

GREY GECKO PRESS  
*presents*

# A Fancy Dinner Party



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Foreword by Jonathan Maberry

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*A*  
*FANCY*  
*DINNER PARTY*

*With a foreword by*  
*Jonathan Maberry*

**EDITED BY**  
**HILARY COMFORT**

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First Edition

*For all the new and still-struggling authors  
whose stories have yet to be told.*





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# A Fancy Dinner Party Menu

## *Appetizers*

### *The Finger of Death*

Gabrielle Alan

### *Being Bad*

H.C.H. Ritz

### *Civility*

Lee Lackey



## *Salads*

### *Misty Mountain Morning*

Leo King

### *The Faithful Farmers*

B.H. Werner

## *Entrees*

### *Hybrid*

Austin Malone

### *A Fancy Dinner Party*

Leo King

### *Heirloom*

B.H. Werner

## *Desserts*

### *Peace Meal*

Wayne Basta

### *Miss Tilly*

Amy Theacasi

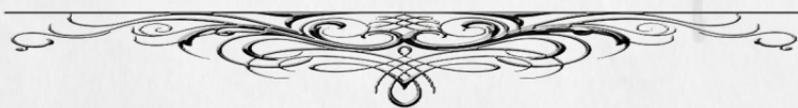
## *Cheese*

### *The Art of Steaming*

Jason Kristopher

### *The Arrangement*

George Wright Padgett





# *Foreword*

Jonathan Maberry

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So . . . okay, cannibalism.

In the horror game, we tend to cover a lot of odd topics. Mass slaughter. Hordes of the living dead. Pasty-faced eastern-European noblemen in tuxedos with a taste for hemoglobin. Titanic fire-breathing lizards stomping their way through Asian cities. Demons and ghosts. Shapeshifters and mummies. And even very human monsters like Gary Heidnik and Hannibal Lecter.

Horror subject matter is, well, horrifying. Occasionally disgusting. Often disturbing. And scary as hell.

But nothing provokes a more profound and atavistic dread than the consuming of human flesh. It's the ultimate taboo, the one line that we tell ourselves we would never—*could never*—cross.

Unless . . .

Unless our plane crashes on a snowy mountaintop and all those dead fellow passengers are just *lying* there.

Unless you're born into one of those cultures in present-day tropical Africa, or in remote spots in Melanesia, or the Korowai tribe, where eating human flesh is part of required cultural practice. Hell, the glorious tropical paradise of Fiji was once known as the Cannibal Islands.

There's even a theory that Neanderthals were cannibals (hence the paucity of complete skeletons found), and a related theory that our modern ancestors may have dined on the Neanderthals. We even have a cool scientific name for it: anthropophagy.

But still . . . eww! For most of us, when we think of cannibals, we think of Jeffrey Dahmer and Albert Fish.

Modern man is not comfortable with the idea. Perhaps it's because we've grown out of it. Or we've been guilted out of it by clerics and lawmakers who have labeled it as sinful and wrong. Or maybe we just lost the taste for it. It doesn't, I am reliably told, taste like chicken.

But damn if we don't enjoy spinning yarns about it! We see it in movies—*Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to *Silence of the Lambs* to *The Road*. We see it on TV in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files* and even on *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. And we write a lot of stories about it. *American Psycho*, Charlie Higson's *The Enemy*, Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse*, and even a reference in *The Hunger Games*. Not to mention the entirety of zombie literature.

Which brings us to *A Fancy Dinner Party*. This is a collection of very odd, highly weird, and completely delicious little tales that have only one thing in common. Some part of the human body will, inevitably, be consumed.

Mmmm. Mouth-watering, isn't it?

Sit back, tuck in your napkin, keep your favorite steak sauce handy, and dig into this bizarre feast. It's a menu you won't soon forget.

*Bon Appétit.*

# *The Finger of Death*

Gabrielle Alan

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The taste of one's own flesh should be unpleasant.

