

KULTUS

A Thaddeus Blaklok Novel



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KULTIUS

RICHARD
FORD



SOLARIS

For Dad.

CHAPTER ONE

HE WAS SO very proud of his tower; it was one of the highest in the Spires, and a soaring monument to solitude.

From far below wafted the sounds of the streets, the hustle and bustle of the Manufactory with its pumps and its gears and its engines. The window to his spacious study was kept closed most of the time to guard against the pollution that would ride up on the ether and creep into the sanctity of his domain. He would only open it to vent out the smoke from his calabash pipe, an indulgence he seldom allowed himself. Strangely, he found that the murky stench left by the city's air was far preferable to the pungent miasma left behind by his spicy Latakian weed.

Earl Beuphalus placed his book down on the wide, dark-oak desk and reclined in his worn leather armchair. He ran a finger and thumb up the bridge of his nose, loosening the wire-rimmed spectacles that sat there, and gently rubbed the spot where they pinched his flesh. Damn his eyes for their reliance on eyeglasses, they were a curse to all vain men. He peeled the fragile metal and glass from his face and flung it down on top of his book.

Stretching, he looked around his wood panelled study, glancing in turn at the paintings that hung on every wall, each depicting a key noble of House Westowe. In the corner was great uncle Hannibal, a well-known raconteur and carouser. It was rumoured the old sot had nearly demolished the Westowe

fortune before he died. If it had not been for his brother, Duke Cresto, who took over after Hannibal's untimely demise, there would be nothing left. Cresto's image hung on the opposite wall, as far from Hannibal as was possible, and next to Cresto was Earl Beuphalus's father, Gaius, glaring down, red faced and furious as he had been in life. The artist had managed to capture him perfectly; a little too perfectly for Beuphalus's taste.

The Earl could only wonder what his own portrait would look like as it hung in this ancient study. Would he appear regal, or merely pompous? It mattered little, as long as they got his raiment correct. Beuphalus was a man who enjoyed smart dress at all times. Even now, reclining in his private study, he wore a green satin suit, bespoke made by the finest tailor on Kraken Street. His brown waistcoat was moleskin, made from real moles, and his silken shirt and cravat had cost more than the rest of his attire put together. At the moment he wore leather slippers, but the shoes that matched his current accoutrements had been specially imported from the colonies, hand-crafted and polished to a mirror sheen. It was important, nay imperative, to Earl Beuphalus that he looked his best at all times, even when, as now, he was in private repose. Well, one never knew when one might have visitors.

Outside, the sky was beginning to darken and the ambient glow of the gaslights on the streets below would soon permeate upwards, penetrating the thick smog that hung over the Manufactory. The view would be tremendous, as it always was. From his lofty tower, Beuphalus would look down onto the gaseous pall, lit from beneath by a myriad of colours. It never ceased to take his breath away.

But that would be some time yet. For now he would have to content himself with his books. Or perhaps one book in particular.

Rising from his armchair he walked towards the tall shelf that took up most of one wall. It stretched from floor to ceiling, packed with tomes both ancient and modern. There was no

rhyme or reason to the order these books were stacked, but Beuphalus knew the location of each one instinctually. He could close his eyes and reach out, knowing that his fingers would easily find his copy of *The Scatological Scientist*, by Castigan, or if he wanted something a little more light hearted he could reach down for *The Torturer's Gambol*, by Shrike. But it was not scientific journals or canonised comedies that the Earl was looking for. He wanted something much more forbidding.

With a slender hand, he reached up to the top shelf. A thin layer of dust had formed across it – the top shelf was reserved for books he seldom spared the time to read – and he gently pressed the spine of *Getty's Almanac of the Bestial* with one long finger. At his tender touch the book slid inwards, just an inch, then sprang back into place with a click.

Beuphalus stood back and waited. After the gentle purring of cogs from behind the shelf, a wood panel on the wall quietly slid open with a whooshing sound reminiscent of a lover's gasp. Almost ceremonially, the Earl reached inside the hidden alcove and reverently retrieved the ancient codex within. Cradling the tome in one hand he pushed the panel back across the small alcove until it clicked into place.

