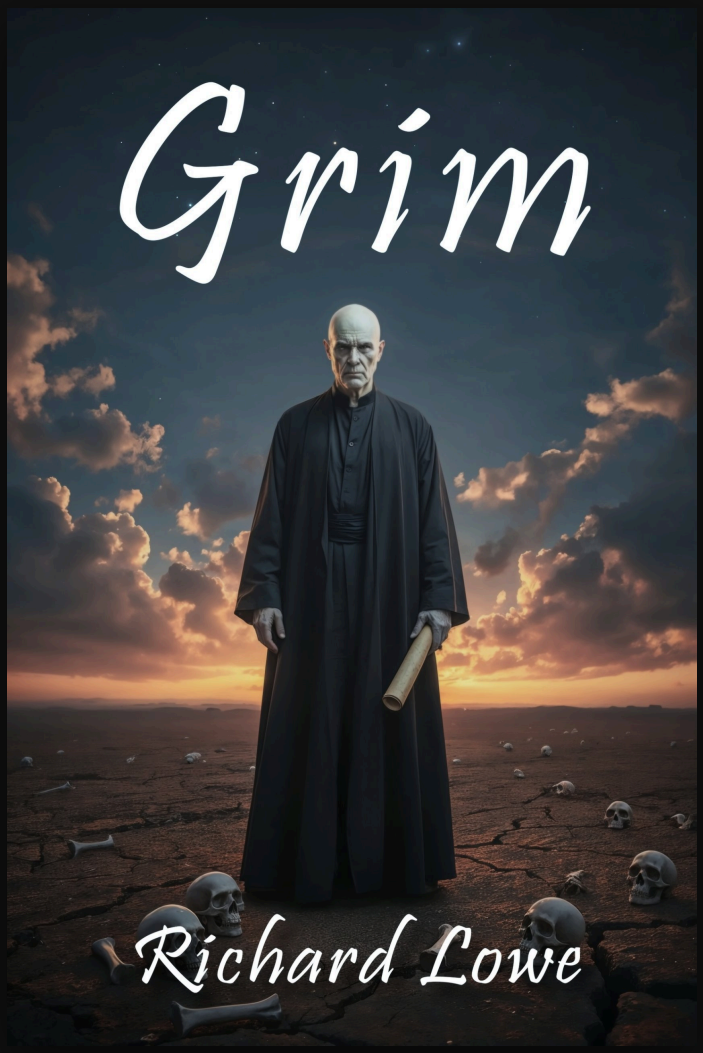
A FREE COMPANION TO GRIM

The Watcher on the Hill

A grieving father climbs Golgotha to ask a dying man one question, and a stranger with a scroll writes down everything that follows.



RICHARD LOWE

The Watcher on the Hill

I pressed myself against the rough stone and the dust was in my teeth, and the air smelled of iron and dry earth, and under that of blood and the fouled ground beneath the crosses.

My heart went hard against my throat. I had followed talk through the narrow streets of Jerusalem by where people pointed, and my own questions pulled me, and the pull grew with every step up the bare slope.

Golgotha was rock and wind, and the wind came up from the valley and would not let go. Three crosses stood on it, and the sky behind them had begun to darken.

Yeshua of Nazareth hung on the center cross. The scourging had opened his back and sides, and the muscle under the torn skin jumped each time he dragged in a breath. A thief hung on either side of him, nailed and bleeding, sagging and lifting and sagging again, and their moaning carried on the wind. One had fouled himself. Between their breaths the wood groaned under the weight of hanging men.

A centurion had the hill, and four soldiers under him. The four had shared out the condemned men's clothes at the foot of the crosses and thrown dice for the one garment that would not divide, and now three of them sat below the crest out of the wind, where the centurion stood with his back to us, watching the sky. The fourth had the watch. He leaned on his spear and spat into the dust. I crouched behind my rock and watched too. I had come to see this, and I could not have told anyone why.

