



The Sacred Band: The Acacia Trilogy, Book Three

By David Anthony Durham

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—George R. R. Martin

David Anthony Durham’s acclaimed fantasy saga, the Acacia Trilogy, continues . . .

As *The Sacred Band* begins, Queen Corinn bestrides the world as a result of her mastery of spells from the Book of Elenet. Her younger brother, Dariel, has been sent on a perilous mission to the Other Lands. And her sister, Mena, travels to the far north to face an invasion of the feared race of the Auldek. As their separate trajectories converge, a series of world-shaping, earth-shattering battles will force the surviving children of the Akaran dynasty to confront their fates head on—and right some ancient wrongs once and for all.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for David Anthony Durham and The Acacia Trilogy:

“A fascinating world.”

—*USA Today*

“A big, fat, rich piece of history-flavored fantasy. . . . Imagined with remarkable thoroughness.”

—*Time*

“Gripping. . . . From the first pages of *Acacia*, Durham demonstrates that he is a master of the fantasy epic.”

—*The Washington Post Book World*

“Thrilling. . . . Durham’s new world—like our old one—is crawling with wickedly fascinating characters.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Transcendent. . . . As fantasy epics go, the ‘Acacia’ trilogy is a direct and worthy descendant of Tolkien.”

—*Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star*

“A truly epic fantasy . . . Superbly written.”

—*Fantasy Magazine*

“Something genuinely new. . . . Strong echoes of Homer and Virgil, Tolkien, Norse mythology’s Twilight of the Gods and America’s compromised history as a republic built on slavery fuse into an enthralling, literate and increasingly suspenseful narrative.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

“Never lets up. . . . A very tasty fantasy stew.”

—*San Jose Mercury News*

“Extraordinary. . . . One of the best books, fantasy or otherwise . . . in recent memory.”

—*Free-Lance Star*

“Excellent. . . . A multi-layered, page-turning series that pushes the envelope of epic fantasy.”

—*Contra Costa Times*

About the Author

David Anthony Durham received the 2009 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer of Science Fiction for *Acacia* and *The Other Lands* (the first two volumes of the Acacia Trilogy). Author of the historical novels *Gabriel’s Story*, *Walk Through Darkness*, and *Pride of Carthage*, he was handpicked by George R.R. Martin to write for his Wild Cards series of collaborative novels.

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Chapter One

Corinn Akaran stepped into the brilliant morning light. She walked across the deck of her transport ship, descended the plank to the Teh docks, and strode through the military officials awaiting her as if all of it were one continuous movement. The men—including Melio Sharratt and General Andeson, Marah and Elite officers--parted around her, stunned even though they had stood in preparation for greeting her since the dawn. For a moment the group did nothing but stare.

The queen wore armor that melded influences from the empire's provinces. Chain mail covered her arms; it was thin and light but made of fine links of steel, cuffed at the wrists with a hint of Senivalian style. A Meinish thalba wrapped her torso, snug against the contours of her hips and breasts. Her skirt, also of chain mail, was as short as any Talayan runner's. Leather straps wrapped over her legs, completely covering them in a second skin that was tight around the calf, loose around the knee, and tight again around the upper thighs. Over all this she wore a light Acacian cape that flapped around her as she moved.

Baddel, the Talayan who had jockeyed to be the first to address her on his homeland's soil, welcomed her with a barrage of enthusiastic praise. He poured forth condolences for the injury done to Prince Aaden. "Numrek treachery knows no bounds! I still can't??.??" For a moment he got no further. The queen's Elite guards swept down in her wake, jolting the advisers into motion. They scurried to keep up with her, all except Melio Sharratt, who seemed at ease and said as she passed, "Your Majesty, I've never seen you??.?.?dressed in armor."

"We're at war," Corinn said. "In this I'm the same as any in the Known World. General Andeson, tell me."

By which she meant update her on the most recent intelligence. The general did. The first wave of Marah had swept in upon the Numrek's seaside villas, catching them at least somewhat unawares. They'd fought among the rambling estates, across the beaches and piers and gardens in which the Numrek had lived in sun-drenched splendor. Soon they had the coastline blockaded. Corps of the Elite pushed inland as the Numrek retreated.

"We pressed them back into the hillside fortress the locals call the Thumb," the general said. "It's an ancient structure. We'd thought nothing of it, but the Numrek must have reinforced the walls and stocked it with supplies. They've had time to prepare their treachery. We've offered battle daily, but they no longer engage."

"They've suddenly gone coward," a younger officer said.

"No, they're toying with us," Melio said. "They send their children onto the battlements to float paper birds on the air. They're clever with such things."