Carrying the book like a newborn baby, Beuphalus returned to his desk, pushing the clutter aside and laying the codex down as though returning it to the cradle. Then he sat and stared at his most precious possession.

The cover was plain and leather bound, though it had faded from years of wear. Round its edge was stitching of fresh cord, where Beuphalus had painstakingly replaced the previous hemp that had grown frayed over the decades.

Tentatively, the Earl reached out and laid his hand on it, feeling it, breathing it in. He knew he shouldn't really open it until the dark hours but he couldn't wait. It was like the book was calling to him, whispering sweet temptations like a back street doxy gently beckoning him from a night-darkened alleyway.

He curled his fingers around the cover and opened up the leather, revealing the crisp yellow pages within. The first page bore a simple sigil; a stylised V. Beuphalus caressed it, tracing the faded ink with his fingertip. He turned another page, cringing slightly as he heard the fragile leaf of the ancient tome crack. The age-worn pages only served to remind him of the book's profane history. It was a reminder that what he was doing was wrong. It was forbidden, his secret vice, but it would be its own reward eventually... he had been promised.

As he reached to turn another page a tremendous banging sound echoed along the hall outside. Beuphalus froze, his eyes suddenly wide with fear. The heart in his chest was pounding and a sudden cold sweat began to bead beneath the cravat at his neck.

He was alone, his retainers had been sent home for the night. Who could possibly be in his tower at this hour? Perhaps a burglar, a footpad off the streets below, come to help himself to the Westowe fortune. Perhaps the Judicature, come to investigate him and his vile 'hobbies', bringing their chains and their billy clubs and their thumbscrews. Perhaps it was something far worse.

Quickly, the Earl concealed his precious tome back in its secret alcove. It almost hurt to hide the codex away so soon after its unveiling but it had to remain secret. He kicked the slippers off his feet and moved towards the door. Beuphalus reached for the handle, noting that his fingers were trembling as he did so, but before he could reach it he had a second thought. After stealing barefoot to the fireplace, he grasped an iron poker, then returned to the door. It creaked noisily as he opened it, revealing the long dark corridor beyond.

On one side of the passage was the same style wooden panelling that adorned the study, on the other was rough-hewn stone, interspersed with high windows that reached to the ceiling. Intermittently the dim grey light of the city encroached on the dark corridor, lighting the Earl's way. He could see

nothing ahead but an empty passage stretching out for twenty feet until it turned to the right.

‘Hello?’ cried Beuphalus. ‘Is anyone there? Mrs Rooney, is that you?’

There was no answer. If Mrs Rooney, the cleaner, had decided to work late she was not answering.

There was another sudden bang, this time louder and a lot nearer, and the Earl almost jumped out of his tailor-made attire. It seemed to come from just beyond the turn in the corridor.

Steeling himself against the fear, Beuphalus stepped out into the dark. He was the sixteenth Earl of the House Westowe after all. Besides that, he was guardian of the codex of the President Valac, Lord of the Eighth Gate, Master of Serpents and Keeper of Hidden Secrets. He had seen things that would make an ordinary man shit himself. It was stupid to think he should fear noises in the dark. And yet Beuphalus *was* afraid, there was no getting away from it.

His bare feet made little sound on the wooden floor. Occasionally his soles squeaked on the polished wood, or one of the boards creaked under his weight, but otherwise he moved like a spectre. When he had crept to the end of the corridor he stopped, raising the poker high above his head before peering around the corner.

As soon as he saw the source of the sound, Beuphalus let out a sigh. A window had sprung open, clearly blown inwards by the wind. It must have banged heavily against the stone wall, echoing its sound down the passageway to his study. It was a wonder the glass had not shattered within its frame.

The curtains to either side of the window were billowing in the wind, and the smells of the Manufactory were beginning to waft in on the evening breeze.

The Earl leaned the poker against the mahogany panelled wall and strode forward, his confidence fast returning. He should have felt just a little foolish at being so spooked, but then again he was right to be cautious; any number of intruders

would love to encroach on the great tower of the Westowes, and it always paid to be careful, as great uncle Cresto had often said.

