

# **The Killing Fields**

by

**Kim Lakin-Smith**

The 1974 Triumph Stag V8 prowled the country roads, oiled black angles flickering against the night like a mirage. Regan gripped the leather steering wheel and glanced behind her. Curled up on the back seat under a worn blanket, the kid slept, her head awkwardly positioned on the makeshift pillow of an AK-47 assault rifle. She was snoring.

They hadn't hit a road block for the last fifty miles. Just as well, since they'd run out of currency as far back as Birmingham, Regan mused, downshifting the gears and easing off the accelerator to coast into a hairpin bend. But while she doubted any self-respecting road hog would bed down in such a desolate spot, it never paid to be complacent. Not when thy neighbour would sooner sell your ass to the highest bidder as help you out, particularly if it guaranteed a dozen extra food stamps or a tankful of bioethanol. Not when the 2020 civil war had seen every major city in England shorn back to its seedy underbelly, like stains on an otherwise green and pleasant land. Not when they were navigating a land of single-track roads, tangled hedgerows and night-shrouded middle distance, and Regan's foremost thought was *too quiet by far*.

“Are we there yet?”

Regan stared at the melancholy girl reflected in the rear-view mirror.

“We’re definitely *somewhere*.”

All raisin eyes and bed-head, the kid slung the gun aside and poured herself over the handbrake into the front seat. “Got anything to eat?”

Reaching sideways, Regan punched the glove box. She located a scrunched up brown paper bag and handed it over. “Couple of boiled eggs you filched off that farmer’s wife this morning.”

The kid grabbed the bag. Rooting around inside, she retrieved an egg, tapped it on the dash and started prising off the shell. “Nice lady,” she said a minute later, her voice thickened by a mouthful of egg.

“Who?” shot Regan. She reined in the Stag as they approached a signpost.

“Mrs Jacobs. She pinched my cheeks.” The kid rubbed at her face as if shining up the memory.

*Another half a mile.* Regan kept the vehicle at a sedate pace as the road turned into a dirt track. “Guess she thought you were just a kid.”

“I *am* just a kid.”

“Might look like one, but you’ve as much in common with the average eleven year old as I have with a nun,” said Regan flatly. “Pinched your cheeks.” She shook her head, bemused by the kid’s idealised version of events and keeping stum about the truth, which was that while Mrs Jacobs had acted mother hen, her husband had followed Regan to the tithe barn where the Stag was garaged.

Bolting the door, Mr Jacobs had fixed her with rheumy, thread-veined eyes. “Wife says sorry but we can’t let you leave without some dispensation.”

Regan raised the bonnet of the Stag, leant into the engine and drew out the dipstick. She swiped the rod with a rag. “We traded a day’s labour for provisions,” she reminded him without emotion. “It was your wife who suggested we kip in the hayloft. I’ll just load up the goods we rightfully purchased then me and the kid’ll hit the road.”

“Except I can’t let you do that. It’s the wife, see. Says the car’s worth eight gallons of bioethanol on the open market. So I’m going to have to *insist.*”

Regan glanced back over a shoulder to see the man reach for a pitchfork. She replaced the rod, unhooked the arm of the bonnet rest and let the hood fall. “You’re not getting my car.”

The farmer moved towards her. He tried out a nasty smile. “What if I let you keep the car and you pay me in kind for my wife’s hospitality. Nice girl like you has got to know a trick or two.”

“I sure do,” she drawled and eased back against the bonnet. Mr Jacob’s smile broadened. Bending at the waist, she reached between her legs and ripped two CZ-75 handguns from their tape holsters under the Stag’s front bumper. She tossed the guns up into the air, snatched at each with the opposite hand, cocked the clips and aimed twin barrels at the man’s forehead. “I can juggle,” she said dryly.

Later, when the farmer was duck-taped to the rusty, cobwebbed tines of an old ripper, trousers round his ankles, and Regan had refastened the

handguns under the bumper, slung back the bolt and eased open both sides of the creaking barn door, she leant in by his ear. “And I’m not a nice girl.” The pitchfork pierced the dirt an inch short of his groin.

“These are *bloody* tasty.”

Regan became aware of the half-devoured boiled egg being wafted under her nose and forced her mind back to the present.

She cut her eye at the girl. “Don’t swear.” Turning in between part-hinged, dilapidated gates, she took it steady on a minefield of earth clods and potholes.

“I can fire guns but I can’t swear?” The kid crammed the remnants of egg into her mouth.