Andeson's sideways glance at him was disapproving. Melio shrugged and mouthed, What? It's true.

"It's become something of a waiting game," Andeson said. "The fortress is built atop a butte. There is but a single track that wraps its way up around it, too narrow and unprotected to march an army up. We've lobbed stones and explosives at them, but they're well dug in. There are tunnels deep within the butte, accessed only from inside it. There's a water source in there somewhere as well. It may be a matter of starving them to

death.”

“An unheroic strategy,” Corinn said.

“I would choose honorable battle every time, Your Majesty, but at times one’s foes make that impossible. These Numrek are vile. They massacred their own servants, you know. Built a wall of their bodies at the base of the Thumb. If you had seen--”

“I’m sure our soldiers have performed well,” Corinn interrupted, “and I have every faith in your leadership. I’ve arrived now. I’ll finish this.”

They progressed out of the docks, through a makeshift storage area in the dusty open space beyond. The Teh coast was somewhat wetter than most of Talay, but this late in the season the grasses that covered the hills to the north were bleached golden by the sun. Corinn was glad to have arranged for horses ahead of time. The mounts awaited them, held by Talayan youths who looked nervous about their unaccustomed work.

“Queen Corinn,” Melio said. “Anything new from Mena?”

“Not since she sent a bird from Luana. I expect to hear from her again soon. Ride with me, Melio. When the Numrek have been dealt with I have an assignment for you. We’ll discuss it as we ride.”

Melio bowed his head, and they stood as the squire attending Corinn’s horse tried to swing it around into position for her.

“There’s a rumor among the soldiers,” Melio said. “It came across on the last few transports. About?..?..?Aliver.”

“A rumor? Have Andeson and the other generals heard this rumor?”

“I’m closer to the troops than they. That’s where I heard it, but the rumor is trickling up. It can’t possibly be true, though, right?”

“Between you and me, yes.”

Melio’s face lit up. All his disparate features aligned in a manner that was surprisingly handsome. “Truly? Where is he?”

Corinn stepped on the stool that had been set down for her. Preparing to swing onto the horse, she said, “He is safe in the palace. He needs seclusion just now. He remains fragile. Best not to fan the rumors yet.”

The night ten days earlier that she had worked her spell had been long and beyond exhausting. She was drained already, what with the sorcery she had worked on Barad and the song she had sung to Elya’s children. She could have dropped into slumber before she even began her third spell, but she needed someone to help her carry the burden of rule. She needed her brother.

As soon as his body became fully corporeal, he slumped forward. He would have fallen had she not sprung up and guided him onto her bed. For a time she stared at the wonder of him. He was really there! Solid,

warm to the touch. Breathing. He was naked, but she thought nothing of that. His eyes moved beneath his lids in dream. What does a man dream after returning from death? What was death anyway? Was it not the conqueror of all? No, it wasn't, for she had just denied it at least one victim. She had so many questions, but even as they formed, her mind went sluggish. She knew that he would slumber long, and so she left Aliver and collapsed on a divan in an adjoining room.

Rhrenna and two maids woke her two days later. Rhrenna would not have disturbed her even then, she explained, save, "He is awake and asking for you."

With those words Corinn sprang up and rushed back to the other room. Aliver Akaran stood on the balcony, his knuckles white, gripping the stone balustrade, his jaw loose with astonishment. He wore a morning robe, tied at the waist. Rhrenna must have ordered it brought for him.

Corinn turned to figure out what fascinated her brother so. The sky above was the color and texture of a blue eggshell. The morning sun, just free of the horizon, was cut in half by one long sliver of pink cloud. A flock of black neck divers folded their wings one after another and plummeted like darts, exploding into the water of the harbor in a feeding frenzy. Thin lines of smoke rose like flower stems from the lower town. It could have been any of these things.

Aliver set his gaze on her. His eyes were a darker brown than she remembered. His skin was no longer as pale as it had been the first night. It was a richer color, tanned to a light brown. Now that she saw him clearly, she realized she had combined his features with Hanish's when she had pictured him. He was older than when she knew him last. Immeasurably older, though he gave that impression not so much in the details of his features as in the distance of the consciousness behind them.

He said, "I'd forgotten so much."

"I as well," Corinn answered.

"You were a girl," he said.

Corinn shook her head. "I never was."

Aliver tested an expression on his face. Disappointment. Or confusion. Disapproval. Some combination of these that his features could not spell out yet. "I am sure you were."

Corinn brushed her hand down the curls of hair near his temple, wrapped her palm around the back of his head. She pulled him close and touched their foreheads together, something her father used to do with her. "I remember a smaller version of myself, but not a girl. No girl should be as afraid as I was."