Before he shut the window, Beuphalus paused, gazing out onto the Manufactory below. The sun had all but set, and he could see that, far below, different coloured beacons were beginning to wink into life as the lamplighters went about their work. There was the chatter on the streets, and the sounds of engines and horses moving along the vast scribble of roads that entwined the tall towers of the Spires. Above, the droning sound of an airship peeled down as the vast machine cruised between two soaring towers, black smoke billowing from its vents as it went.

He closed the window and fastened the latch. Pausing a second more to look out at the vast metropolis, he suddenly caught sight of his image reflected in the glass. Beuphalus had never been a handsome man but he had always prided himself on personal grooming. Alas, the years were beginning to catch up with him and soon no amount of preening and trimming would be able to halt the onset of age. It was in that moment he saw that his own reflection was not the only one caught in the window. Someone was standing behind him, just visible in the shadows. Someone... or something.

The Earl froze, clutching the curtain that was still in his right hand. As he watched, gripped by sudden terror, the figure moved out of the dark. It was hooded, wearing a long cowl that shadowed the head and ran down a pair of broad shoulders. When it drew closer, Beuphalus could discern more features of the face; bestial, with a long pointed nose and black shadows for eyes.

There was no point trying to confront the thing, he had left the poker behind and, besides, he was no pugilist. With a girlish yelp of terror, the Earl set off at a sprint down the corridor, away from his study and the hooded intruder. As he ran he gave a quick glance over his shoulder. The cloaked

figure merely stood, watching him from the darkness as he ran.

Beuphalus turned a corner, then another. If he could get to the entrance hall there were several exits from his lofty rooms. At least if he made it out of his front door he could call for help. But who would there be? This was a tower of House Westowe, there were no neighbours to speak of; he would have to race all the way to the base of the tower before he would see another soul. Silently he cursed himself for his stupidity in not hiring a minder, or five minders, or ten. But it had not seemed necessary at the time, the security of his tower was second to none, it could not be scaled and the locks that barred the great doors were beyond the skill of even the most proficient intruder.

But then obviously not!

When he turned the last corner before the grand staircase, all thoughts of flight became moot. Ahead of him, blocking the corridor, stood another cloaked figure, identical to the first.

Beuphalus stopped dead in his tracks, mouth agape. He thought of talking, of pleading, but it was obvious these infiltrators were not mere housebreakers. As he looked he could see that what he had previously thought was a bestial face was in fact a mask. The robes were designed for ceremony, not concealment. These figures were sinister indeed, sent to scare him, or kill him. Worshippers of a rival to Valac perhaps... or something worse? The powers Beuphalus had been toying with over the years were bound to catch up with him sometime. But he was not about to give in easily.

With a shrill cry of defiance, the Earl threw himself at the nearest window. The heavy glass shattered under his weight, and he felt the stinging pain of fresh cuts upon the flesh of his hands and face.

He lay on the balcony beyond, the stiff evening breeze was blowing strong, and it served to ripen the pain of his cuts.

Beuphalus knew he was hurt, he found it difficult to move, but he still managed to crawl to the balcony's edge, hearing the

crunch of glass beneath him. Glancing down he could see that his suit was in tatters, but it mattered little now.

Grasping the balustrade, Beuphalus pulled himself up. Blood covered his hands and left a dark smear on the stonework. He managed to get his head over the top, seeing nothing but clear air between him and the ground, hundreds of feet below.

‘Help!’ he screamed to the distant earth. ‘Help me!’

His second cry turned into a strangled sob, but the Manufactory did not seem to be listening. It was too preoccupied with its own noisome clangour. It was hopeless; there would be no rescue now.

Desperately, Beuphalus lifted one leg, the tattered cloth of his trouser fluttering in the breeze. He almost made it, almost shifted enough of his weight over the balcony for gravity to do the rest, but he was not quick enough.

Firm hands grasped him, with strong fingers that dug into his flesh and held him tight. As he was dragged back across the balcony, through the broken glass and into the darkness of his tower, Earl Beuphalus managed to scream one last time.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROOM STANK.

