

Hunt for Valamon

D. K. Mok

Spence City (Apr 7, 2015)

Softcover \$9.95 (328pp)

978-1-939392-26-8

Each character in this fantasy adventure has deep motivation, adding layers of conflict to a dark, creative story.

What happens when a crown prince is kidnapped and the most qualified rescuers are a monk and a cursed woman? *Hunt for Valamon* is an answer, and an amazingly inventive one. Australian writer D. K. Mok's fantasy world here is familiar, but what it becomes is like dumping a handful of jacks on the floor and having no idea where they'll come to rest.

Prince Valamon isn't cut out for running a kingdom, so the king designates his second son as heir, which suits Valamon fine. He never expected that this would lead to his being snatched from a warm bed one night by a frightening creature and taken to an enemy stronghold. His additional misfortune is that the enemy is human, bent on revenge, and willing to use sorcery, whereas Valamon's father the king has outlawed all such arts.

Seris, a cleric imbued with healing powers, is ordered to accompany whoever wins a contest to become the king's champion and Valamon's rescuer. This directive turns his quiet, humble world upside down, for he has no martial skills, no experience of the wider world, and no desire to leave his spiritual post. When the accursed warrior Elhan del Galvir, known by her sinister moniker the Kali-Adelsa, is the last warrior standing in the contest, Seris sees his future disappear, only to be replaced with death.

The characterization of all the main players here is meaty, visceral, and intelligent. Every one of them, from Valamon to the being who snatched him, has an agenda, and no two are alike. No one's actions feel awkward or out of place; the pacing is like a roller-coaster ride; and the settings are imbued with meaning that's subtly placed. The overall effect is a fantasy-thriller read that is intense, dark, inventive, and delicious.

It takes some heavy creative muscles to write something this good, and Mok's work meets all expectations. An empire rises and falls, lives are forever changed, business-as-usual ends, and a new form of governance is in the wings, all in one book. It's always a pleasure to find a writer who shows such great writing chops straight out of the gate.

J. G. STINSON (Summer 2015)

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