The red haze of the beet farm’s first warning lamp bled into the Stag’s headlights. Regan felt a familiar sense of foreboding. “You don’t have to swear to stay alive,” she muttered.

Two types of farm existed post-civil war. There was the conventional sort devoted to agriculture and raising livestock, with produce quotas pooled

and reassigned by the government, and which remained a relatively tranquil way to make a living. And then there was the beet farm, its acreage seeded with the raw plant stuff used to make bioethanol, and, as such, reduced to a rabid war zone by gang violence, mafia-owned cartels, and vigilantism. Given its rural location in the Shropshire Hills, the welsh-stone farmhouse could have been mistaken for the former, were it not for the bullet-pocked sheet steel coating the front door or the iron mesh at the gable windows either side of the porch. A sense that visitors were anything but welcome was reinforced by the hostile blaze of motion-triggered halogen bulbs and the warning bursts from a pair of wall-mounted flame throwers.

“Who’s there?” demanded a voice sandpapered free of sentiment.

“The Scarecrow.” Arms draping the open, driver-side door of the Stag, Regan tossed back her head, gulped to activate the resonator chip embedded in her throat then rapidly exhaled. The sound that issued from her lips was a reverberating caw, just bearable to the ear and synthetic. She closed her mouth suddenly. The noise cut off.

Regan waited as bolts shifted back, chains rippled, and, in a series of halting jars, the door worked open. A figure filled the doorway, chest panelled like a mutant armadillo, legs elephantine in voluminous canvas combats, feet encased in twenty hole bovver boots, and hair that stretched beyond the waist.

“Chase the red dragon out of my arse, if it ain’t the original Scarecrow. Malkin as we’d call you in these parts, but who’s splitting hairs?” Harrison stepped into the light, piggy eyes blinking. He stuck out a hand. Regan swung the car door to and strode over. Their hands sealed.

“Regan. I’d say thanks for dropping by, but we both know it was the scent of money got you hooked.”

Regan cocked her head at the dark fields. “Grapevine says you’ve got yourself some rats.”

“A proper pest problem this year. They’re holed up at old man Robinson’s o’er the hill. He pegged it last June.”

“What breed?”

“Pirates.”

“Shit.” Regan raked a fist over her shaved head. If there was ever a breed of raiders guaranteed to kick up a stink, it was pirates. While their peers were employed by a handful of the world’s elite crime syndicates - south-east Asian triads, Russian Bratva, a clan of the Naples’ Camorra, and a few significant others - pirates were gang-led, targeting a different beet farm every harvest and with zero scope for negotiation.

“Numbers?” Her mind raced ahead, checking off hardware and small firearms stored under a false lining in the boot of the Stag.

“Crew of about eight or nine. Haven’t had a run-in yet but I’ve seen the freaks cruising out by Claw Pond. Couple of choppers, a quad, dune buggy, dirt bikes, a Baja bug. Stilt walkers too.”

“Just your common old garden variety of crop pirates then.”

“Reckon so, except...” Harrison indicated Regan’s bee-stung mouth - or as she interpreted it, the lethal voice box stitched inside her throat.

“This crowd have got themselves a bona fide Captain Hook.”

Regan dragged the back of a hand across her lips as if she’d been slugged in the mouth. Captain Hook was slang for a bandit touting the

hardware to deflect a Scarecrow's infrasonic scream. She spat into the dirt. "Harvest starts..."

"First light tomorrow. I pulled the specimen beet on Thursday. Got the thumbs up from the lab today for sugar content."

"I'd best get an early night then. Half my money up front." She put out a hand.

The farmer rooted around beneath his breastplate. He drew out an envelope. Regan reached for the cash, but he held onto the envelope a second. "Where's that pretty little girl of yours?" His piggy eyes interrogated the Stag's back seat. "You've never gone and hid her in the boot again?"

"Not mine." Regan ripped the envelope from his fingers and stashed it inside her cropped leather. Stalking over to the car, she popped the boot and slung up the lid. The kid rolled out in a tangle of assault rifle, daisy-shaped sunglasses and skinny limbs. She landed crouched with her gun trained on Harrison's breastbone. "Not pretty," Regan added darkly.

Mist ghosted the soft panorama of patchwork fields and drystone walls. Astride the icy metal gate, Regan swiped her stun baton to and fro like a homicidal majorette. She put her lips together and blew. A reedy whistle echoed off her cold surroundings. It was a human sound, but Regan recognised the nuances in the crackle of static on her tongue, and the small rush of air through very fine, steel vocal chords.

“Warming up?”

