littering the streets below with rubble. Once this had been a prosperous merchant neighborhood, the most common thoroughfare between the palace and the sea—before a girl’s prayer had been heard by Black-Winged Ani, that treacherous god of love and vengeance.

Once the road had been filled with horse carts and carriages, a throbbing artery pulsing with bustle. Now, corpse-like, it rotted; the ground crumbled beneath the ruined buildings and cobbled streets, homes for those desperate enough to live in the merchants’ Relicts.

Inside the coach, an elaborately dressed dark man clenched his hands into fists. Kritos stared at the far wall of the coach, ignoring the Relicts outside, his thoughts occupied entirely with his grievances. He cursed himself for an overobedient fool, and he cursed Last and the man’s filthy sense of humor.

Kritos levered himself out of the quilted seat, reaching for his stout malacca cane, which had been flung, haphazard, across the coach. Recovering it, he pounded the roof of the carriage. “Slow down, you damned fool. You’ll have the wheels off and I’ll have your hide.”

Slow down, he thought. He was in no hurry to find the boy who meant an end to his comfortable position as Last’s heir. He raised the cane, hesitated. He could order the carriage around now. Tell Last that there was no boy, that the bastard son had died, unwanted, in Antyre’s Relicts.

He lowered the cane, indecision and fear warring in his belly. John Coachman would know, damn his eyes, and the boy might surface on his own, seeking his birthright. If the boy lived, Last would find him, no matter what Kritos told him. Last was too well aware of the creditors hounding Kritos to trust his word alone.

His hands knotted around the cane as he pondered more drastic measures. The boy was only a boy, and he was a strong man and armed. Hefting the cane, he swung it in short, brutal strokes, slamming it against the cushioned seat with a satisfying impact. If the boy were dead—

But his hands clenched again in a paroxysm of stifled frustration. Last did not trust him, and Kritos knew well enough that the coachman had undoubtedly been warned to prevent such a thing.

Inevitability slumped his broad shoulders, made him discard his plans with a breath that sounded like a sob. Last was a treacherous bastard, he thought, wholly without irony.

Ahead of the coach, the cobblestones had been worn to a bare edge around what once was a central square, its pits filled in with scavenged rubble, smoothed over with dirt. In it, the Relicts children circled one lad with a stick, watching with an intentness that betrayed that this was no game the children played.

“So you hit ’im onna head, then inna cods, inna belly, and onna head again, ’til they don’t never get up no more. Then you cut their purse, innit right?”

“Right, Roach,” they chorused. But Roach sought his approval from the two youths standing apart, in a closed circle of their own. He stood, shifting from dusty foot to dusty foot, waiting.

What did they look like, these leaders of children? Children themselves, though not for very much longer. In a year or so, they’d be hunting up a new trade: highwayman, whore, gaolbird, or hangman’s bait if they were particularly unlucky. Currently, they appeared much like the others. Rag-clad, barefoot, begrimed, and feral. One was, perhaps, blond under the dust and dirt. The other was as dark as night, with eyes of the same hue, startling and dramatic in a pale, pinched face. No amount of filth could darken hair like that any further.

The might-be-blond had vivid blue eyes and a placid face. He was bigger by a head than his snarl-maned companion. This was Janus, the unknowing object of Kritos’s search.

Janus ignored Roach’s demand for approval, studying instead his friend’s dusty, extended fists. Janus reached out, ready to choose, ready to tap one fist over the other, and paused. Raising his gaze to the smirking silent mouth, to the mocking eyes, Janus touched the brunette’s lips, winning the game.

The brunette stuck out a pink tongue, and on it a ring quivered—tarnished, but undeniably gold. The children’s eyes lingered on it enviously. A man’s ring, it was a little too big for his forefinger, but Janus slid it on, clenching his hand around it. He smiled.

Only then did he turn his attention to the waiting Roach. “You’ll never learn, Roach.” His voice was roughened with the onset of manhood, and the accent was as different from Roach’s as night was from day, elegant, cleanly spoken, not the gutter patois of the other.

“So what’d I forget?” Roach asked.