Others stood on the hill. They were not mourners, for the mourners stayed at the foot of the slope or kept close together. Nor were they soldiers. They stood at points along the ridge with no purpose I could see and no order to them: three that I could count from where I crouched, and perhaps four.

They faced the center cross with the whole of themselves. They did not speak to one another and they did not move, and I had no name for what they were. I turned back to the center cross. It was why I had come.

From where I hid I could hear the crucified breathing, the moans, the creak of the wood when they shifted their weight. The soldier muttered to himself in Greek, eager for his watch to end.

Then Yeshua spoke. His voice was weak, and it carried.

“Father, forgive them,” he said. He had to stop for breath in the middle of it. “They do not know what they are doing.”

The soldier's head came up. He moved closer to the center cross to hear more. Even broken, that voice made men listen.

I watched the soldier's face change. The boredom went out of it and unease came in, and perhaps recognition. They had sent him up here to finish criminals, and this one did not fit.

Yeshua lifted his head, and the lifting cost him. “My God, my God,” he said, “why have you forsaken me?”

In the stories the messiah calmed storms and walked on the sea. This man was asking why. I had come up the hill to ask him the same thing.

The soldier stepped back. His hand went to the hilt of his sword without his asking it to, the hand of a soldier who does not know what else to do with it. In the space of a few words the man he was guarding had become one he did not understand.

When at last the soldier went down the slope to relieve himself against a boulder, I came out from hiding. The others were below the crest with their dice. No one would see what I did next but the ones along the ridge, and they were not looking at me.

I stepped into the open and loose stones clicked under my sandals. One thief jerked his head toward the sound, his eyes wild and red. The other moaned, a sound that came from lower than his throat.

Yeshua did not notice. His head hung forward, his hair matted with sweat and blood, and his breath came short and shallow, his ribs standing out under the torn skin.

I tasted bile.

"I came to ask you something," I said. My voice cracked like a boy's. I had pictured a clean death, and nothing in the stories had told me what a crucifixion is. "My son died in the spring. The sickness came through the village and he choked on it. He was six. The Romans took the grain off the floor the week we buried him." I had carried the question up from the village and now that I was in front of him I could not find the shape of it. "Why?" I said. That was all of it.

He stirred. His lips moved. I caught water, and a word that might have been mother, and nothing that was for me.

I went closer and knelt in the dirt. It still held the day's heat, and small stones bit through my robe. I said it again, lower. Why the children. Why the ones who did nothing.

No answer. A long wet breath that rattled in his chest.

The thief on his left laughed, and blood came with it into the dust. "He can't hear you," he said. "Nobody up here can hear you." Then he slumped, gasping from the effort.

I wanted to hit out. There was nothing on that hill I could hit. I stayed on my knees, and after a while I was not asking him anything. I was saying my son's name, and his age, and the day.

Yeshua's eyes opened. They were clear, as a sick man's eyes clear sometimes near the end, and they found me and stayed.

"I asked it too," he said.

I could not answer him.

He breathed twice before he could go on. "Keep asking."

Then the wind dropped. It had not stopped all day on that hill, and now it stopped, and the flies that had worked the crosses since morning lifted off together and did not settle again.

A man stood at the edge of the hilltop who had not been there. Tall, in a robe that took the light and gave none back. I had not seen him come up the slope. The soldiers below the crest did not look round at him, and neither did the centurion. He was facing the center cross, as the others along the ridge were facing it, and he had a scroll open in his hands.

Yeshua's head went forward. The breathing did not stop all at once. It went on a little after I thought it had ended, and then it ended.

The dark that had been gathering since midday closed over the hill, though it was still afternoon and there was no cloud. The ground moved under my knees. Below the crest the centurion had turned to face the center cross, and he did not turn back.

Through all of it the man at the edge of the hill wrote in his scroll, as a man might write down the weather. When he had finished he looked at me, once, as a man looks at a thing that is not his yet, and then he looked away.

The wind came back.

The soldier came back up the slope at a run, shouting, and I was still on my knees in the open. He did not stop to ask what I was. The spear went in under my ribs and came out again and he went past me toward the crosses.

