

# **The Modern World**

**Steph Swainston**

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I wake, and lie motionless on my camp bed in the dark tent, listening. The wind roars down the gaps between my pavilion and the next, hisses over the guy ropes. Outside, heavy canvas cracks and flaps. The lantern outside my tent door vibrates on its iron stake and sets up a loud humming. When the gust dies back it unmasks the din that woke me. Soldiers are screaming. Men are shouting to each other in the absolute darkness outside. The gale gusts again so loud I can't distinguish anything at all. I can have only been asleep for a couple of hours; it must be one or two in the morning.

I throw my blankets aside and leap off the bed. As my bare feet touch the damp grass the ground shakes so violently I fall to my knees. My bed and the low cane table next to it collapse, spilling my letters and clothes onto the sparse grass. Is it an earthquake?

The tremor surges strongly, a guy rope snaps and in the gloom I see the poles of my fyrd-issue pavilion start to lean to the right. The walls begin to droop, gathering creases.

There is a constant banging, the lantern flame wavers. Its light blows out: suddenly everything is totally black. Its pole hits the ground with a thump.

Wind puffs out the walls then sucks them hollow, drawing in the far-off sound of a desperate, unearthly shrieking, urgent hammering and splintering wood. That isn't human. What's going on? What's happening? I fumble around trying to find my matches, before I realise what it is. Animals are making that noise. Horses. What the fuck would make them scream like that? They're in their stalls at the top of camp; the smashing is their hooves beating the gates where they're trapped. Their noise is solid panic but I can't hear anything else. In a second the power of their agony winds me so tightly on edge that I whimper. I grab my combat trousers off the grass, hop about on a bare foot shoving one leg into them, then the other, pull them up to my waist, button them.

The gale swells and punches the tent walls. The horses' screams die out, one by one. Now I can hear men and women yelling, their shouts come from both sides and from the row of pavilions in front of mine.

'Help!' A man's cry fragments in the wind. Footsteps thump on the duckboard track outside, resounding in both directions. People are running to and from the centre of camp; I can't tell what they're trying to do. Lamps flare outside, far on the other

side of the pavilion lines, towards the gate. Their light shines through my walls as yellow dots with fuzzy haloes, outlining the ridges of the surrounding tents.

I thrust my toes without socks into clammy leather boots, shoving them right down to the hard sole and drawing the bucket tops over my knees. I pick up my scale-mail hauberk, hold it up, jangling, over my head and struggle into it as if it is a jumper, leaving the bottom straps loose. Its freezing scales slap against my bare skin but I have no time to put on the undershirt.

I fumble my left arm into my round shield's leather loops. I can't see anything but blackness at ground level. I feel for my ice axe, snatch it up and wriggle its webbing strap over my hand, around my wrist. The canvas ceiling sags down to my head. Its rear wall billows in on a cold blast, carrying the smell of tough grass and wet moss. The ropes stretch to breaking strain, then yank thick pegs out of the ground.

I dart to the entrance, unlacing the flaps from each other with my long, white fingers up in front of my face. A silhouette stumbles past outside, running for its life, then back again in the direction it came. He falters one way then the other, incapable of making a decision, swiping at the air with a broadsword clutched in one muddy hand.

I scramble out under the cloudy starless sky, onto the planks that serve row fifty-one. I tread on something lumpy and yielding, and look down. It is a severed right hand. I lift my boot toe off its palm and its curled fingers relax slightly.

Abruptly a tremendous noise like a tree trunk breaking crashes through the gale, followed by a running series of snaps starting deep in the night in front of me. It sounds like sailcloth ripping, or a hunter stripping the ribs off a carcass. It approaches louder and closer, peels past me on my right, and ends far behind me with a ear-splitting crack. I crouch wondering what the fuck it was. The wind exalts with twice the strength and splatters water drops from the tent canvas across my face. The palisade must have gone down. Three sides of our square encampment are wide open. The wind roars straight from the high moor with no shelter to break it up and searches out the tiny gaps in my mail shirt. I have a sudden impression of the vast, empty hills. It is five kilometres to our reinforcements at Slake Cross, three to the nearest fortified farm.

This must really be an earthquake if it's strong enough to rip down the palisade. The ground shakes in short spasms. Behind me my whole pavilion collapses with a sigh, blowing air past me. The wind tugs at it, twisting it into a rustling, living

form. Torn strips flap past, writhing as they ascend. They fly like flags from the tent next to mine; it has been shredded. Tangled bloodstained clothes roll and wrap themselves around the base of its pole. To my right, towards the centre of camp, the neighbouring tents in the line lie collapsed in the same direction, like trees in a blasted forest. There are more lamps along the track but the ones that aren't dead gutter feebly. I stare into the roaring night but I can't see any further.

A dark-haired man sprints along the duckboard, clutching his crumpled, padded undershirt to his naked chest, the greaves on his otherwise bare legs flashing.

'Stop! What's out there?'

He just disappears against the moors' lightless bulk.