The brunette, freed from silence, burst into speech. “The same thing you forgot last time and the time before. The shoes. Always remove their shoes. Good shoes sell.” Accented like Janus’s, an aping of the aristocracy, her voice held a bite to each word that made it utterly distinctive.

“Sorry, Miranda.”

“Regret will not put food in your belly when the stolen coin runs out. Then it’s back to stealing and whoring again.”

The pack tightened, shifting from predators to an assortment of frightened children.

Roach stepped out of the circle. “I’m no whore.”

“Not yet,” Miranda said, unrelenting.

“Not never,” he swore.

“It’s his belly, let him learn,” Janus said. He fingered the ring and stared at the other children, the fallen houses, the gaping sinkholes, like a young lord surveying the ruin of his empire, holding court one final time.

Carriage wheels clattered, sparking unusual echoes on this forgotten street, and sprayed jagged shards of stone in their wake. At the carriage’s approach, the children scattered, only re-forming the pack when it came to a sliding halt. The horses reared in their traces before settling down to heave giant, wet-flanked breaths.

The children perched in empty windows, on piles of broken cobbles. Their thin fingers clenched sticks and loose stone, waiting in silence.

The liveried coachman put one hand on his pistol, one on his whip, daring them to act. Freed of his touch on their reins, the horses danced and bridled until the coachman snapped his whip above their heads.

Kritos stepped from the carriage, sleek in his embroidered finery. Feral eyes grew warily speculative, and Kritos paused, boots still on the carriage rung. He pulled a linen handkerchief from his sleeve, damped with scent, and pressed it to his nose and mouth for a moment.

“Which of you miserable bastards is Janus, son of Celia?”

At this sign of specific interest, Roach and the pack spooked and fled like a burst of hunted doves. Miranda and Janus stayed. Their faces might have been made of the same stone as the houses—blank and still, hiding secrets.

Kritos took the last step down. His mouth twisted as his champagne-shined boots slid in the greasy dirt. “Is one of you Janus?”

Miranda spoke first. “How much to show you where he is?”

Kritos didn’t listen to her past his first start of surprise at her accent. His eyes fixed on Janus, on the echoes of Last in Janus’s straight jaw and nose, in the gas-flame blue eyes. So this was the prize he was sent to secure. His replacement. The murderous temptation rose again, but Kritos, the strong man, felt distinctly leery of tackling this pair.

While he contemplated, he watched Janus watching Miranda. Signals flowed like water between them, a code learned in faint lifts of eyebrows, of tightened lips and tilted chins, of twitched fingers. No, he had no intention of giving his back to these hellions.

“Pay you,” he said, “when I can thrash the information from you?”

“Like to see you try,” Miranda said.

“Like to see you catch us,” Janus said.

Their lovely aristocratic voices made the words a taunt. Their bodies tensed like strung wire, poised for flight and the shelter of the labyrinthine alleyways. He would have to lull them, let them presume he abided by their rules, all the better to take them by surprise.

Kritos said, “How much?”

“Not so poor as copper. Not so dear as sols,” she said.

“Lunas,” Janus said.

“Silver? For a gutter-born bastard?” Outrage thickened Kritos’s voice and drew Miranda’s lips into a cold approximation of a smile.

“Pay what is fair for us. Not for you,” she said.

“One luna, then. When you lead me to him.” Kritos pressed the scented linen to his mouth.

“Done,” Janus said.

Kritos paused, wary. The haggling ended too soon; Kritos had expected them to

demand the coin up front, expected them to lose him in the Relict's nooks and alleys. He knew they had no more intention of fulfilling the bargain than he did; for them to agree meant they were not content with the thought of a single luna. They wanted it all.

"We'll lead you." She eeled off, followed by Janus. Neither looked back, the challenge implicit as they entered the narrow, dark alley torn between two houses.

Kritos set his shoulders, judging their span against the gap. The coachman leaned off his perch. "Sir, be careful."

"Do you think me feared of urchins?" Kritos blustered. "Hold the cattle for my return."

Kritos was not afraid, not now when the moment was imminent. Undoubtedly, they planned to trap him, but they had let him take their backs, left themselves at risk.