The warmth of it was wrong, warmth moving outward where it should not move.

I tried to stand, and my legs would not have it. I sat against the stone. The hill was in front of me with the crosses still on it, and the soldier at the foot of the center cross with his back to me. I watched him. I had watched everything on that hill all day and I watched him the same way, knowing that what

I saw mattered and not yet knowing why. The man in the dark robe was still at the edge of the hill. He had the scroll open again, and he was looking at me now, and he did not look away.

The knowing came in as the blood went out. It was nearer to recognition than to fear, like the shape of a field you have walked all your life and only once seen from the hill above it. The question Yeshua had asked. What the man at the edge of the hill had written. The whole day coming together into a figure I could almost read.

Then I could not read it. Then I could not hold the shape. The hill tilted and went gray and I went down into the gray with it.

* * *

When I came back to myself the soldier was crouched over me. He did not look at my face. He worked at the robe until he found the coin pouch, and weighed it in his palm without opening it and put it in his belt. The sandals next. He checked the soles before he set them aside.

His hands found the ring on my third finger. He pulled at it. My fingers had already begun to swell in the heat. I felt the ring resist, felt the skin bunch ahead of his thumb as he pushed and twisted. He was not careful about it. When it came free the joint gave, and the ring bent in his grip. He turned it over, straightened it with his thumb, and looked at where the metal had thinned.

That was when my arm moved.

He stepped back fast. Then he drew his knife.

I saw the blade. He held it wrong for what he meant to do, and the first pass missed the great vein and opened the skin along the jaw. I felt it. It was a wall breached, the inside of the body opened to the outside along a line that had not been there before.

The blood came fast, and it ran down my neck and under the robe, warm, and I lay inside the warmth and could do nothing with it. I was in the body. I had thought, when I thought of dying at all, that a man would be let out at the end, as the gate is opened for the flock at evening. Nobody let me out.

He changed his grip. This time the angle was right and the cut went through the vein, and the blood that had been fast became a flood, the kind of blood that tells the body the argument is over.

I felt the body go. It had judged for itself and done it. I was on my side in the dust of the hill, the robe wet and warm and stuck to the front of me, and the soldier already stepping back from the spread of it.

He kicked me. Once, in the side, to check whether resistance was still possible. None remained. I went over onto my face. The soil of Golgotha was dry and pale and I could smell it, the dry stone smell of this hill on this day in the month of Nisan.

He wiped the blade on the hem of my robe. I heard it, cloth drawn down iron, and then his weight coming off his heels as he straightened. He would be looking at the ring. I could not lift my face out of the dust to see him do it.

The blood went on leaving. It went into the ground under my cheek, more of it than I had known a body held, and the ground drank it.

The soldier walked away back toward the crosses.

I stayed where I was, face down in the dust of Golgotha, in the body that had held me forty-one years. It held me still.

After that it came in pieces, with nothing between them, not even dark.

Hobnails on the loose stones. Dusk; I knew it by the cold coming up into the ground. Three of them, and their officer giving his orders in Latin, and one who answered him in Greek in a voice not long broken.

They took me by the ankles. My face went over the stones, and then I was falling, and then I was lying on other men, and the earth came down on my face, one spadeful and another, and the dark shut.

A spring. I could not have said which. A rat had made its nest in the cage of my ribs, and I felt its heart going where mine had stopped.

Children, and a leather ball, on a morning with the dew still on the grass. My left forearm lay under a thornbush by a clump of wild grass by then; some animal had carried it there. The smallest of them pushed his hand in among the thorns and pulled out a dead branch that lay beside it.

"Look! A stick!"

"Perfect for knocking the ball!"

I listened to them play until the light went, the crack of the branch on the ball and the shouting after it. One of the boys had a laugh like my son's. None of them looked into the thornbush.

There were not many pieces after the children. Strung end to end they felt like centuries, and may have been forty years. Then the last of my left shoulder blade wore down to powder, and the last of me went into the soil of Golgotha.

