

The
SIN
in the
STEEL

Ryan Van Loan



A Tom Doherty Associates Book
New York

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THE SIN IN THE STEEL

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Before I learned how to read, I thought knowledge was finite, dead and decaying inside old men's skulls. Now I know the truth, that knowledge is living gold threaded through layers of dead parchment, just waiting to be mined. But while the world may be driven by knowledge, it runs on gold. The hard kind. And if my plans were to succeed, that was the kind of leverage I needed. I saw my chance, placed my wager, and took my seat at the table.

For that I was being shoved at bayonet point down a marbled hall lined with frescoes and landscapes of a hundred ports that shared a similar theme: palaces and outposts of the mighty Kanados Trading Company. The Imperial Guard pushed us forward at a breakneck pace; it was a wonder I didn't trip over my blood-soaked dress. I must confess, the bayonet at my back was wonderful motivation. Eld stumbled beside me, weak from the knife he'd taken in one shoulder.

A knife meant for me.

I'd tossed what I thought were loaded die, only to see them come up pips, and unless the odds changed fast, we were likely

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to swing for it. The Imperial Guard wouldn't look the other way like the Constabulary, and even the Constabulary wouldn't look away from a room full of dead guards and a mage whose God would be missing their magics soon enough. Not when I'd been caught holding the still-smoking pistole. *Maybe with enough lire?* Unfortunately, I'd need as much gold as it cost to buy the palace they'd brought us to and even then, the Imperial Guard doesn't bribe easily. I've tried.

No one gets off with just a bribe when you've murdered a mage. Not that we had. Murdered a mage, that is, but perception was reality and reality saw us swinging before the day's sun had fully risen.

A pair of heavy wooden doors that rose from floor to ceiling swung open of their own accord as we approached. I saw the hint of a muddy footprint and filed it away before the guard behind me hit me low in the back. I went down, caught up in my bloody skirts. Eld tried to catch me, then cried out when I hit his bad shoulder, and we both sprawled across the marble floor, sliding to a stop in front of a gilded table built over turnstile cabinets. I picked myself up, making it to my knees before the hard octagonal iron of a musket barrel pressed against the base of my skull and sent a chill running down my spine.

"Eyes down or your brains will decorate the floor," the guard growled.

"I've read blood leaves a bitch of a stain on marble," I said, before I could think. Eld groaned beside me. *Number eighty-eight, Alyce's On Sculpting.* The guard growled again. I heard a pair of heels click on the floor. Lavender skirts pinned back and sewn with thread o' gold swished around the table in front of us. I risked a glance up through a few errant strands that had pulled free from my loosely braided dark curls and saw a pale woman with blond locks piled down the left shoulder of her gown—

which had sleeves that covered her to the wrist, as was the latest fashion.

She met my gaze with a smile that made her appear younger than she was, thin lips or no. An older woman in dark Imperial armor, with crimson plumes of rank swaying atop her helm, walked past us to stand beside the blonde. She moved with the loose, stalking saunter that I associated with enforcers the street gangs employed. She held up—making sure we could see it—an all-too-familiar pistole, then set it down on the table, out of view. Once that was done, she crossed her gauntleted arms, staring at us from eyes darker than her sun-darkened face, as if sizing us up.

“You’ve a need for friends,” the woman in the lavender gown said.

I looked up at that, expecting to see a dark room awash with lantern light glittering off the blades and saws and pincers meant to pry the truth from our lips whether we willed it or no.

“Do we now?” Whatever else I meant to say caught on my tongue as my eyes finally took in the room they’d brought us to. *Gods*. Guard forgotten, I looked past the woman and felt my mouth slacken. No torture table here, but something far more dangerous.

A library.

They’d brought us to a library—at least that is the only word our tongue has for it—but “a library” meted it poor justice. It was labyrinth-like in its shelves that rose from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, with the far wall a dim specter in the distance, barely illuminated by a score or more of chandeliers. It wasn’t the size of the space but the sheer quantity of what it held that made my throat clench as if in want of water. Books . . . no, tomes, packed side by side on every shelf, sometimes stacked double in height. Everywhere my eyes turned there was another cover in

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mismatched bindings and sizes and colors staring back at me, another voice to be discovered, another bit of information to banish my ignorance, another morsel of magic to be consumed.

