Opening extract from

Black Spring

Written by

Alison Croggon

Published by

Walker Books

I

After the last long winter, I needed to get as far away from the city as I possibly could. My life there filled me with a weariness of disgust; I was tired of endless conversations in lamp-lit cafés with over-educated aesthetes like myself, tired of my apartment with its self-consciously tasteful artworks and its succession of witty visitors, of the endless jostling for status among the petty literati, the sniping envy and malicious gossip. There was also the question of a lady; there had been an unwise involvement, which on her part had flamed into an uncontrollable passion and which had caused me considerable discomfort. She was married to the General Secretary of the Writers' Guild, a man of considerable influence in the literary world and, if the affair had been pursued much further, it might have materially damaged my future prospects. This affair had caused me much nervous strain over the previous year, and my physician advised me that I ought to take a rest cure.

I thought idly of touring the glittering capitals of the wider world, but this seemed too much like my present life. More

than anything, I hankered for solitude. Then I remembered my boyhood fascination with the wild men of the Black Mountains and the grim romantic landscapes of the north. Perhaps I could find what I needed in my own country… I made enquiries and at last, through a relative of a friend of mine, secured the lease of a house in Elbasa, a hamlet in the centre of the northern plains. It was, I was told, unusually luxurious for a hinterland dwelling, belonging to some scion of the northern royals, although it seemed he lived elsewhere. But its owner had not permitted it to fall into dereliction: an efficient couple kept it in order, and would act as my servants, should I take the lease.

Thus it was, in the early hours of a frosty spring morning, that I summoned a hansom-cab to convey me to the train station, and began the long journey to the Northern Plateau.

Naturally, despite my scientific and sceptical bent (I scorn womanly superstition), I had taken some precautions. There are too many stories about the naïf who travels into the wild with an arrogant faith in the superior qualities of civilization, only to find himself tragically undone, for me to be utterly inattentive to the protection of my person. I visited Aron Lamaga, the most famous of the city wizards, and availed myself of certain costly charms to protect me while I was on the road and in my remote residence. It seemed only sensible.

Aron Lamaga lives in the Wizards' Quarter, and although certain of my acquaintances frequent this area, for it has reputedly the liveliest taverns in the city, I confess that I do not generally join them. For the most part, the populace is a mass of quacks, charlatans, eccentrics, lunatics and criminals. The police watch of the city do not venture there, by tacit consent; it is not merely that the bewildering tangle of narrow alleyways, dark workshops and strangely dilapidated mansions holds perils for the unwary stranger, but that in this quarter – or so

I have heard – natural laws do not hold. It is said that maps are not reliable guides: streets which are bustling thoroughfares on one day are simply not there the next; buildings that are tall and substantial on Monday, on Tuesday might appear to be miserable hovels or a patch of wasteland punctuated by dock weeds; and those who venture there without guidance not infrequently disappear without trace.

There are some wizards of note whose workshops are in less disreputable quarters, but Aron Lamaga is generally agreed to be the most illustrious of all of his profession. The prime minister relies on his astrological advice, and, it is rumoured, consults him on certain tricky and secret affairs of state, such as when he wishes to rid himself discreetly of an inconvenient person. Lamaga is reportedly without parallel in the subtle business of disappearing citizens, and is capable, it is said, of erasing the memory of a man, even from those who have known and loved him all his life, so that it seems as if he never existed. He is said to be much in demand in the criminal underworld for the same reason. I cannot say whether this is merely dark gossip, but his reputation, whether true or no, certainly makes Lamaga a person whom it would be wise to fear.

Thus it was not without trepidation that I hired a guide and plunged into the crowded streets of the Wizards' Quarter, in search of Lamaga's mansion. But I was also, I confess, extremely curious. In the event, my meeting with the great wizard turned out to be a little anticlimactic. Instead of the exotic chamber I had anticipated, lined with an abundance of purple velvet curtains and smelling of exotic incense, its walls inscribed with sigils and crowded with grimoires and glass alembics and other suchlike magical apparatus, I was ushered into a room of surprising ordinariness, such as might have belonged to any one of my wealthier acquaintances. It was a conventional drawing room, comfortably furnished, albeit with some drawings and

paintings on the wall which eschewed ostentation and showed him to be an art collector of considerable and informed taste.