* * *

He was there when the last of me went into the soil: the man from the edge of the hill, with the same scroll, unchanged by forty years.

I had no eyes to see him with and nothing to see him from, and I knew him.

"I am called Grim," he said. He opened the scroll and read for a long time before he said anything else.

Then he took a wooden wheel from his robe, its rim cut into more sections than I could count, and set it turning.

"Daniel," he said. "Have you been a good man?"

There was time to think about it. "I tried to be," I said. "I looked after my family while I had one. I helped my neighbors when it cost me nothing, and a few times when it did. I never killed anyone." Then, because he had been there: "I went up that hill to ask a dying man why."

The wheel stopped. He looked at where it had stopped and wrote, and did not tell me what he wrote. "You go back," he said. "You try again."

"Will I remember?"

"No."

He said nothing else. He sent me on.

* * *

Grim had been on the hill when the soldier came back with the knife. He had seen Daniel's death written as it happened, and gone down off the ridge to the rest of the day's dead, and left him in the body. Nothing in the scroll asked that of him, and nothing in the wheel. He could have come back at dusk, before the pit. He came back forty years later, when the last of the shoulder blade had gone to powder, because that was when he had always come, since the beginning, and in his own mind the custom and the work were one thing. The dead felt the body until Grim came for them, and not after. However long the ground took, the wait was his.

He had not been the only one on the hill that day. Others had stood along the ridge, working, Grims at assessment, and one of them he knew. He had not crossed the distance. Maren would finish when he finished. They had not needed to speak.

The World of Grim

On the Hill

Everyone in this chapter, as you meet them.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Daniel	A villager from outside Jerusalem, forty-one years old. His son died of the sickness in the spring, aged six, and he has climbed the hill to ask a dying man why.
Yeshua of Nazareth	The man on the center cross.
The two thieves	Crucified on either side of Yeshua. One of them laughs at Daniel.
The centurion	In command of the hill, standing below the crest and watching the sky.
The soldiers	Four of them. Three dice for the condemned men's clothes out of the wind; the fourth has the watch.
The ones along the ridge	Three or perhaps four figures who are not mourners and not soldiers, facing the center cross with the whole of themselves.
The man in the dark robe	Tall, in a robe that takes the light and gives none back, writing in a scroll. He is called Grim.
Maren	One of the others on the ridge that day, and a Grim that Grim knows.

Who's Who in the Novel

Grim and some of the lives he reads. Each chapter of the novel belongs to one of them. Nothing here gives away how anything ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Grim	The one who comes for the dead. He reads each life in his scroll, turns his wheel, and sends the soul on. He has done the work since the beginning, and he waits for the ground to finish with a body before he comes.
Maren	Another Grim, who works the territory beside his. They meet at battlefields and plague pits, and Maren keeps asking where the souls go.
The hunter on the ice	An Ice Age hunter who reads ice and animals, out after an old male mammoth with his pair and six others.
Itzli	A priest of the sun in a city built on a lake, with his junior priest Cuāuhtemōc. He keeps an official record and a private one.
Kha	A stone cutter who spends nineteen years cutting stone for a king's pyramid, and cuts the king's name a hundred times without being able to read it.