Caught in his thoughts, squinting in the murky light of the alleyway, Kritos saw the girl brush by the wall, a shadow in the dark; a spill of stones tumbled free, driving at his head. *You'll need more than that, girl*, he thought, leaping aside. The ground gave beneath his feet.

The cascade of stone hadn't been the ambush; the loosely covered pit had. Kritos hit the bottom hard, rolled to his feet, found himself chest-deep in the ground, with damp stone beneath. It was probably the only reason the pit didn't go deep enough to break a man's neck.

He raised his cane just as the girl swung her stick at him, striking the soft tissue beneath his chin. Kritos gagged with pain; his teeth snapped against each other. Slapping her legs with the cane, he made her dance away, but she reversed her grip on the stick, making up the distance, and jabbed the end of it at his face. Kritos jerked and took the blow meant for his temple in his eye instead. Pain flared, and fear. Howling in shock, he flailed with his cane, but couldn't avoid the blow from behind that forced him to his knees.

"His purse, Miranda, hurry," Janus said.

"He's not down yet," Miranda protested.

"Near enough to make no difference, and the coachman might come after him. With the pistol."

Miranda pounced, fingers working on Kritos's purse strings. Janus squeezed beside her to help. Wheezing for breath, tears streaking his face, Kritos fumbled for a weapon and found rough stone at his hand, one of the little avalanche that betrayed him. He swung, felt satisfaction push pain away when the rock made contact.

Miranda screamed, a banshee yelp of rage and shock, and her hands flew to cover the bloody gash along her jaw.

“Bastard!” Janus brought his stick down again, knocking the rock from Kritos’s hand, and reaching for the purse himself.

Kritos lunged upward, got a grip on Janus’s white throat, and held on. After three stifled breaths, Janus’s face started mottling with lack of air. Miranda scrambled for her dropped stick, and Kritos leaned back against the supporting wall and kicked her in the stomach. She flew backward and stunned herself against the stone.

Janus clawed Kritos’s hands, then groped upward, gouging at the man’s damaged eye. His thumb slipped along the same rut the girl’s stick had made. Kritos screamed and slammed Janus against the earthen and stone wall, dazing him. Kritos kept the boy’s slackening form before him, using him as a shield, and struggled to his feet, sobbing with pain and anger. His strangle-hold on the boy’s throat loosened, and Janus showed signs of recovering.

Miranda crept forward, barely visible against the pit’s floor, her hands fisted. She reared back on her haunches; pebbles and dirt stung Kritos’s face, and he kicked out again and caught her in the thigh. She tottered and fell at his feet. He kicked her in the face, and she made a small, sighing sound, eyes fluttering shut.

Kritos tightened his grip on Janus’s neck, squeezing. The boy choked and spluttered, his nails leaving tracks on Kritos’s wrists. Behind him, the girl muttered and swayed to her hands and knees. Kritos swore. If he took the time to kill the boy, she’d be on him again with the tenacity of a weasel.

Kritos pulled Janus after him, dragging him out of the pit, keeping his watering good eye on the dark shape in the dark pit. He backed up, dragging Janus into the uncertain sunlight of the Relicts. The coachman pulled his pistol and swore.

“Put that away,” Kritos said. “Get ready to go.” Janus had a neck like a young ox, and Kritos’s hands were slick with his own blood. Janus muttered and twisted, made every step a battle, digging at Kritos’s hands with his own, fumbling at his face, slumping and dragging his weight to slow him. The ring, so newly acquired, slipped and fell into the dirt without a sound.

Kritos resolved his struggle by slamming Janus’s head into the edge of the carriage doorframe and dropping the sprawling, limp form onto the floor of the coach. Janus fell half-in, half-out, his bare feet trailing in the gritty dust.

The coachman warned, “Last never said nothing about half-killing nobody.”

“Last never had to deal with that hellcat,” Kritos said, panting for breath, shuddering all over with belated nerves and denied fear. His hands shook as he bent and forced Janus’s slack limbs into the carriage. His face throbbed as the maltreated

eye complained and continued its slow weeping of bloody tears.