The man himself was dressed like a rich merchant. He was slightly stout and had a curiously unexceptionable face, by which I mean that you would pass him in the street and think him like a hundred other reputable citizens. There was absolutely nothing about his appearance that gave any clue to his profession. He listened politely to my requests, nodded in a businesslike fashion, asked me to wait for a short time and returned with a small velvet bag. Inside were a silver ring, the inside of which was engraved with some arcane figures, which he instructed me I was to wear at all times, and a small glass phial with a dropper. It contained an emerald-green liquid.

"You must place one droplet on your pillow wherever you sleep," said Lamaga. "Also on the threshold of every outer door. This will protect you from most of the evil influences you are likely to encounter in the hinterlands."

"Most?" I queried, as I closely examined the phial. It was certainly of unusually exquisite workmanship.

A very slight spasm – perhaps of annoyance at my question – passed over his face, and for the briefest of instants I had an apprehension of danger, as if I had unknowingly brushed too close to a sleeping tiger. "I cannot protect you from imprudent behaviour on your own part," he said shortly. "If you act with common sense, you will avoid uncommon trouble."

He stood up, and my interview was clearly over. A little disappointed – I had, after all, expected somewhat more excitement from this visit – I handed over a considerable amount of silver and allowed myself to be bowed out of his house by his very respectable butler.

My journey to Elbasa was uneventful. I took the train to the end of the line, at the far edge of the lowlands, and from there

I hired a carriage to take me to the Northern Plateau. You can imagine with what eagerness I watched through the curtained windows as the green and fertile plains of my birth gave way to the stony beauty of the hinterlands. The well-cobbled thoroughfares of the city changed to rustic cart roads, and thence to roads which were sometimes little more than dirt tracks.

On the first day of travelling by carriage we began to climb. The lime trees and beeches and oaks of the lowlands thinned and then began to disappear altogether, giving way to conifers and low, wind-bitten thorn trees and scrub. The weather was clear and cold, the sky an icy blue. I felt my heart becoming lighter the further we drew from the city.

At noon on the second day we reached the Northern Plateau. We stopped at an inn for a hasty luncheon, and as I stepped out of the carriage I looked up and my breath was taken away: it was my first sight of the magnificent heights of the Black Mountains, which hitherto had been but a shadow on my horizon, cloaked in legend. The sheer brute fact of them was awe-inspiring: their crags heaved up into the distant sky, their crowns shrouded with grey cloud, their grim sides falling with an obdurate, oddly graceless beauty down to the Northern Plateau, the Land of Death, which now stretched before me, grey and flat under a thin sprinkling of snow.

Elbasa was in the centre of the Plateau, on the main road that ran through this region, and consequently one of the more notable settlements in this part of the country. When I had expressed my alarm at being near a town, speaking of my desire to leave all urban life behind, my friend Grosz, through whom I had secured my lodging, had laughed immoderately, and assured me that, in a region where most villages boasted at most a half-dozen houses, I was unlikely to encounter anything that *I* would recognize as a town.

"My dear Hammel," he said, when he had regained his

composure, "I know that you have not travelled, as I have, through the Land of Death. You may think the name fanciful; let me assure you, it is not. There are few grimmer visions than that desolate landscape of cemeteries! It is the home of vendetta, remember. Death has a different meaning in the north: its people live beneath its sigil, and death is the coin of their economy. The landscape has, I assure you, a most romantic beauty, but it is the harshest of beauties. Here you will see life in its most rugged state of nakedness! You will be longing for the crowded streets of the city ere long!" Here he even smirked.

A little offended, I reminded myself that Grosz was in his cups and thus not quite responsible for his expression; and I replied, somewhat tartly, that I desired, above all, the grace of solitude, and knew very well how to keep my own company. And that, moreover, having been brought up on a country estate myself, I was not unused to the rougher pleasures of country living.

Still smiling, my friend leant forward and poked me in the ribs. "Let me remind you, then, to avoid at least one of those rougher pleasures," he said. "The girls in the Land of Death are not for the taking, not like the country girls of the lowlands. They come at a heavy price."