Daetric finds it spongy, tough, and slightly salty from sweat, which is the only indication of his nerves. The already severed skin at the base of the ring makes it easy to slip his teeth in and pull. The skin is pliable, easy for him to sink his teeth into; the difficulty is tearing. Once he rips a strip free, blood streams from the wound, and he sucks it down, his mouth sealed on the finger. He doesn't want to make a mess.

The pain is within his threshold; he breathes through his nose evenly, and focuses on why he is here. As long as he can remember that, he can withstand any trial or tribulation that may come.

One of his canines scrapes roughly against the metal ring secured on his forefinger, sending a tremor down his spine. He resolves to be more careful, and he gingerly eats around the ring.

A bead of sweat gathers at his temple and falls, trickling down his bare chest and thigh. Circled about him are the rest of the Order; the shrouded figures only remind Daetric further of his nakedness.

"It's symbolic," Adept Tarek had explained on one of their many walks during the last three years of his initiation. "When you are born, you come into this world

nude and new. This will be your rebirth into our Order. You must be bare to receive the blessing."

Daetric had nodded.

"There is one other thing." Adept Tarek had held up his hand, tugging the glove off, revealing his Death Finger. It was devoid of skin and muscle, held together through magic and the *Santric* ring it bore.

"You must also make the sacrifice. The method you choose will dictate the faction you belong to, and you will go to join that Order."

"I am ready, Adept, whatever my choices."

"I have a feeling, dear boy, you will choose the most difficult path."

And he did. At the beginning of the ceremony, Adept Tarek towered over him as he was given his options, laid out on a plank between them.

"Now is your choice. First: by my hand." He indicated a knife, the handle made of finger bones, its blade black with rivets of red. This would be the quickest method. "By theirs." He gestured toward a pot of flesh-eating insects, which would be the slowest method. "Or by your own means." He held his hands out towards Daetric.

Daetric met his mentor's eyes. "I choose my own means."

Tarek nodded and lifted a finger, and the plank was removed.

"Daetric has made his decision," Tarek announced to the assembled men. "By his own means, he shall join this Order." He twisted his *Santric* ring, working it off his forefinger, his mouth a grim line, with only a slight

twitch of pain in the corner. Once it was free, he slipped the ring onto Daetric's finger.

It took all of Daetric's training and stubborn stoicism to keep his face stone and his knees from trembling. Even as it tightened, pressing deeper and deeper, constricting blood to the finger — even as it cut into the skin, severing veins and muscles, stanching the blood flow, and then melting the skin below, until it was just the warm metal against the bone — even then, he kept his face still.

As he works his way to the knuckle, nibbling at stray strands of muscles, he lifts his eyes in search of his mentor. But Adept Tarek fades into the sea of shadow cloaks, all with their hoods pulled down.

Death Fingers point at him, some a dull phlegm yellow edged in brown through age, others gleaming white in the firelight. The old hands, and new, in this trade of death. In the low light, their fingers remind him of twigs.

Aeron used to tie a twig to his own finger, when they played Keeper of the Peace in the woods behind their farm. Aeron would be Justice, and Jaemin would be the Evildoer, and the rest of the children — Raelin, Gaeml, and Daetric — would be the victims.

Jaemin, the Evildoer, would spin a wild tale about all the cruelty he would do, his brown eyes dancing and his face twisting into smirks and sneers. And the younger siblings would run into the woods and hide, hoping the Evildoer would be caught before he found them.

If Aeron, Justice, caught the Evildoer and poked him without anyone seeing, he would win, ending the reign of tyranny. If the Evildoer found all of the others first, he would win.

But sometimes, Jaemin would find everyone except Daetric, and Aeron wouldn't be able to get Jaemin without anyone seeing, either. Eventually, Aeron would give up and declare Jaemin the winner.

And only then would Daetric come out. It was during these times that Daetric would privately declare himself the winner. He was always the best hider.

It's why he survived.

It was dark, and Aeron was shaking him and Gaeml. Jaemin stood at the foot of the bed, holding Raelin's hand.

"Want to play Keeper?" Aeron asked.

Gaeml squinted up at his brother. "But the wolves are out."