Three hundred and sixty-seven. Even Eld hasn't read as many books as I have, and he's old. I'd thought myself well-read, versed in the subjects of enlightenment, but here was a treasure to beggar my meager achievements. Here was a sun to my mere pinprick in the darkness. *I could spend a dozen years here and not finish.* I inhaled deeply, absorbing the dusty incense into my bones; a shiver covered me in gooseflesh. *A dozen years.*

The musket barrel pressed harder against my neck, bringing me back to the reality of my situation—on my knees with a gun to my head and enough evidence painting Eld and me as murderers to see us executed on the spot.

"You've a need for friends."

"I *have* friends," I said, trying and failing to keep my gaze from wandering across the shelves behind her. One. Anyway. "But I'm not sure I follow you."

"Oh, I think you do, Sambuciña," the woman said. Her light cheeks dimpled when she saw my astonishment, and she smiled again. I never know why people do that. Smile. Are they amused? Happy? Trying to disarm? Almost certainly the last, even if some of the other emotions play into it, but it's hard for me to discern.

The eyes, on the other hand, rarely lie. Hers were bright and hard, and searching. *For what?*

"You were on your way to the gallows, to be hung for disturbing the Empress's peace, for larceny, and for half a dozen counts of murder, but as a *friend*, I interceded on your behalf." She made a motion with her hand and the barrel against my neck disappeared.

"That's pleasant of you," I muttered. The guard growled yet again.

“Buc!” Eld hissed. He’s polite like that. He looked pale in the lamplight. I hoped that was from the shock of the arrest and not blood loss. He was the muscle and I the brain, and weak muscle was no muscle at all. Besides, he was the only soul that would call me friend. I can’t lay claim to many years, but I’ve learned it doesn’t pay to toss that away.

Not with these stakes.

“Is there a name we should use, to thank you?” Eld asked.

I tried not to roll my eyes.

“Salina,” the woman said after a moment. She arched an eyebrow. “I can save you from the noose, but only if you’re useful.”

“Very noble,” I said.

“We’re not noble, Sambuciña; we’re a trading company. Omnia cum pretio.”

“Everything has its price,” I repeated. It was the one phrase in the New Goddess’s tongue that didn’t twist in my mouth.

“Precisely,” Salina said, favoring me with another of her false smiles.

“We’ve rights to a judge’s ear before we swing,” I reminded her. “And last I checked, self-defense wasn’t a hanging offense.”

“Self-defense?” Salina snorted. “You were caught surrounded by dead bodies, pistole in hand. That hardly seems like self-defense.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” I said.

“They can indeed,” said a new voice. A man in a powdered wig marched out of the stacks behind Salina; his naturally tanned skin, somewhat pale from lack of direct sunlight, looked paler still beneath the bloodred robes he wore.

“That’s why,” he said as he settled himself into the gild-backed chair behind the cataloging table, “it requires the judiciary to sift through the evidence, to sort”—he gestured toward the stacks with a flick of his hand—“fact from fiction, as it were.”

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"You did say you wanted a judge's ear," Salina said, that small, insipid smile catching the edge of her lips. "Do you know why Servenza hangs criminals, Buc?"

"Because rotting bodies send a message," I said.

"That's part of it," the female Imperial officer beside Salina said. Given that she'd brought the murder weapon in, she was likely the one giving the orders when we were captured. *Damn her.* Her plumed helm turned her into some anonymous grim defender of justice, the executioner to the judge's judicial pronouncements.

"The other part is that it's cheaper to hang them than it is to shoot them," the judge added.

"But the Kanados Trading Company isn't so cheap," Salina said.

"You can't hold a trial in here," Eld protested.

"Oh, but we can," Salina said.

"Court is in session," the judge pronounced, his lips thinning in the vaguest suggestion of a smile. He produced a gavel from his robes and rapped the table thrice. "The honorable Judge Cokren presiding."

The sound of the guard cocking his musket was loud in the silence.

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Eld began arguing with the judge, protesting the venue, the domain, and anything else under the sun he could think of, but his arguments were as weak as he was, given the massacre we'd come from. A massacre of—Gods damn it—*my* doing. But there were odds to be had, if I could see the angles in time, only my head was spinning still and I could taste iron in my mouth. *That blow didn't help things.* I'd been sloppy, to let the woman catch me with her fist, however glancing, but we'd been outnumbered three to one and us unarmed. *Enough time to analyze what went wrong later. If there is a later.* I waited a breath to let the men build themselves up, until Judge Cokren's face began to take on some color of its own.

"Your Honor!" My shout cut off the two men's voices. "W-would it please the court to hear our version of events? So that you may ascertain the truth?"