"I am well aware of that," I said curtly.

"Well, don't you forget it," answered Grosz, more soberly. "I know your disposition, Hammel. And I swear, I have never seen such eyes as those of some of the upland women. But even to glance at them is perilous. And I'm not talking about the chance of being knifed. Cursing means something quite different in the Plateau…"

For a moment I caught his seriousness, and shuddered. I had a sudden vivid memory of having seen one of the upland wizards in town, a year or so before. He carried the staff of his vocation, but otherwise wore merely the coarse garb of a

highland shepherd. He had with him a mute, a small boy whose tongue had been cut out, as all wizards did a few centuries ago. Like many barbaric archaisms, it was a custom still practised in the Land of Death. I shuddered to see the mutilated boy, and wondered why I had never heard what happened to these boys when they outgrew their use: were they killed, or abandoned? Or perhaps they received some reward for their services, and afterwards lived blameless but voiceless lives?

The wizard's bearing was arrogant to the point of insolence, and he walked with the long steps of one unused to narrow spaces; I noticed that even in that crowded street, people scrambled out of his way. He cast his flashing eyes around him, his mouth tight with contempt. As I walked past him, staring in my curiosity, I unwittingly met his eyes, and my heart went absolutely cold; for a moment I almost thought he had stabbed me. Filled with an inchoate terror, I managed to pass him by, and turned the nearest corner almost at a run. There I stopped, gasping for breath, at a loss to explain the panic that had so briefly possessed me.

Yes, everyone knew of the curses of the wizards of the hinterland, and of the Blood Laws and their vendettas. But, after all, it was the reason I wanted to go there, to see for myself the savage customs of those parts. There, my friend told me, life was stripped to its most essential: every action was inscribed with the sigil of death, and the hinterlanders, man and woman, obeyed its implacable laws unquestioningly. There, my friend said, waxing lyrical as he often did after a number of wines, life found its true, obsidian meaning.

"But stay away from the women," he said again, looking at me narrowly over his glass. "Unless you too wish to be drawn into its tragic mechanisms. For there is no escaping the northern laws, once you excite their attention."

I recalled this conversation as I gazed at the Black Mountains,

whose sombre weight even from this distance oppressed my heart. For a moment I regretted my decision to come to the Plateau; I was on the verge of telling my coachman to turn and head south again, back to the orchards of my youth. But something in me – perhaps the thought of my friend's unspoken mockery should I return so swiftly – rebelled at my hesitation. And so I said nothing, but bowed my head to enter the low door of the mean inn, where I was to enjoy my mean luncheon.

I arrived at Elbasa two days later, on a day of cold, soaking rain. The Plateau, or what I could see of it through the veils of grey water, looked especially desolate and friendless. My spirits began to fail; I wondered what could possibly have possessed me to visit this cheerless part of the world, when perhaps I could have been lying in the pleasure barges of the Water City, or wandering through the incomparable artworks in the museums of the City of Light.

We passed several small villages, each of them, as my friend had said, no more than half a dozen houses. The houses were built of the black basalt of that region, and were humble dwellings for the most part, slant-roofed and tiled with grey slate. Few of them had more, I judged, than two or three basic rooms. Despite my friend's assurances of comfort, I began to feel rather less sanguine about the house that awaited me in Elbasa.

The only items of real interest along the road were the stone towers outside some of the villages. They stood like grim fingers pointing skywards, windowed only with glassless slits covered with shutters, sometimes reaching to four storeys high, but thin and narrow: they could not have been more than ten paces square at their base. These were, I knew, the *odu*, the houses of refuge where a man with the vendetta on his head could live unmolested but exiled from human society, emerging at night in the hours of amnesty to gather food. Fascinated, I wondered

how many poor souls lived out their years cooped in darkness inside these comfortless places, and whether that life was really any better than a quick death by bullet on an empty road.