"You still are."

Drawing back, she shook her head. "No. I have to explain many things to you."

In the few days before she left for the Teh coast, Corinn tried to convey as much as possible to him. The world had not paused outside the palace to grant her a respite. It felt necessary that she have him to herself, that she bind him to the truth as she knew it.

She ordered Rhrenna and the two maids to complete silence about Aliver's return. She had her quarters

emptied of other staff and servants, stationed guards only outside her chambers. She wanted to be alone with her brother. She did not even try to find a reasoned approach to what she told him. She just spoke. She offered what information came to her, circling back to give context, jumping forward to the present and then realizing by the look of glazed distance on his features that she had lost him. His eyes sometimes went as stone-dead as Barad's, vacant, sightless, and yet staring. Each time she stopped and breathed and began again. She reminded him who he was. She assured him that it was urgent that he return to life and complete the work he had left unfinished. Not only that, there were new complications and threats, and she needed someone she could trust completely at her side.

Aliver moved about the rooms, restless, studying things, lifting objects and turning them in his hands. She walked, following his lead as he explored the gardens, touching plants and watching birds and stopping to marvel at things--the pressure of the wind when it blew, the heat of the sun on his skin, the colors in the terrace tiles. Corinn sometimes thought he had forgotten her, but if she stopped speaking he shifted his attention to her.

They ate together as often as Corinn could manage. Simple meals, at first, without the sweet and sour spices common to Acacian cuisine. Watching him dip flatbread into olive oil, Corinn almost thought herself a new mother again. He shoved the bread into his mouth and worked his jaw, so focused on it that he ignored the oil dripping down his chin. He ate as a child does: the food had his attention completely.

She could not stay hidden in her rooms all day. There was no end to the work of the empire. She had to meet with advisers and senators. Emissaries still sailed in from around the Known World, both to offer condolences for the Numrek betrayal and to ask if the news of a pending invasion should be credited. She told them it could. It was real. She allowed no doubt about it, even though in other meetings she drilled Sire Dagon as if she did not believe, trying to rip more information out of him.

The world was in turmoil, and she alone had the responsibility of calming it. Good, then, that she did not feel as overpowered by it as she had before bringing Aliver back. In some ways things had quieted. He had a long way to go before he could emerge as the symbol of her power that she hoped he would, but for the time being it was good just being with him. He made her think of her father. He even made her feel closer to Mena and Dariel. She wished they were here to see what she had done. How pleased Dariel would be! Mena, too. Aliver's return would make up for all the strife that had tainted their relationships. They would start anew.

For two days the Numrek in the Thumb did not answer the messages Corinn sent them. It was only after she had stood in clear sight of the butte-top fortress and shouted up to them herself that they believed she had come to speak with them. With the chieftain Calrach gone to the Other Lands, and with Greduc and Codeth slain on that bloody day in the Carmelia, Corinn had not been entirely sure with whom she would parlay. Gathered within the shade of a gently billowing linen tent, she learned that Crannag, a relation of Calrach's, now held power. He was older than the chieftain, more a warrior than a statesman. Good. That suited her.

Crannag sat alone. He set his hands on his knees, tossed his black hair, and grinned. This man had once stood at the door of her quarters, of Aaden's. Now she could barely recognize the guard he had been in the smug lines of his face.

"All right, Queen. I'm here." He held up his strong arms and made a show of searching his torso for weapons. He was shirtless, the muscles of his chest sectioned and defined. He was some thirty paces away,

so he had to project his voice. “What do you want of me?”

“I want you to die,” Corinn said.

Crannag guffawed. “You could have that. Your Marah there?..ah?..together?..me with no weapons, them fully armed?..I think they might have me, if they wanted. Of course, I might just be able to get a hand around your neck first.” He reached out, pretending to suffer body blows as he grasped for her. The pantomime was too much for him. He bent forward around his laughter.

“It’s not just you that I want to die,” Corinn said. “I want all Numrek to pay for your treachery.”

Crannag’s leather-brown face went grave. “You want me to go back in there and get my people to come out and be slaughtered. We have other things planned now. A long plan, Queen. You didn’t know Numrek have patience, did you? You always thought us grumpy, grumpy Numreks. Ah?..” He snapped his fingers, and his eyes rolled up as he searched for the right word, then found it. “Taciturn. You like that? You thought us ta-ci-turn. You thought we had nothing better to do than stand by your door as you slept and ate and thought yourself the queen of the world. It’s a tiny piece of turd island, but it’s the center of the world!”

From the Hardcover edition.

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