Regan stared up at a colourless sky. “I told you to stay back at the farm.”

The girl scooted up alongside Regan, the gate clanging noisily with the extra vibrations. “Didn’t want to. That farmer gives me the willies.”

“Harrison? He’s a harmless old coot.”

“Folk said the same about Pol Pot.”

Regan stared at the youngster.

“What? I went to school once. Once,” repeated the girl, hiding her face to chase an itch at her ankle. Then she froze.

“Yeah, I hear it.” Regan jerked her head left then right. She sniffed. The strange sweet smell of burning bioethanol filled her nostrils. “Coming in from the south. Stack of them. Going to scoot now?”

The gate reverberated. The girl had gone.

Regan waited with an even throb of a heartbeat, aware of the silverware in her throat. She cooed devilishly.

Claw Pond was an excellent spot to pick a fight. Not so much a pond as a dip in the ground, it was a dust bowl in the summer, glacier in winter, and a mud track all the weeks in-between. In its present frosted state, it was also the spot to house a nine row, self-propelled Beet Harvester. The pirates had raided more than the farmhouse at old man Robinson’s, Regan concluded, pressing her mouth to the lock. The vibrations which emanated from her throat worked the pins and released the lock. Opening the door, she swung up inside and crouched - it would pay her to observe the gang. To know a man was to kill him.

Inside the minute, the grid beneath her feet shook with the noise of them. In great scooping waves of sound, they descended. Regan gauged

the gang from behind the cover of grimed glass. Harrison was right in his estimation. Nine pirates, sand sharks judging by their weathered leathers and sun-dirtied skin. It was unusual for sand sharks to desert the beaches of the south-west and Wales, and their hijacking of anything the sea cared to deliver up: pleasure craft, fishing trawlers, and the solitary swimmer. But the beet farms were rich pickings. Regan's upper lip curled. Every other piece of scum in the UK believed himself man enough to have a go.

“Saddle her up.” The command came from a man who looked as if he had been torn out of the earth and left to mulch down amongst his own bones. His hair was a tangled yellow mane. His leathers were dirty brown, and cracked or patched at the joints. He was short and muscular, and his dirt bike pep-pepped under him.

“You sure the Scarecrow ain't here already, Samson?” This from a large man in the bug, a pirate who was over-fleshed at the throat so that his head seemed to float above his shoulders.

“Not sure of anything when it comes to the Scarecrow, but we’ve got ourselves a Hook. Only question is, are any of you pussies man enough to stick it in her?”

Regan patted herself reflexively, feeling for the bone handle of the buffalo skinner poking out of its smooth leather sheaf on one hip, the checkered grip of the holstered P-32 semi-automatic on the other. She could see the Hook, or at least its harpoon cannon mounted between the handlebars of the yellow-maned rider’s dirt bike. If discharged, the canon fired a miniature magnetised disc designed to home in on her throat, slice flesh and disable her sonic scream.

So the man in brown was its Captain. Regan felt the ghost of something like revulsion. She’d keep him in her sights; it’d be good to see him die. All she had to do was get the rest of the pirates within a ten metre radius then start screaming.

“I’ll do the first shift on the harvester.” The voice was young, a boy not yet comfortable in his adult skin. A second dirt bike was silenced. She heard footsteps and the scrabble of rubber sole on metal. Vehicles idled in

the background. The voices of walking dead men melded. To Regan, the cab of the harvester was hot as hell and airless suddenly. *Now it starts.*

Opening the cab door, he saw her, startlement etched on his face as she slid in the knife...she'd learnt the rough way in the past that it did not pay to negotiate with pirates. He died in her arms like the child he had longed to be. Regan shook the body off.

It was a few minutes before the dead pirate was missed. Regan knew she had the Captain spooked when he sent his next weakest soldier, a thin girl, all hips and lips, with a shock of lemon-coloured hair. She rode in on her quad, a wide-axled black wasp. Dismounting, she sidled up onto the Harvester and reached for the cab door; Regan kicked it out into her face.

The girl ricocheted back. She fell badly. Regan heard bone snap. Staring up at her, the female pirate's features shrunk in upon themselves. "Scarecrow!" she hollered before swallowing a bullet.

Regan launched herself out of the harvester, tucked in her elbows and sprinted.

First to react were the stilt walkers, gangly and muscular on their clanking, pneumatic metal limbs. They moved towards her in enrapture, like insects siphoning off her juices.