It was a mix of rotten eggs and dead animal. There was an eviscerated rat on the floor but that wasn't the source of the animal stench. The rat still smelled bad, anyone who thinks that dead rats don't leave an odour should try giving one a sniff, but this was worse; a more intense musk, reminiscent of a well used stable.

Thaddeus Blaklok lifted his head from the bare wood floor of the tiny room. It was fuddled, like a hooch hangover of the worst kind, but with an intense feeling of elation inextricably locked into the nausea. His hands were shaking. Could have been the adrenalin; the buzz of his recent communion. Or was it just fear? No matter how many times he did it, whether the invocation was a minor one or a full-blown hellfire-and-sulphur stink, it took all his willpower not to shit his trousers. Of course, anyone watching would struggle to notice. There was rarely any clue on Thaddeus Blaklok's face as to his thoughts. That was where his power lay. Most of his power, at least. Had he been a card sharp, Blaklok would have been very rich indeed.

He rose to his hands and knees, heaving a large gulp of air into his lungs. A bead of sweat ran across his shaved head and dripped onto the floorboards. It splattered and spread, making a tiny sound as it hit the dry wood, the moisture quickly consumed into the thirsty wooden veins. Thaddeus raised a

hand to his moist head and ran his fingers across it, feeling the droplets of perspiration gather into a puddle on his palm. With a deft flick he sent his sweat flying towards the floorboards.

Bending one leg he put an unsteady foot to the floor, trying to lever himself upwards on his powerful limbs, but the going was difficult. He was drained, as though some infernal machine had stripped his musculature of all power, leaving behind only dry and impotent sinew. Every movement sent a tingling pulse through his ligaments and he moved slowly, as though afflicted with a pox.

Thaddeus managed to gain his feet, but the room insisted on spinning like a whirligig. It seemed violently set against him, bent on sending him sprawling to the ground. Quickly he closed his eyes, hoping that by blocking the sight of the room that was shooting past his field of vision in a blur of colour it might somehow allow him to stand straight. It didn't work, and he stumbled all the way to one wall, feeling the pain of a table corner dig sharply into his thigh. Something tumbled from the table, crashing to the wooden floor with a crack and a smash. The pulsing light he could see through his clasped eyelids suddenly dimmed, and Thaddeus realised he had broken a lamp. Never mind; it wasn't his lamp anyway.

Before starting the incantation he had done his best to move all the furniture to the edge of the room. Considering the repercussions there could be from summoning the chthonian creatures of the netherplanes he supposed a broken lamp was a small price to pay.

Thaddeus clung to the wall like a drowning man to a piece of flotsam. There he waited for the spinning to subside, with nothing but the inside of his eyelids for company. It would not have been so bad had the spinning been merely visual, but he could hear it too, whooshing past his ears like the wings of some great bird, sweeping past him, adding to the nausea. But he would not be sick. To puke was to give in to it, to show weakness. That was not Blaklok's way.

The stench of singed wood drifted up to him, the lamp he had smashed must be igniting the floorboards. There was nothing else for it; he would have to open his eyes. If the lamp had leaked oil everywhere it would not take much for it to ignite. If he were set afire when he was already feeling like crap it would not be a great way to end the day.

Tentatively, Thaddeus lifted the lid of one eye. The room was still spinning its merry-go-round waltz, but nowhere near as fast as it had been. He glanced down at the lamp. The glass shade had shattered into several pieces at his feet but it had not yet spilt its cargo of oil. The flame still flickered from the lamp's wick and it was scorching the wooden floor. He knelt gingerly and stood the lamp upright, taking a deep breath and willing the room to slow. It seemed to work, and Thaddeus managed to open his other eye and stand on both feet without the aid of the wall.

The tingling in his limbs was beginning to subside and the shaking lessened. Like a rush of fuel to a combustion engine he felt the strength returning to his taut muscles. There was still nausea, the urge to vomit almost overwhelming, but it was the least of the side effects and the one he could tolerate best.

His skin began to cool, and the moisture that covered his body cooled with it. With a shiver, Blaklok surveyed his room. The chalk pentangle was still intact, a wisp of grey smoke still rising from its centre where the object of his conjuration had so recently debarked. The salt circle he had laid within was now smeared and skewed across the floorboards. Between the two markings was the eviscerated rat. Even now, mere seconds after its demise, jinking flies were beginning to congregate to lay their spawn and feast on the fresh carcass.