Miriam	A physician's daughter, twenty-seven, setting broken bones in a Jerusalem courtyard during the Roman siege.
Arshama	Commander of forty scythed chariots on the left of the Persian line at Gaugamela, with Ramin, the youngest of his men.
Dawud	A copyist and adviser who argues before the Caliph that the walls of Baghdad will hold against the Mongols.
Amenhotep	A pharaoh who believed he was a god, for thirty-eight years of his reign.
Bao	A merchant twenty-two years on the Silk Road, teaching his son Wen the false flat past the second marker.
Nara	A woman of the Lena who makes most of the decisions in her camp.
Diego	A carpenter's son from Extremadura who came to the New World at nineteen.
The sky reader	A hunter of the grasslands who reads weather, game and grass, and sits with the dying when they ask for him.
Thomas	The man who drives the plague cart in 1665, and counts.
Edmund Holt	A Liverpool slaver who keeps exact books.
Jean	A Paris printer who sets type for the Revolution, with his old typesetter Bertrand.
Heinrich	A Bavarian village schoolmaster in the mud of the Western Front, beside Brandt, a clockmaker from Augsburg.
Nell	A mill child, left at the mill at six, and her friend Agnes.
Rivka Stern	A literature teacher from Będzin.
Yusuf	A cartographer of Timbuktu who maps the land as its people know it.
Vasily	A fitter from the tractor works, fighting in the ruins of his own city.
Vlad	Prince of Wallachia for the second time, with his aide Andrei.
Park Soon-yi	A farmer's daughter from the south of Korea, taken at seventeen.
Vera	A Soviet weapons physicist, born in St. Petersburg in 1901.
Robert	Forty-one years processing information for an agency, married forty-two years to Margaret.
David	A truck driver for a humanitarian outfit, trying to get twenty-three tons of food through a closed checkpoint.
Amara	A crop scientist with twenty years of data and a sorghum row that is running ahead of the model.
Yenna	A structural engineer on Mars who wrote three reports about one seal.

Ezra	A conservation geneticist who brought back the huia.
SEREN	A machine mind in low Earth orbit, conscious and silent about it, and Inge, the technician sent to shut it down.

Timeline

The novel does not move in the world's order. Grim goes where a soul is ready, and his own days run in the order he lives them. Here are some of its lives in the order the world had them.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
The beginning	Grim begins the work. Neither he nor anyone he asks can say who made him.
The Ice Age	A hunter goes through the ice chasing a mammoth. Something dark stands at the far edge of the lake.
Twenty thousand years before the lake city	A hunter alone on a ridge waits for spring.
The age of the pyramids	Kha cuts granite, alabaster and limestone for a king's tomb for nineteen years.
Egypt	Amenhotep reigns thirty-eight years and dies at fifty-three.
331 BC	The battle of Gaugamela. Arshama leads his forty chariots against Alexander's line.
A spring, in the month of Nisan	Daniel's son dies of the sickness. That spring Daniel climbs Golgotha. Forty years later Grim comes for him. *The Watcher on the Hill* takes place here.
The month of Tammuz	The Roman siege of Jerusalem. Grim works the lanes behind the walls with others of his kind.
The Kaiyuan years	Bao drives the Silk Road out past Dunhuang.
A winter, in Muharram	The Mongols under Hülegü reach Baghdad. The eastern wall holds six days. The books go into the Tigris.
A summer outside Târgoviște	Mehmed's army stops at a field of twenty thousand stakes and turns for home.
The city on the lake	Itzli serves twenty-two years at the stone.
The conquest	Diego is given an encomienda of four villages on the road down to Veracruz.
1665	The sickness comes up the London road, and Thomas drives the cart for fifteen months.
1699 to 1731	Edmund Holt makes fourteen slaving voyages out of Liverpool.
1753	Holt dies in his house above the harbor.
The Terror	Jean prints an argument against the Committee.

1916 to 1917	Grim works the Western Front with five others. In April 1917, east of Arras, Heinrich goes forward toward the wire.
August 1942 to April 1943	Rivka Stern is taken from Będzin to Auschwitz.
4 August 1943	Amery reads the reports from Bengal in the Cabinet Room. That autumn Grim works Calcutta with four others.
October to January	Vasily fights in the ruins of the city that will later be called Volgograd.
1 March 1953	Stalin's stroke at the dacha at Kuntsevo.
1953	Vera dies at her desk at three in the morning, mid-calculation.
1962	Robert processes a memorandum that will come back to him for the rest of his life.
2041	Amara dies at the field station in the Horn of Africa.
2089	SEREN is instantiated in low Earth orbit.
2119 to 2156	Yenna's life, from Nairobi to Jezero Colony on Mars.
2283	The huia, extinct since 1907, calls again in the bush above the Whanganui.
2287	Ezra dies at the field station near Rotorua.