I sense rather than see movement on my right towards the fallen palisade. Maybe men, heading away from the tents. They seem to thin out, are gone. I hear clicking and swing round with a breath to my left. Did something scuttle behind the canvas wreckage? My hand is so tight around my axe haft I feel its tally notches pressing into my palm. I bring it up into guard.

A soldier is squatting to shit in front of the next tent. The tent's walls are patched with blood and it emits a warm cloying smell of viscera. The soldier is looking away from me, so terrified that his bowels let go and he's getting it over with as fast as possible.

Another man runs past, wearing nothing but a coat and pants, his ponytail whisking. I don't know how to stop them fleeing so I yell the rallying cry, 'To me! To me! Minsourai! ...Wake up! ...Wake...' But there is no one to wake. I can't see inside the laced tents and even if I could I don't want to. I back away; I might be safer at a distance from them.

These are the advance guard, only five thousand men but still too many to rally. Where's Hayl? These pavilions are for his minsourai, mounted scouts who reconnoitre and find routes for the fyrd, locate and mark positions to camp.

I begin to pick my way in the opposite direction towards the centre and the Castle's field headquarters. If we can possibly regroup, the Sun Pavilion will be the best place.

I follow the duckboard raised above the grass that's bruised and pasted down into the mud. The mud is becoming more slimy with blood. Under the boards I see a boot with a lower leg protruding. No sign of the rest of the body. Further on, dismembered limbs scatter the tussocks and track.

The wind batters against me and, somewhere within it, I catch the rasp of an Insect's leg against its shell. I shrink back and stare around. I can't see anything!

Behind me, something the size of a pony but with thin long legs skitters across the track. I glimpse a flash of red-brown shell. They're everywhere! My scalp tingles: at any moment one will lunge out of the night and grab me before I even see it.

Far on the other side of camp lights are clustering and moving away. I'll try to reach them. If I can trust what I've heard, the palisade's still upright over there.

The wind gusts from every direction carrying the brief sound of mandibles chopping closed, like a whetstone on a scythe blade. Closer to the centre now, the tents on either side are nothing but shreds. Inside one, I hear the sound of bone splintering. In each pavilion, ten men are dispatched by bites before they wake up, their bodies twisted into different postures. Ten men fused together into a slaughterhouse heap so unrecognisable I'll have to use their dog tags to identify them.

The next tent stores the armour consignment that arrived yesterday. I hear crashes as clawed feet skid over the steel, knocking against piles of plate, jostling sheaves of pikes. I smell whiffs and hear scraping from the latrine shack. Insects are in there too, turning over the earth and eating the shit.

The path begins to zigzag. The earthquake has shaken some of its joined sections apart. Then I see it folded into peaks; the boards are still connected but standing on their ends.

Grey eye facets glitter. I glimpse an Insect face-on. It pulls back into the darkness between two pavilions. Its triangular antlike head moves up and down; it is tangled among crossed tent ropes, severing them with bites. Pieces of paper and torn pennons fly through the night, brushing the ground and catching against buckled ridge poles.

I see angular shapes of Insects standing, feeding on the corpses. A brush of air, something rears. Instantly I see jaws like stag beetle mandibles, then it crashes into the shield. Its jaws slide off the curved edge. I yell and swing my axe, feel it connect. I free the axe and bring it down again. It's dead. It's dead! Calm down! Short breaths rush in and out as I feel not think – how many more? I have to get away. I plunge down the track, running blindly. I'm on the verge of completely losing control, then I stop.

The track has ended. There are no more planks.

At the same moment a heavy gust blusters against my face carrying the unmistakable firm burnt copper scent of Insects. When as a child I lost my milk teeth, pulling at a tooth and turning it rushed a salty blood taste into my mouth, and I had a strange sore pleasure from turning a tooth on a flesh thread or biting down the sharp underside onto my gum. That's what Insects smell like, and it's so intense there must be hundreds. How have they appeared inside the camp? My jaw prickles as if I'm about to vomit. I gulp down saliva and I let out a scream to release the fear.

'Jant!' a voice answers, faint on the wind. It is Tornado, bellowing but I think I hear an edge to it as if he's in pain. 'Jant, where are you? Hayl, is that you?'

'Tornado!' I yell with all my strength.

'Jant! Jant!' Tornado sounds desperate. 'Fuck –'

The wind's noise rises higher and higher. If I open my wings, it will smash me into the ground.

Something whizzes past my face, with the gale, and thuds into the duckboard behind me. I crouch down to investigate. An arrow is sticking in the plank at a steep angle, its bodkin point embedded deeply. Its shaft and white fletchings are still quivering. I start to hear, but not see, more arrows hissing down. They pelt from the sky, from somewhere ahead of me, not spent, striking with force.

I raise my shield in front of my face and feel it jar. Arrows come down like hailstones sweeping across the track, thudding into the corpses, into the soldiers who are still alive but wounded, lying on the ground sweating and twitching. All the ground I can see is filling with arrows. Our archers must be a couple of hundred metres away. Why are they shooting at us?

