

## The Leopard

**K. V. Johansen**

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*Ancient and medieval history inform the setting and characters of this intelligently constructed world.*

K. V. Johansen's *The Leopard* combines familiar fantasy elements in unique fashion to create an involving and deftly written novel of escape and capture, love and loss, and battles both mental and physical.

*The Leopard* consists of two parts. In the first, Ahjvar the assassin accepts a mission from the goddess Catairanach in exchange for freedom from her curse and the violent ghost that rules him. In the city of Marakand, the Lady of the Well's human Voice is slain, and replaced by an innocent temple dancer. The second part follows the new Voice's unexpected transformation; Ahjvar's servant, Ghu, as he struggles to find his master; and a wanderer and her werebear companion. Wrapped around these stories is the return of seven demons, once confined by the Old Great Gods. Not all demons, however, are evil. A gods-driven, imminent war holds the fate of their world for the victor.

Ancient Greece and its pantheistic religion is the template Johansen uses to create her gods, goddesses, and demons, with adeptly placed brushstrokes from multiple non-European cultures laced throughout the story.

The spot-on pacing in *The Leopard* makes its overall tale move smoothly. Direct and forceful action scenes are expertly layered into quieter scenes of contemplation or inner monologue. Tension hums through every scene. Settings are varied, and scenes flow into each other with clarity and purpose. Johansen's writing style is assured and elegant, subtle and powerful.

The wealth of personalities which Johansen's characters embody are realistic for their classes and roles. Her lead characters breathe, eat, get wounded, and show emotions, as do some secondary characters. Ahjvar suffers under his goddess's curse, bitter about his fate. Even Zora, one of the most chilling antagonists, retains a part of her humanity. Minorities, same-sex relationships, and non-typical female characters enhance this novel's diversity.

J. G. STINSON (Summer 2014)

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