He clambered into the carriage, uncertain in his balance, and paused, his back to the open door, to kick Janus once, then twice in the ribs, listening for the crack of bone. It was all the vengeance he could allow himself, and it was out of sight of the coachman.

The coachman's cry came nearly too late. Kritos spun, but too slowly, his vision too impaired to see more than a quick dark blur.

The stick caught him in the side, punched through the skin but no further. It was, after all, only a piece of well-worn wood. "Let him go. Pervert. Thief." Even with her voice shrill and panicked, her accent remained unchanged, and for the first time Kritos wondered who the girl was.

From his high perch, the coachman angled his pistol, trying to get a clear shot. He pulled the trigger; the gun exploded, the ball expelled forward, burning powder and shards of metal flying back to scald the coachman's hand. Kritos flung Miranda from him at the same moment, and the ball bypassed Miranda to add yet more stone chips to the earth.

As she lunged at him again, the coachman ripped the air with his whip and wrapped the lash around her chest, spinning her around, leaving her in the dirt, gasping, sniveling, nose running blood.

The sight of her sprawled in the rubble did more to restore Kritos's courage than the coachman coiling his whip for another blow.

"You must want your silver," Kritos said.

He flung his coin purse into her face; the leather pouch burst at the seams and scattered his own trap—the silver lunas that were only painted wood. "What he's worth. Coachman, drive on."

The carriage turned slowly in the open square and headed back the way it had come, faster and faster, as the coachman gave the spooked horses their heads.

LEFT ALONE, Miranda gathered her stick and the tarnished ring with shaking hands. Her head spun and her jaw burned where grit had been ground into the open wound. The whip marks crossing her torso through the thin, ripped shirt seeped. And all of that pain was nothing to her. All she could think of was Kritos, carrying Janus away like a hunter's trophy.

She limped over to the edge of the street and fell, her blood dampening the dirt. She waited for the strength in her legs to come back, and she turned the tarnished ring over and over and over in her hands, peering in to see the words within. *Only each other at*

the last. Heart pounding, breath seizing in her chest, refusing to cry, she clenched the ring in fisted hands and curled herself around it.

WHEN HER BREATH RETURNED, she rose and stumbled home—a room with two women, one old bed, a press of mismatched clothing, and some few bits of furniture salvaged out of some refuse bin closer to the civilized parts of the city and hauled back to the Relicts.

Nearest the door, a pale, enervated woman swayed in her seat, her hand loosely caging a bottle of Petal, a potent mixture of Laudable syrup and cheap spirits that turned any grief to a distant dream. She stared into the air as if she could see her past unfolding behind her, her days as the pampered daughter of a lord. Before Janus. Before the stigma of bearing a child, unwed, sent her to the Relicts to find a new life as occasional whore and mother, though she was dismal at both. Her customers only ever visited once, and that for the novelty of fucking an aristocrat. Her sole act of generosity had been to teach the children to read and write, though she leavened that by raining stinging slaps whenever their accents faltered into Relicts cant.

The other woman, Ella, sat on a rough footstool near the fire, coaxing it into life with callused hands. She had been at her peak of attractiveness when she birthed Miranda, fourteen long years ago, and her looks had faded to nonexistence. Her hair, coarse, gray, and unconfined, stood out in rough snarls. But unlike Celia, she could at least manage a gap-toothed smile and a bit of routine coquetry for her progressively more infrequent customers.

Miranda banged the door shut and came in, leaning on her stick. When Miranda moved into the dim glow of the fire, Ella's mouth twisted in dismay. "Not your face. What have you done, child?" Ella cried.

Miranda's rage simmered. Both women were too worn to be successful whores. But Miranda was meant to be a courtesan, meant to pass her earnings on to the older women.

Ella rushed to the clothespress and pulled out a wooden box. In a different world, it might have held a lady's less valuable jewels. Here it held the tricks of a whore's trade: powders and cosmetics, abortifacients, and a scattering of remedies. She dragged Miranda before the footstool, tutting and fretting.