It had been a simple invocation. The circle of salt was merely a precaution. After all, the imp he had summoned had entreated *him* for aid, not the other way around. But old habits were hard to shake, and a protective circle of salt was an elementary and requisite aspect of necromancy; any novice knew it.

The encounter had been mercifully brief and Thaddeus was left in no doubt as to the importance of the liaison. Unfortunately, as with all things associated with the demonic, he had been given the most cryptic of clues as to the nature of his task.

Procure the Key for us, Rankpuddle had said, its dog-like muzzle forming the words perfectly. As it spoke its mouth seemed strange, the bestial jaws working just as a man's would. Blaklok didn't know whether the key in question was meant for the imp or for someone else, for the creature always spoke about itself in the third person, and even then not very plainly. *A deluge is coming that must be stopped* continued the imp, *the Key is the way*. Of course Thaddeus had asked which key in particular, to which the answer had been, *look to the dead*. Then, with a flash of blinding light and a whiff of sulphur, the foul creature was gone.

Look to the dead, Blaklok thought. Well, that could mean anything. If the damnable beast demanded his aid then why not just ask for it? Why all the puzzles?

Thaddeus sat himself in the small wooden chair that had been pushed to the room's edge. The shaking in his hands had all but left him now and even the bilious feeling in his gut was beginning to subside.

A sudden rapping at the door set his heart racing once more.

'Mr Blaklok?' It was Mrs Fotheringay, his landlady. Trust her to pick now of all occasions to bother him. 'Is everything all right in there? I heard a terrible loud bang earlier on. And next door is complaining of a peculiar smell.'

Thaddeus opened his mouth to give his usual gruff reply, when he noticed something on the floor. More flies had rushed to join their fellows around the rat, and something black and hairy had crawled from beneath the floorboards to investigate the tiny body. But it was not the carousing of insects that had caught Blaklok's attention. He moved from the chair, crawling on all fours to where the carcass lay, its entrails strewn in what he had originally believed a haphazard manner.

Look to the dead, he thought again with a smile. The rat's innards spelled out a word, the slimy guts spread across the floorboards in an elegant script. *Chronicle*, they said, bold as brass.

Thaddeus jumped to his feet, feeling the sudden elation of triumph. Mrs Fotheringay bashed on the door once more, just as he wrenched it open. Her sullen expression, the one she bore most often as though she had just stood in dog shit, dropped from her face. Her eyes popped open at the sight of Blaklok bearing down on her, stripped to the waist, tattoos plain to see on his muscular frame, face of thunder, covered in sweat and surrounded by a queer effluvium.

'I was only-' she managed to say, before Thaddeus grasped the newspaper that sat in the crook of her arm.

He held it up before her face and nodded his thanks, his eyes still burning in their deep sockets. She flashed him a bewildered smile as he slammed the door in her face.

Quickly he laid the newspaper out on the bare floorboards. *The Chronicle* was the most popular broadsheet in the Manufactory. In fact it was the only broadsheet in the Manufactory, its stories bearing a particular bias towards the Noble Houses that ran the city and the Sancrarium, the papacy to which they all paid a cursory tribute. In the metropolis that was the Manufactory, journalism was as functional a vocation as street sweeping or lamplighting. There was nothing that passed for freedom of the press, but right now Blaklok didn't give a damn – he only wanted information.

The cover bore several headlines, and Blaklok was quick to rule them out as he scanned the crisp paper. A murder in the Cistern, the betrothal of two unexceptional nobles, a tower in the Spires finally completed. All trivial.

Then he saw it; *Key of Lunos on Display*.

A smile slowly crept across Blaklok's face. That must be it! Though he had never been one for puzzles, this one seemed plain enough. He scanned the rest of the paper just in case. If he was wrong about this he would end up 'procuring' the wrong

key, and that could never be good. But there was nothing, no mention of a key anywhere else in *The Chronicle*.