Spring was yet to visit the Northern Plateau: the fruit trees were stunted and innocent of blossom, and the flat grasses sere and yellow. The only green was the dark dress of some ragged-looking and solitary pine trees. Forlorn goats and damp chickens picked their way around the village middens in an apathetic fashion, and I saw the occasional dumpy woman, clothed in black from head to foot, going about the household tasks. Outside every village was a simple unfenced graveyard, with graves framed by squares of stone. Quite frequently, I saw single memorials by the road, nowhere near any visible habitation, grey cairns of rock dark with rain. After a few miles punctuated by these melancholy signs, I began to feel that I was travelling through a single vast cemetery.

On the road we passed very few people; there was the occasional darkly clothed traveller on foot, trudging stoically onwards, his head bowed against the rain, his rifle slung across his back, draped in sacking to protect it from the rain. I stared dully out of the carriage window, bored and cold, my spirits increasingly oppressed.

We were passing yet another solitary walker, when he glanced up incuriously at the carriage and briefly met my eyes. My breath stopped: although he was a young man, and of considerable beauty in the dark-browed fashion of those of the hinterland, he seemed a living corpse. His eyes were absolutely devoid of light, and his features pale and insensible as carven marble. The rain ran unchecked down his face, as if he really were a statue. My heart quickened as I noted the white band he wore around his right arm. This, then, was one of the Dead; my first sight of those who walked under the sigil of the vendetta. The band around his right arm indicated that he had killed a

man, but was still in his month of grace; after the month passed, the band would be worn on his left arm, and he could meet his death at any time in the daylight hours. Unless, that is, he took refuge in the *odu*, fated never to see the sun again.

I looked back as his lone figure dwindled into the distance, struck to the heart by the man's tragic beauty. He seemed indeed like an angel of death, walking through a landscape of the dead. For the first time I began really to understand my friend's words about the Northern Plateau. But perversely the sight cheered me: perhaps, after all, I would find something to interest me in this godforsaken place.

My carriage clattered into Elbasa's tiny central square shortly before dusk that same day. A few vagrant sunbeams peeped through a low rent in the clouds and lent the square a little shabby warmth. While my coachman ventured off into the rain for directions to the house, I contemplated Elbasa gloomily out of my carriage window. On one side of the square was a tavern, on the other what I presumed to be the house of the mayor. In the middle was an ancient and stunted lime tree, still bare of leaf, a forlorn version of its gay southern cousins, and underneath that a worn stone seat by a rank pond of blackish water choked with rotting leaves. A grimy shop and rows of shuttered houses completed the melancholy impression.

After almost a week of constant travel I was anxious to leave my carriage and settle into a comfortable house. I longed for a hot bath and then a glass of Madeira by a roaring fire before I fell gratefully into a comfortable bed. That I managed to get these things at the end of my journey was, I confess, a source of considerable astonishment.

My friend's report had not erred: the house I had leased for the spring months was indeed luxurious by the standards of the Northern Plateau. It was but a little way out of the village, and

set at a pleasing angle on a low rise, which was the closest they came to a hill in these parts. It could not escape the usual pines, which sheltered the house from the harsh winds that often swept down from the mountains. It was known as the Red House, because it did not have the ubiquitous slate roofing, but cheery clay tiles, which someone must have imported at great trouble and expense from the south. As I peered curiously out of my carriage I saw the last of the day's light touching its roof, making it appear almost luminous, and it seemed to me miraculous to see such a thing in this dour landscape of greys. I could also see a butter-yellow light streaming from the windows, and my heart lifted.

Once inside, I met the couple who kept the house, a taciturn and courteous man named Zef, and his wife, Anna. They were respectably dressed and mannered, locally bred but well trained, and although the house was not large – running perhaps to six or seven main rooms – it had about it an air of order and prosperity which was already a little alien to me, accustomed as I had become over the past few days to low-roofed inns with mattresses more notable for their livestock than their softness. Although it felt a little foolish in these polite surroundings, I carefully anointed the thresholds of the house and my pillow with a droplet from the phial Aron Lamaga had given me, as had become my habit since reaching the Plateau. To complete my satisfaction, I found that Anna was a superior cook: she made a dish of tripe and onions that evening that nourished the soul as much as the flesh. You can imagine how I congratulated myself on having found such an oasis of civilization in this rude country; with what relief I lay down that night between fresh linen sheets; and how, before I drifted off into well-earned slumber, I turned my mind with a fresh excitement to the prospects of my new situation.