It was the crackle of electricity which made her risk a glance backwards. The stiltwalkers reached for her with long, rubber batons tipped with coiled metal. Regan felt the flush of extra adrenalin. Her taser was a toy next to those mothers.

“Run Scarecrow run,” teased the tall boys in their hoodies and graffitied board shorts. Regan sprinted harder. Her flight had been intended as a ruse to lure all of the pirates into pursuit. Now the stakes had been upped. On impulse, she slid down to the ground as she ran, drew the P-32, used the propulsion to roll onto her back and peeled off a couple of shots. One stiltwalker crumpled, his baton falling onto the earth, rolling, and completing a 360 degree radial before shocking its owner. The other daddy-long-legs plunged his coil against her arm.

A tight rip of pain shot through her. Regan fought the need to gag. Air flooded between her parted lips, lit up the antechamber of her throat

with its chords, flesh and resonator, and she sang then, a string of metal notes designed to ground her. The pain vanished. The stiltwalker stabbed her again with the cry of “Shoot her now, Samson, while she’s out!” Her song had also drained his baton of its charge; the stiltwalker used it as a battering ram while kicking out at her with his mechanical legs.

Steam released in great wet bursts. Pistons shunted hard against her face. Amongst the blur of flesh and metal, Regan made out a face. She smashed out with a fist and felt the pull of skin beneath her knuckles. The stiltwalker buckled back. Regan threw aside the now useless P-32; she would have needed to return the handgun to its memofibre holster to shield the weapon against her song. Ripping her taser from a sheath inside her leather, she jacked back up onto her feet and lunged at the stiltwalker’s face. Spasming, he collapsed to one side as the roar of what Regan knew had to be the choppers dirtied up the morning air.

Her game was off. Only three dead and she was way out in the open. With the rest of the pirates outside of the ten metre radius that she

required to unleash the full, lethal capacity of her sonic scream, she was a sitting duck.

Regan squinted at the Captain sat astride his dirt bike and resting forward, his elbows on the handlebars. Her skin prickled. He was playing with her. But she was on fire with the thrill of the fight. She could deflect their bullets and knives; all she had to do was give a little whistle.

Meanwhile, they'd got the Hook, which meant that she would just have to have eyes in the back of her head.

With the choppers circling her like tremendous metal dragonflies, Regan tore her gaze left and right. The men astride the hogs wore tight black leathers, mirrored aviators and tie-dye bandanas, their features indistinguishable. Identical twins, she realised, pondering the best route to take them out. A couple of metres away, her opponents were at too close range to draw, aim and fire the borrowed AK-47 assault rifle from the sling at her back. The P-32 handgun abandoned, Regan wielded the stun baton in one hand, the buffalo skinner in the other. If the hogs' riders tried

to take a pop at her, she'd lock up their guns' mechanisms with a single note.

But these riders toted a Sai sword apiece. They also seemed less concerned with bringing her down as baiting her.

“Hey girlie. Bet she doesn't get many takers with that throat full of metal.”

“Going by appearances, I'd say she's a man-hater. What'd you reckon, Billy? Think the dyke's gonna cry?”

Regan was kneeling down. Utilising the blade as a mirror, she kept the Captain in view. The twin pirates struck her as innately stupid; if she could just sprint past their blades and head for the Captain, she was pretty sure they'd follow, and then she would have the full crew inside the crucial radius.

“I thought Scarecrows were meant to be tough, Billy.”

“That's what I heard too, Brad. Whereas this girlie seems sloppy.”

“Things aren't always what they seem.” Kicking off an icy tree stump that she'd crouched down to conceal, Regan spun herself into a

high round house kick, the boot of one foot ricocheting off the left cheekbone of one of the twins. The rider skidded, just managing to right the chopper before he collided with a massive oak. Regan landed, feet splayed, fists tight to her sides, and still clenching her weapons.

The second twin whipped open the throttle of his hog and charged for her. *Beautifully stupid.* Regan took to her heels and ran. With the subterranean pulse of the pursuing choppers at her back, she zigzagged in and out of the branches and brambles at the field's edges. And she could run, Regan reminded herself, feeling the air thick as syrup in her lungs. She'd been running all of her life and she was damn good at it.

Heading for the Harvester and its fresh dead, Regan ducked as one twin drove his Sai at her neck. She didn't want to unseat him, but draw both men back to the killing ground. The incessant swish and stab of the blade was distracting however; she clucked on a mouthful of air, pursed her lips and threw a slicing note at the pirate's hand. He dropped the Sai as if the double-pronged handle was liquid metal.