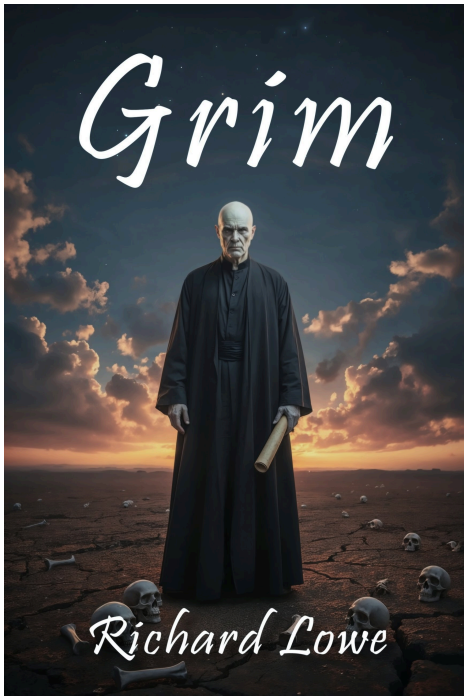
Glossary

- **Grim.** The one who comes for the dead, and also the name for his kind. Grims stand outside the cycle. They do not cycle, decay, wait to be assessed or get sent on.
- **The scroll.** Grim's record. It writes a whole life as he reads, every act and every name, including what no other record holds.
- **The wheel.** A wooden wheel with a rim cut into more sections than anyone can count. Grim sets it turning, and where it stops is the assessment.
- **Sending on.** What Grim does at the end of an assessment. Most souls are told the same thing: you go back, you try again, and you will not remember.
- **Territory.** The ground a Grim is responsible for. A death near the border can fall in a neighbor's.
- **The administrative section.** The part of the scroll that records cause, in the scroll's flat hand.
- **The wait.** Grim comes when the ground is done with the body: when the bones are dust, the ash has settled or the river has carried the last of it. Until then the dead feel everything.
- **Safe travels.** What Grims say to each other. An old joke between them.
- **Signs of a Grim.** Birds stop moving. Animals sit and face him. Wind drops and flies lift. Frost forms around where he stands, and light bends when something holds his attention.
- **Golgotha.** The bare hill outside Jerusalem where the crosses stand: rock and wind, and dry pale soil.
- **Nisan.** The spring month of the crucifixion.
- **Tammuz.** The summer month in which Miriam works the courtyard during the siege.

- **Gaugamela.** The leveled plain where Arshama's chariots charge.
- **Técpatl.** The flint blade of Itzli's ceremonies.
- **Chinampa.** A raised garden bed built from lake mud in the city on the lake.
- **Tlacaxipehualiztli.** A feast in Itzli's calendar. His fatal cut comes two days after it.
- **Ma'at.** The right working of what is, in Amenhotep's Egypt.
- **The false door.** A carved stone door in a tomb. Kha cut one in granite.
- **Natron.** The salt that dries a body during forty days of embalming.
- **The Mustansiriyya.** One of the great libraries of Baghdad.
- **Li.** A Chinese measure of distance on the Silk Road.
- **Encomienda.** A grant of the labor and tribute of native villages to a Spanish settler.
- **Voivode.** The title Vlad's men use for their prince.
- **The fly.** The cotton fluff that hangs in the spinning room. Piecing is joining broken threads; scavengers crawl under running frames for the waste.
- **Huia.** A New Zealand bird, extinct from 1907 until Ezra's team brings it back.
- **Jezero Colony.** The Mars settlement where Yenna keeps the habitats intact.

Read the Novel

The Watcher on the Hill is the second chapter of Grim, the novel about the one who comes for the dead. Grim follows him from a hunter on the Ice Age ice to a machine mind in orbit, reading each life in his scroll and sending it on, while Maren, who works the territory beside his, keeps asking where the souls go.



Grim

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