Once he had determined that this was the object of his task, he read further:

Duke Darian Hopplite, fortune hunter and explorer, heir to the House Hopplite fortune and eligible bachelor, has decided to show his recent procurement – The Key of Lunos – at the Manufactory’s Repository of Unnatural History. The Key, unearthed by Duke Darian on a recent expedition to the Moon, is an item of great value, and the subject of intense scientific and theological debate. Some say the Key is a vessel for the Almighty, while the scientific community argue the veracity of this, stating that the Key of Lunos is an item of “undeterminable extra terrestrial import”.

Duke Darian has declined to become involved in the debate, himself stating that the item: “Looks dashed nice on the old mantle”.

The Key of Lunos will be on display for one week, starting Thrivensday.

Thaddeus sat back in the small wooden chair that still leaned against the wall and rubbed his stubbly chin with one calloused hand. This could be difficult. An item owned by a duke of the Noble Houses. Not only would it mean a hanging offence thieving such an item, but now it was to be displayed in the Repository of Unnatural History. Everyone knew security within that monolith to all things weird and weirder was almost as tight as the Chambers of the Sancrium. The place was full of dangerous flora and fauna, and the near impregnable aegis was there as much to keep the exhibits in as to keep the light-fingered out.

There was nothing else for it, he needed advice. First of all he needed to know exactly what he was dealing with. What was this bloody Key and why was it so important? The rest he

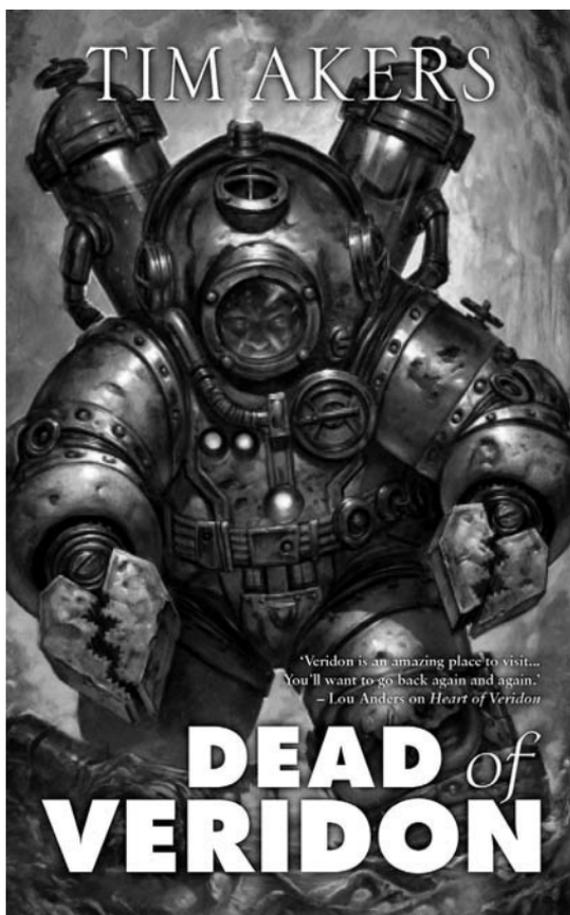
would figure out as he went. After all, how hard could it be? The Repository's safeguards might be considered insurmountable by its custodians, but then again they had never tried to stop Thaddeus bleeding Blaklok!

About the Author

Richard Ford originally hails from Leeds in the heartland of Yorkshire, but now resides in the Wiltshire countryside, where he can be found frolicking by the Thames, drinking cider and singing songs about combine harvesters.

For more information on what he's up to check out

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Trouble finds Jacob Burn: kicked out of his house, out of his comfortable life – out of everything that is familiar – even turned away from his circle of criminal friends and colorful enemies. Two years after he saved an ungrateful city from a mad angel, thwarting the plans of every powerful faction in Veridon, Jacob is still trying to pull his life together.

And still trouble finds him. A bad job goes worse, and soon old enemies present themselves as allies, and former friends set themselves against Jacob as he tries to put the dead to rest and the living to justice. Things gets even harder when he's appointed by the Council to investigate the clockwork-powered rise of the dead, while some hold him personally accountable, and others in the city work to use the chaos to their advantage.



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