She stared hard ahead - the Captain hadn't changed position. Neither had his men. The Baja bug idled. Throaty rumbles spattered from the dune buggy's exhaust. And while the chopper rider who had pursued her closest slowed to a crawl as they returned to the basin of Claw Pond, it was the other twin who was most noticeable by his absence.

Regan glanced over a shoulder. No sign. Then she felt the blade plunge in. In seconds, the hot wetness of her own blood greased the inside of her jacket. An inch to the left and the Sai would have punctured a lung; Regan knew her own physiology like a studied map. She tore her shoulder aside before the pirate had a chance to rip out the sword and retry for her heart. *How'd he got up so close?* She risked a sideways glance. He'd abandoned his chopper for her first victim's dirt bike, its sound a more subtle wheeze of noise that had been lost to the revs of the nearing vehicles.

Too late Regan realised that she had taken her eye off the Captain. She heard a cicada-like whirl of sound before feeling a pure, clean bite of pain as the Hook sliced in. Blood ran from her throat, draining between

her breasts, becoming cold at her stomach...Regan faltered as she ran. Through a blur, she saw the Captain unfold from the sight of the harpoon at the rear of his dirt bike. She was just aware of a great gust of noise tumbling towards her, the war cry of human voices and engines.

“Shot you down, Scarecrow! Now let’s really hear you scream,” she heard the Captain demand.

Regan tried for the rifle at her back, but couldn’t rip it from its holster. Craning her jaw in a futile bid to drink in the vital air to sound her scream, Regan tried to rip the Hook out. The disc was slippery with blood; she cut her fingers on its razor edge. Through a film of pale, fading consciousness, she saw the pirates closing in, led by their Captain and with their swords and guns drawn. *Get up and fight*, she screamed internally.

Sound pummelled in her ears like fast flowing water. She reeled. The pulse grew stronger, deep, reverberative and lushly mechanical...Regan’s eyes shot wide. A dragon in gleaming black body armour smashed through the metal gate to the right of Claw Pond. Regan felt the

transfiguring glow of victory as the Stag crashed head on into the soft meat of the Captain's body and carried him high on its bumper before he ricocheted forward and was flayed beneath the wheels. The Stag ripped a path through the beets; Regan fastened her grip hard on the Hook and disgorged it from her throat. She discarded the disc carelessly, like a handful of soil returned to the land, and looked up.

The remaining crop pirates had frozen in mid-stride, their mouths slack, eyes greased and reflecting the figure of the resurrected Scarecrow.

Regan stretched out her arms. Had the girl driven the Stag out of range, Regan imagined that she would have had to crash it, having very little control over the beast of a vehicle and straining to reach the pedals. Her pause was brief. Letting her head fall gently back, feeling the wound at her throat weep, Regan made her voice heard.

Harrison had cleared a good part of the first field by noon. She'd helped him remove the bodies. The girl she'd found inside the shadowed ribs of one of Harrison's unused hay barns. Having ripped clean through the barn

door, the Stag had come to rest against a wall of aged hay bales. The girl was alive, forehead blooded at impact. The Stag was intact bar some new scars to the paintwork.

Having patched up her throat, Regan pocketed the remainder of her payment, refuelled the Stag with a full, complementary tank of bioethanol, and pilfered enough of Harrison's larder to last them to the Scottish border. She paused then, resting a foot against a back wheel of the Stag, arms crossed, and surveyed the beet fields, the hardy leaf set in rows and unobtrusive on the landscape. A subtle ache pulsed in her throat.

Where was the girl? How long did it take to clean up a bruised forehead?

Regan eased away from the Stag. She crossed the yard, stepped up onto the porch of the farmhouse and was reaching for the pocked steel door when the kid came crashing out.

"Filthy bastard!" snapped the girl. She glanced back at the doorway and the figure of the farmer now filling it. Harrison was nursing a stained

cheek where the girl's fist had connected. He breathed in gulps, eyes wary as they settled on Regan.

Stepping backwards, the Scarecrow drew slowly off the porch.

“I told you not to swear. Get in the car.”

She listened for the slam of the passenger-seat door.

“It'll be your turn again in five years, Harrison.” Her gaze was steady. “Girl will be all grown up then. Her aim gets better all of the time. Time comes we're knocking at your door again, I'd suggest you watch your ass.”

She left the farmer behind, his piggy eyes at her back as she slid into the driver seat of the Stag, told the girl to buckle up, revved the engine and pulled off down the dirt track.

Copyright © 2008 Kim Lakin-Smith

<http://www.kimlakin-smith.com>