A Mankind Witch by Dave Freer

Solid, Fast-Paced Adventure.

(Starred Review) In Freer's superior heroic fantasy novel, set in 16th-century Scandinavia, allies of a demon try to thwart Christian missionary-magicians from the Holy Roman Empire. Freer (The Forlorn) wisely concentrates on individual participants within this big struggle: a shipwrecked Barbary corsair, Cair Aidin, branded as a worthless thrall; a good-hearted but insecure princess; a spectacularly evil troll hag and her grendel son; and a team led by the Holy Roman emperors nephew/secret agent. All these characters are credibly smart and quirky. Cair, for example, is a clever contriver of mechanical devices, so he stoutly refuses to believe in any of the magic taking place around him. When a sacred pagan token disappears and the princess is framed for its theft, the skeptical Cair pursues her out of love while agents of the Empire follow out of duty into the clutches of the troll mother. Freer's people are sometimes mistaken and often stubborn but basically likable; he even presents them convincingly enough to get away with some outright sentimentality. Good characterization, ripsnorting action and an ingenious plot make this a feast for sword and sorcery fans.

My Personal Review:
A Mankind Witch (2005) is the third fantasy novel in the Heirs of Alexandria series, following This Rough Magic. In the previous volume, Maria became the Bride of the Lord of the Dead and the besiegers of the Citadel began to have serious problems. The King of Hungary decided to withdraw to the mainland and Iskander Beg was waiting for his coming.

Benito visited Hades and negotiated a bargain with the Lord of the Dead. They agreed to Maria living eight months among the living and four among the dead. The Lord tried to cheat, but Benito outwitted him.

In this novel, Cair Aiden is Mediterranean, from the island of Lesbos. His brother is the King of Barbary and Cair is war chief of the Redbeards -- the Barbary pirates -- but now he is alone in the middle of an open ocean clinging to a spar. Finally, a dragonship comes and takes him away.
Princess Signy is the daughter of the old king. She has little power or respect since the death of her father and is the subject of many malicious remarks by her stepmother. She is respected and obeyed by the stable hands who tend to the old retired horses that she has acquired.

Albruna is the Dowager Queen of Telemark and stepmother of Signy. She has a honeyed voice with which she convinces others that Signy is a dokkalfar -- a dark elf -- on her mother's side. Albruna sees little good in Signy and wants her married off.

Vortenbras -- son of Albruna and half-brother of Signy -- is the new king. When Cair is brought in as a slave, Vortenbras gives him to Signy as her thrall. Cair doesn't know what is going on initially, but soon meets Signy and grows to respect her.

The troll's wife is allied with Chernobog. She queries a draug about the protections on Telemark and learns that they come from the oaths sworn on the sacred dranpir. She tells her thralls to take the draug back to the bog and thinks about ways to defeat the magical talisman.

Prince Manfred of Brittany is the nephew of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles Fredrik. Charles sends him with Fransessa de Chevreuse to Copenhagen to meet with the Danes. Fransessa will remain in Denmark while Manfred goes to Sweden to confer with the proctor-general of the Knights of the Holy Trinity about the Danish complaints.

Erik Hakkonsen -- Manfred's bodyguard and mentor -- is an Icelander. He will accompany Manfred on the imperial mission. Erik is still mourning the loss of Svanhild on Corfu.

In this story, Cair gains a reputation as a balewerker because of the coincidental event that occurs as a fellow thrall assaults him. Of course, Cair knows that magic doesn't exist, but the superstitious thralls in Telemark believe in it. So a few words in Latin, some tricks with an amber stone and other coincidences soon convince them that he is truly an evil worker of magic.

Cair uses his reputation to instill some overt respect for Signy. He tells himself that her welfare affects his welfare. But he is really beginning to love the spinster daughter.

One thing that he cannot do anything about is the betrothal of Signy to King Hjorda in Stavanger. Albruna is still negotiating the nuptial agreement, but Hjorda has seized much gold from a Vinlander fleet and needs to get it out of Stavanger before the Vinlanders come looking for it. Signy has her own plans for Hjorda and carries a knife up her sleeve for her wedding night.
Meanwhile, Francesa has calmed down the Danish king. Manfred and Eric are accompanied by the proctor-general to the chapterhouse in Skane. There they learn something about the corruption of the knights and also teach the knights a few lessons about the rapier and physical fitness. Moreover, they find an ally in Ritter Juzef Szpak, a Pole and the master of novices at the chapterhouse.

This tale teaches Cair a lesson about magic and confronts Signy with her worst fears. The dranpir armband disappears and the priests of Odin fear that the annual oaths cannot be sworn. Manfred and Erik meet a Vinlander Captain who goes with them to Telemark.

Highly recommended for fans of this series and for anyone else who enjoys tales of Norse gods, serious magic, and socially incorrect romance. If you have not read any other works in this series, start with The Shadow of the Lion.

-Arthur W. Jordin

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