"We'll play inside."

They never played inside.

"Where's Father and Mother?" Raelin asked. Under one arm was the doll Father had crafted for her. Mother had been trying to stop her from sleeping with it now that she was ten winters old.

"They're playing too, Rae," Aeron said. "They are going to be the Evildoers. They're outside, counting. Jae and I are both going to be Justice. How does that sound?"

"Wait." Daetric reached under his pillow, pulling out string and some twigs. "You need Death Fingers."

"That's right, Dae, we do." Aeron held out his finger.

Above all about that night, Daetric remembered Aeron's fingers trembling as he tied the twig on his brother's finger.

As Daetric makes his way past the second knuckle, the skin is closer to the bone, harder to catch between his teeth. He moves his finger to the side of his mouth and begins to gnaw.

Daetric darted from his room before anyone else. He knew where to hide. He'd been cleaning the fire pit earlier in the week, and he had heard a sound up the chimney. Looking up, he'd seen a bird make its way up and out the chute. How did it get there? he wondered. He easily found places for his hands and feet in the stone as he climbed just a little way up. There he discovered a cubby, where one roof beam had been cut too short; inside was a half-built nest. He crawled in, and to his delight, he could look out through the paneling to the main room.

Daetric spied his brothers, standing in the front room; they stood side by side. Both looked more like Father than ever, despite being only ten and three winters. Then Aeron placed three fingers over his heart and bowed his head. Jaemin followed suit. Why were they praying? That was when Daetric knew this wasn't a game.

Shouting came from outside, and then the clash of steel and a woman's cry. Aeron pulled two of Father's swords from the wall and handed one to Jaemin.

The door shattered; a burly man strode in, blood dripping from his sword. On one side of his head hung a half a dozen or so bones that clicked together with eve-

ry step. They were of different lengths, but all were narrow, and at the bases were black rings.

Aeron and Jaemin swung clumsily at the man. Their thin arms could barely lift their swords, and each swing was slow and easily deflected. The man laughed as each blow became slower. Finally, he knocked Jaemin to the floor and buried his sword in his stomach.

Aeron let out a howl and slashed his sword, catching the man by surprise and slicing his face from eyebrow to chin.

The man roared and brought his sword across Aeron's throat.

A cry sounded from across the room. It was Gaeml. He was always so restless and curious. He must have heard the fight and come to investigate. He charged at the man with his wooden practice sword.

Daetric shut his eyes and stuffed his hand in his mouth and bit down as hard as he could. He didn't want the man to hear him, nor did he want to see any more of his family die.

He could hear the man stalking through the house; he knew from the shrieks when he found Rae. And he knew from the silence when she was dead.

He stayed there for hours, watching that man sit on his father's chair and eat his family's food. The bodies of his siblings lay at his feet.

Daetric may have dozed at some point, but he jerked awake at the sound of voices.

"So, I take it, they were against selling?" The new man's back was to the chimney. He had on a long fur cloak with a hood. Daetric strained his neck trying to catch a glimpse of his face.

The burly man slurped from the cup. "Correct."

“Did you kill them all?”

“Yes.”

“What a shame. That means there is no one to inherit this land.”

“I suppose it goes to the crown, then.”

“I suppose so.” The man in the cloak pulled a coin purse out of his pocket and tossed it on the table. “Your fee.”

And then he was gone.

The past ten years have led to this moment. No longer is he that helpless child in that cramped space. He is a man, and soon will be an apprentice in this order. The gods will grant him the power to take a life with one touch. He will wield the power of justice and strike down the evil and the corrupt.

For five hundred years, the Order of Shadow Knights have been tasked with keeping the five kingdoms at peace. They bend the knee to no king; they are an impartial observer until needed. Now he, too, will don a shadow cloak and learn the art of being an assassin.

Daetric tears the last bit of flesh from the pad of his finger. He chews slowly, savoring, then swallows.

The taste of one’s own flesh should be unpleasant. But as the power rolls through him, seeping into his pores and then down into his very bones, it is anything but.