"It would," Judge Cokren said, smirking at my stammer.

Let a man think you weak, let him think you vulnerable, and he'll never see the blade until it's planted in his ribs. This time

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the blades were of the verbal kind. There'd been enough blood spilt, and most of it on my dress.

"It was self-defense, Your Honor . . ." I began.

"Oh?" Salina crossed her thin arms, drawing her gown tighter about herself. "Do tell."

I ignored her, shooting a questioning look at Cokren, who nodded fractionally in approval.

"Some philosophers think knowledge a burden, a millstone round their necks dragging them down with its power, but they're all fools," I said, speaking softly as I eyed the books surrounding us.

My vision was still a little unsteady, but I couldn't stop drinking in the thousands upon thousands of tomes waiting to be discovered. But first, I needed to discover why we had been brought here. Last I'd checked, the Kanados Trading Company didn't hang murderers inside their headquarters.

"Knowledge isn't power; knowledge is a loaded pistole waiting to be fired. Knowledge is opportunity."

I smelled the warm, welcoming scent of parchment, thick in the air, and for a moment the ringing in my head subsided. My mind raced ahead, leaving words behind for me to follow, but I had to take my time. Judge Cokren needed a clear picture if we were to walk free. For the first time since Eld had taken that knife in the shoulder, I could feel the odds shifting, albeit ever so slightly.

"We solved a dozen cases that other would-be investigators failed miserably at, just to get to this point," I continued. "To find a merchant who needed someone like me, someone who could look at a score of disparate clues and piece them together to complete the puzzle." *A merchant who could open doors that would give me what I've wanted ever since I left the streets, burning everything behind me.* "A merchant who—"

"Wasn't completely clean," Salina finished. "Grift and bribery, I shouldn't wonder," she added for Judge Cokren's benefit.

"No, Salazar wasn't spotless," I agreed. *Then again, neither am I.* No one leaves the streets without some grime on them, and I'd left with it smeared into my bones. Eld thinks me too young to have lived more than one life, but I grew up on the streets, where most lives never made it past a dozen years. I can lay claim to seventeen and if I have it my way, I'll claim scores more before I draw my last breath.

Watching my old life burn had left glowing embers within me. I'm young, but I'm no fool—change requires power and in the Empire, power comes from gold. The hard kind. The kind Salazar could provide.

"I didn't think Salazar was fool enough to cheat us after we'd solved his case for him," I said.

"Are you arguing that this fight was over a failure to pay for services rendered?" Judge Cokren asked, leaning forward over the table.

"That is what brought both parties together, aye." I nodded.

"And you went into his own warehouse to collect?" Salina shook her golden locks.

"Sounds more like revenge than anything else," the female officer put in. She'd seen the blood and bodies strewn about Salazar's office.

"I knew what I was doing," I growled. "We were there to talk . . . to discuss payment options." Both women arched their eyebrows and I swore. "You can't take money from the dead."

"Not if you're caught before your robbery is complete anyway," the officer said in a low voice.

Salina clicked her tongue. "Now, that was ill done, Colonel. Let Buc give us her version of events."

"It is Captain, signora."

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"For today, yes, but tomorrow?"

"To return to the matter at hand," Judge Cokren said, his tone making both women look away from each other. He adjusted his crimson robes and his dark eyes pierced my own. "Girl, you came to talk to this merchant Salazar and ended up murdering half a dozen."

"Five," I corrected him. All three stared at me. Beads of sweat slid down my forehead. *Must be the lights.* "The mage murdered Salazar."

"The mage murdered his employer? That's your story?" Salina cut in.

"You know mages are loyal only to their God," Eld said with a shrug.

I winced. "And you know that the Kanados Trading Company employs scores of mages to keep tabs on their estates, right, Eld?"

"I—uh, had forgotten that detail," he admitted. His pale features burned, so at least he had enough blood left in him to blush. "But Buc speaks the truth, Your Honor. The mage blew Salazar's brains out."

"And left you holding the pistole?" Judge Cokren chuckled mirthlessly. He adjusted his powdered wig. "This may be the shortest deliberation I've ever had and I tried the man who nearly killed the Empress last summer."

"It was the fastest fuckup I've ever seen," I said.

"Certainly one of the fastest I can remember," Eld supplied. "If you weren't there, you wouldn't have believed it. One moment we're talking, Salazar is trying to bargain down his price, and then the mage ends the conversation."