Miranda yanked her arm free. "Celia, they took him."

The pale woman roused herself to a reluctant semblance of life, setting the bottle on the earthen floor. "And who took him from you?"

"A town buck in a blue and gold carriage with a crest." Miranda kept her voice

calm, but tears welled with the effort. She was only waiting for the vital information—a name. Without an identity, there was no one to fight.

“Last, it seems,” Celia said, picking up her bottle and letting the thick fluid trickle into her open mouth.

“Last?” Miranda said. The name meant nothing, a word in a ring. It should have sounded in her ears like a clarion. But her enemy’s name meant nothing. Ella took the opportunity to pull her close, dabbing the long rip along Miranda’s jaw with powdered alum before packing it with saved cobweb.

“How do I get him back?” Miranda asked, breaking in that instant years of tradition. She and Janus had learned long ago that their mothers had no answers to the slightest of dilemmas.

“Hush,” her mother said. “Don’t you talk while I’m cleaning this out.”

“Get him back?” Celia repeated. “Why? He only caused us pain and trouble. Let he and Last spite each other and spare us.”

“’Tis a pity about the scarring there’ll be,” Ella said, finishing her ministrations and turning Miranda’s face in her hands, judging the results. “Still—such eyes, such a mouth...what a price you’ll command and never mind the scar. And with Janus gone, well, you’ll get over that stubbornness of yours and do as I say.”

Miranda screamed, an animal cry of wordless rejection and rage. She shoved her mother with enough force to send the older woman to the floor. Celia’s hooded eyes widened even in her drug-induced haze. Miranda dropped her hand to the rough-edged knife her mother used to shave bits of wood for the fire, knotted her fist around the handle. How dare they simply dismiss him as if he were of no more importance than a customer? She would make them regret their callousness. She stood, hand shaking, body tensed, waiting for release; then, unclenching her fingers, she let the knife fall.

Why kill them? she thought. At this moment, they were dead to her, and she knew that without Janus, without her, the two women would fade away. The rage faded as fast as it came, leaving contempt. She despised their sickening passivity, their languid acceptance of their decaying lives. She would not accept the same.

Miranda paused in the doorway, taking a long last look. She was leaving now. She would never see these women, this room again. She would not rue it.

Night had folded over the Relicts, and the only lights were the small fires set by the desperate, conflagrations of wood and burning cloth. Miranda felt her way down the street with her stick, tapping before her like the blind beggars who worked the boundary between moneyed and poor.

A name was all she had, and it was not enough, but she headed for the border of the

Relicts as if she were welcome on the other side. In the worst section, while climbing over fallen masonry, she put her foot through a toppled door, spiderwebbed with rot, and tumbled headlong. She plummeted down the heap, scraping her hands, her shins, and landing with a painful crash against a stone slab. She fought tears, tried to rise, but stumbled and fell to one knee. Her breath labored and the wounds of the day, so long suppressed, made themselves felt with belly-wrenching intensity. Clawing at the stone slab, her fingers caught on rough frescoes, and she drew herself up, found it was a wall. Leaning close, she made out wings and knew what the building was, though she'd never seen it before.

The room was even more damaged than most Relict buildings; the walls had all fallen inward, making a precarious lean-to of stone, but then, this was a temple to Black-Winged Ani, She who had spread ruin through the Relicts. Carved wings created a slanted tunnel, which Miranda crept through. Her destination was the altar. But not to pray for a dead god's aid. Even in this extremity, Miranda was not stirred to begging.

The altar was the sturdiest place in the temple, sheltered deep within the wreckage. Miranda crawled beneath it, let her body relax. In the darkness, the grinning face of Black-Winged Ani stared down at her from every angle. Miranda tucked herself into a ball, wrapping herself around the stick, missing Janus's warmth with an ache greater than the throbbing wounds. She fell asleep to the whispering mutter of prayers, trapped like memories in the stone, fell asleep to Ani's looming scrutiny.

Outside, a cold wind rose.