I yell into the night, 'Stop!' and the wind tatters my voice.

Invisible arrows strike the board in front of my toes; one deflects off my shield and drops at my side. They catch in tent fabric. I hear them tap on an Insect shell and the clicking of articulated claws as it scuffles under fallen canvas.

The arrows buzz in well-timed flights, but I can't hear any voice ordering the loosing. Who's out there? Lightning – if it is Lightning – must have concluded that everybody is dead or beyond help. The archers will be terrified. They're protecting themselves and they're never going to stop. I hurry away from them, stumble over a shaft embedded in the track, and break it.

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I catch a glimpse of a single flickering light ahead. It illuminates a white tent from inside. All around is dark so the tent, rectangular because it's side-on to me, looks as if it is hanging in the air. The light moves slowly, in jerks, along at floor level. It inches towards the entrance; closer and closer. A sense of dread weighs on me because I know what I am going to witness next will be even worse. Whatever comes out of that tent is the last thing alive this side of camp and I don't want to see it. I don't want to have to deal with wounds so awful. It will be mutilated and driven so insane by agony it won't even be human any more. I fervently hope that it dies before it emerges.

A lean hand clutching a lantern pushes out from the flap and Laverock crawls out on his hands and knees – head, shoulders, chest. I know him as a minsourai captain, a local with vital knowledge of Lowespass. Digging ramparts made him sinewy, with shorn hair and a face like a weathered leather bag. He was raised with the constant pressures of the Insect threat and Awian ambition.

An arrow snicks into the grass beside him, its flights upright.

'Laverock!' I cry.

He looks in my direction, not recognising me. As he draws his legs from the tent flap I see he doesn't have feet. His feet have been bitten off above the ankle, though not cleanly because sharp tubes of white bone stick out from the severed ends: they look like uncooked macaroni.

Insect antennae flicker after him. Bulbous, faceted eyes follow and the thing strikes forward. Laverock's eyes widen in terror. He pushes himself upright and tries to run on the stumps but his bones sink into the ground like hollow pegs. The Insect seizes his hips low down; its jaws saw over his belly. Laverock knows this is his last second. He snarls in fury as he falls and swings round the iron lantern dangling from his hand. He smashes it over the Insect's head. Yellow-flaming liquid spreads over its brown carapace. I smell scorching chitin, then Laverock's shirt and wings catch fire. His long primary feathers drip and shrink as they burn, as if they're drawing back into his wings. The Insect bites through his body and with a shake of its head throws the top half towards me. The Insect and Laverock's remains sink to the ground, welded together in the fire, vivid against the line of wrecked tents.

By their light I can suddenly see I'm standing at the edge of a vast pit. The flames jump up and shadow its far side, twenty metres away. I stare at it, uncomprehending: this should be the centre of camp. The conical hole gradually,

steadily, widens. Turf breaks off under my feet and rolls into it. I step back, seeing that the slope is covered with debris. On the other side, the Sun Pavilion, collapsed down the incline, lies plastered to it like a gigantic wet sheet, trailing ropes still attached at their ends to dirty uprooted pegs. The brass sun bosses that top its main poles glint among its folds. Dead men are splayed out around and underneath it, pale and naked or half-dressed, some still in sleeping bags. As soil rolls down, they slide towards the base of the cone. Their limbs shift position with jerky marionette motions – they look as if they’re waving. Swords and broken camp bed frames rattle off stones in the soil as they slide; kitbags spill their contents.

Tornado’s voice peals out again, ‘Jant!’ I look up to see the giant man standing on the far bank beset by seven Insects, five on the slope in front of him and one on his either side. Yet more Insects are running up out of the crater. Tornado backs himself against an empty ambulance cart. It has 1<sup>ST</sup> DIVISION LOWEPASS SELECT roughly stencilled on the side, and its spoked wheels have curved boards nailed to the rims, to widen them and prevent them sinking in the mud.

Tornado’s breeches are slashed and blood wells up from red cuts underneath. It flows down his leg from a deep wound in his thigh. His denim shirt is unbuttoned; his big hands curl around the shaft of his double-headed axe. Every second he is taking wounds that would kill me outright.

An Insect below him darts forward but Tornado swings the axe under its mandibles with such force that he decapitates it. He hews down the ones on left and right with a fluid movement. At his feet a mound of carcasses bleeds thick pale yellow haemolymph down the widening pit. Two more Insects run up the slope and over its rim. He deals one a massive blow, cleaving its thorax through. The other seems to brush past him with a movement of its head but it opens a huge streaming gash in the roll of fat over his unfastened belt buckle. Tornado bellows.

He starts to droop forward. He clutches at the cart for support; it rocks on its curved boards. His knees sag and his skin is pallid. He kneels, one knee then the other, head bowed. I can’t see his face.

I watch as an Insect climbs the cart from behind, crests the top, appears above Tornado’s head as a spiked silhouette, with actions like a jointed puppet. It reaches down to Tornado’s rounded shoulders. It starts to feed.