"That's when the killing started," I said. I closed my eyes and was back in the darkened warehouse, in the room Salazar's lackeys had led us to after stripping us of our weapons. I could remem-

ber the smell of the dust, heavy in the air until blood flowed, its sharp iron scent cutting through everything else. "Salazar's man slung a blade at my face." One of the first lessons the streets taught me was that if you flinch, you miss the next move. Do that and you won't have to worry about another move because you'll be dead in the gutter. "I didn't flinch."

"Aye, and why would you when it took me in the shoulder?" Eld asked, shrugging his wounded side.

"You were wounded at the outset?" the captain asked. Her hand strayed to the sword at her side. "And still killed half a dozen?"

"Five," I reminded her.

"I've been wounded before," Eld murmured. He glanced at me. "And, uh, I had some help."

"Look, Salazar was trying to slip out of paying after we'd gone and found his missing merchandise. That was bad enough," I said. "But then he had one of his lackeys go and put a knife through Eld. Not paying's one thing—killing my friend's another." I snorted. "They were fools; by that point Eld had dropped three of them with fisticuffs. He'd have done for more if our weapons hadn't been taken away."

"She exaggerates," Eld protested, but Judge Cokren held up his hand and motioned for me to continue.

"But they'd already made their second mistake."

"Oh?" Salina asked.

"They gave me a knife," I said, unable to keep the hint of a smile from my lips.

"That hurt," Eld growled.

"Did it?" I asked, shaking my head.

Salina sniffed.

"In close quarters and outnumbered, you can either curl up in a ball and wait for their knives—or you can attack."

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"Wait, wait," Judge Cokren said. "You were unarmed and outnumbered and you attacked?"

"Recall I had a knife by then," I said.

"From my shoulder," Eld said.

I shrugged. "Like I said, I hate failure, so I attacked. Put one of the shorter bastards up against the wall before he could blink. He tried to scream—"

"Tried?" The captain's brow furrowed.

"It's hard to scream with a blade buried in your throat," I told her. Salina made a choking sound and looked as if she were going to sick up. I could feel the dried blood on my face crack and my smile made her turn another shade of green. "I think that was number five."

"And then what?" the captain asked.

"Then Buc reminded Salazar what happened when the Montays tried to double-cross us," Eld said.

"The Montays?" Salina asked. "From the Foreign Quarto by way of Colgna? Didn't the younger brother go missing last winter?"

"I'm not sure," I lied. Eld grunted from my elbow in his ribs. "I'm not familiar with any of that name within Servenza's jurisdiction. To continue," I said in a louder tone, "it was about then that Salazar started running away at the mouth with excuses."

"Which was when his mage reached for something in his coat," Eld added.

"Ah, this is where the mage comes into the picture?" Judge Cokren asked.

"Sort of," Eld said. "He was the one who ordered the goons to rough us up—hence the three I'd put down before they started trying to kill us."

"You went face-to-face with a mage?" Salina asked, disbelief written boldly across her features.

"We were about to," I said. "I was still trying to work the knife loose from that skinny bastard's throat when the mage's eyes rolled to the back of his head."

"His eyes rolled?" the captain asked in her low voice. "Like he had a fit?"

"Was he using his magic?" Salina asked.

"No," I said. "Maybe?" I shook my dark curls. "All I know is, he froze suddenly, as if some puppeteer pulled his strings taut, as if every muscle had suddenly seized."

"He didn't stay frozen," Eld said. He shivered. "He pulled a pistol out from his coat before I could blink and I thought I was dead."

"Mages were ever poor shots," the captain said. The plumes in her helm shook with her head. "Comes of relying too much on their magic."

"Oh, he didn't miss," I said.

"We told you we didn't kill Salazar," Eld added.

"And we didn't. Salazar's lips were just starting to move when the mage blew his head off in a plume of smoke and blood and brains." I closed my eyes and could smell the gunpowder sharp in my nostrils.

"In the middle of this murderous maelstrom, the mage decides to blow his employer's brains out?" Judge Cokren asked.

"Never trust a mage," I said. Something I'd known as a child on the streets even before I'd learned to read. Something Salazar would have done well not to forget.

"Wise words," Judge Cokren said, avoiding Salina's sudden gaze as if just remembering she employed mages by the score. "And your story does contain elements of self-defense. . ." He tapped his fingers on the table. "What happened to the mage after he murdered Salazar?"