*Maledicte lived and Maledicte died And only at his birth
did anybody cry. How many people did he kill? One, two,
three...*

—Children’s skipping song

BARON VORNATTI WAS AN OLD MAN, hunched in his chair, staring at the wonders of his extensive library with a jaded and bleary eye. A sable pelt poured over his wasted legs. Absently, he ruffled the furs while he flipped pages of the book of pornographic woodcuts on his lap. A hedonist and a sensualist, he was much withered by time and pain; on a cold winter’s night, he fondled old memories as he once did flesh. But all his precious memories, of women’s softly rounded shoulders and mounded breasts, the sweet juncture at their thighs, of young men’s ripe buttocks, greedy mouths, and strong square hands, all these could not distract him as they used to do.

His back flared and spasmed. His glassy eyes flew to the old grandfather clock by the door. “Gilly,” he roared. “Time!”

Grinding his teeth, Vornatti sagged forward in the chair to ease the strain. The book fell to the floor, splayed on opened pages. He wanted a distraction, something beyond the torment of his bones and illusory remembrances of the flesh. Once, he had found engrossment in the bloody game of court intrigue, but even that had palled with his mastery of it.

In the distant recesses of the library, beyond the firelight, beyond the lamps, glass broke with a sound like cracking ice. Slow, crunching footsteps echoed.

A chill serpent of air wound around Vornatti’s ankles, hissing with blown snow.

“My lord?” Gilly said from the doorway. The large silver tray of drug and drink was dwarfed in his hands. His voice put a temporary stop to the footsteps.

“We have an intruder,” Vornatti said, straightening with a wince.

“Who’s there?” Gilly said, as the footsteps resumed their slow progress, now thudding against the bare wooden floor. He squinted against the glare of the built-up fire, set the tray down on the thick carpeting beside Vornatti.

The footsteps gained the carpet and disappeared in the muffling softness. Gilly lifted a book pole, holding it across his chest, the hook facing the shadows.

“Put it down, damn it, Gilly. Put it down, and give me my Elysia. Let the bastard wait.”

Gilly hesitated, but finally set the book pole back against Vornatti’s chair.

He bent, turning his back to the shadows, and cradled Vornatti’s withered arm against his own. He drew the Elysia into the glass syringe in a cloudy swirl that held something of its origin in it, the elixir left in Naga’s serpent-scaled wake. Letting it settle long enough so that the contents stopped their eddying, Gilly pushed the needle into the old man’s rosy veins. Vornatti closed his eyes as Gilly worked the plunger, hissed against the bite of it in his blood.

When Gilly looked up, they were no longer alone in the circle of firelight. The intruder shared it with them. It was only a boy, shivering in his thin shirt, blue at the lips. He had shadowed eyes, made darker by a cropped tumble of black curls that seemed to spread shadow out behind him. A thin scar sliced along the left side of his jaw, and he held his right hand behind his back.

Vornatti’s eyes opened and he smiled as if a bit of his past had come back in salacious detail.

“What young toothsome have we here?” he murmured, lazy on a release of pain and burgeoning euphoria. “Gilly, only look what the gods have brought me.”

“Be silent, old man,” the boy said, drawing his arm from behind him. In his hand was a sword.

And such a sword. It was black-bladed, black-hilted. The pommel was a burnished mirrorstone, and the edges were so sharp as to seem blurred in human sight. The cross-hilt was made of stilled, dark wings with wickedly edged feathers more reminiscent of daggers than of flight. Like some remnant from the god-touched times, the sword radiated presence beyond its workmanship.

“Are you Last?” The boy raised the sword, its glitter matched by the wildness in his eyes.

Vornatti wheezed into laughter, slapping Gilly’s arm, startling him. “Last.”

The boy’s face grew red temper lines around the jaw and nose. The scar flared to whiteness. “Don’t laugh at me.” He pushed the blade forward; Vornatti parried with the book pole, still laughing despite the slice the sword had carved in the wood.

Gilly stepped between Vornatti and the blade, and Vornatti stilled his laughter. “There is more than one noble house in Graston. No, boy, I am not Last. Look here.” He thumped the end of the pole on the carpet. “Gilly, get your big feet out of the way and fetch us all drinks.”