"Salazar's body hit the floor . . . , " I began. *Eld caught up a*

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sword off one of the lackeys and buried it in his neck. I could still see the blood squirting like a fountain around the bright steel. “The mage reached into his coat with his other hand. I thought he was going for another pistole and I . . .” I took a breath and shook my head. “I screamed,” I whispered.

“So there is some fragment of rational thought in you after all,” Salina murmured.

I glared at the other woman, but Eld saved me from replying.

“I thought the mage had done something to Buc with his magic,” he said. “She doesn’t scream. Ever. So I stabbed him with a sword, I’d, um, borrowed. And he died.”

“Mortal after all,” Judge Cokren said.

“He died hard,” I told him. “I looked for any clues about where he’d been before we met, but he was clean, save for powder marks.” I shook my head. “Too clean, really, given the heat and the dust-filled streets outside. He’d bathed not long before our meeting.

“That’s when I plucked up the pistole, hoping to find some clue there,” I explained. “And that’s about when the honorable captain”—I nodded toward the armored woman—“and her guards burst in.” *With me holding the still-smoking pistole. Never trust a motherfucking mage.*

“It’s an intriguing story,” Salina said.

“It is,” the Imperial officer admitted. Her lips twisted. “But the mage murdering Salazar makes no sense.”

“As easy to understand the sun as a mage’s mind,” Salina quoted.

This was the crucial moment, where Eld and I either walked free or went to our deaths. Looking at Judge Cokren’s expression, I could practically read his thoughts. *What was the mage’s motive?*

“The tiny chunk of rock we stand upon rotates around the

sun,” I said, drawing every gaze to me. “The sun is large in our skies, but were you standing on the surface of the sun and not incinerated from the heat, our chunk of rock would be a pinprick of light, indistinguishable from all the other pinpricks. Read Felcher’s *Discourse on Planetary Bodies*.”

I shot Eld a look as I shifted my feet. I started to cross my arms, but the dark leather bands around my wrists prevented me. They were a shade darker than my skin, and padded, so they restrained without biting, unlike the cold iron I was used to. I’d nearly forgotten I was wearing them. “If I can understand somewhat the sun’s purpose, then I think I can understand the mage’s.”

“What number book was that?” Eld asked beside me.

“Thirty-seven. I should have read Ducasse first though, as a primer. That was fifty-two.”

“What’s thirty-seven? Fifty-two?” Salina asked.

Eld smirked as he inclined his head. I wasn’t sure if he’d picked up my signal or not, but I knew I could count on him for a distraction when I needed it. The less said about the mage’s motives the better, because I knew fuck all why the mage had chosen that moment to betray Salazar, but given what followed—our arrest—it was damned convenient. *Even if the bastard died for it. Why?* Too many questions and not enough clues to sink my teeth into.

“So at the end of it all,” Judge Cokren said, speaking slowly, his off-white teeth too even not to be fake, “you two are the only ones left drawing breath. There are none to gainsay your claims of self-defense. You also”—he touched the pistole lying on the desk before him—“possess the murder weapon.”

“Only Salazar died by musketry,” Eld reminded him.

“Did you think we’d dump that motley collection of cutlery we found at the scene atop such a fine desk?” the captain asked. She

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snorted and removed her helm to reveal shorn hair that barely covered her scalp and would need months before they could form proper curls again. “Your Honor, the girl tells a pretty story, but it’s just that: a story. Pronounce your sentence and let me take them out back to the midden heap. It’ll be but the work of a moment.”

“The captain . . . colonel? Whatever”—Judge Cokren waved a hand—“does make a point.” The officer shrugged as if it were of no consequence. And perhaps for her it wasn’t; she was just following the law. The judge sighed and adjusted his crimson robes before turning toward Salina. “Well, signora? I could be *persuaded* either way.”

“Why don’t you go for a walk, Your Honor?” Salina said finally. “Have you seen our gear-work arboretum? I assure you it’s worth a visit.”

“Aye?” The old man pushed himself to his feet. “How much?”

Salina eyed the officer standing beside her, whose eyes looked like they were going to pop out of her head at the bribery going on in front of her, and grinned. “The same as last? I’ll send for you when your services are needed in here.”

“Perfect.” He glanced at my dress and shook his powdered wig. “Bloody perfect,” Judge Cokren said as he strode past us, his robes swishing softly against the marble floor. “Send for some wine while you’re at it, won’t you?” Then he was out the door, leaving only the faintest whiff of powder in his wake.