



Darkstorm

M.L. Spencer

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Darkstorm is the prequel to the dark epic fantasy series The Rhenwars Saga.

Faced with an imminent cataclysm that will destroy the magical heritage of their people, a secret conspiracy of mages has resorted to harnessing the powers of Hell to save their legacy. The only mages who can oppose them are Braden and Quin Reis: two brothers with a turbulent past and a caustic relationship. But both Braden and Quin are compromised, harboring terrible and tragic secrets.

Will Braden and Quin be able to prevent the unsealing of the Well of Tears? Or will they fall victim to the darkmages' sinister manipulations and join their conspiracy?

Darkstorm Details

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Author : M.L. Spencer

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From Reader Review Darkstorm for online ebook

Kaitlin says

I read this book as part of the #SPFBO reading I am currently working on, and I have to say I was not disappointed. I went into this book hoping for mage battles and epic magic and a whole lot of drama, and that is exactly what I got. It's a fairly short fantasy book, but it's got a lot of good moments and it packs a strong punch of fun. I would certainly say this is well worth a read.

In this story we follow two brothers, Braden and Quin Reis. They haven't been best of friends for some time thanks to some shared tragedies in their pasts, but at the time we are following it seems that they are going to have to get along because there is an evil growing and gaining followers, and some of these followers are supposed to be very important people in the world order.

What I liked about this book was that it was pure fun at times. I tend to find that reading fantasy is how I like to escape and enjoy my time, and this book is a prime example of that. The characters and plot are well done for the number of pages the book has, and feel feisty and exciting. The plot moves at a solid pace, and the book feels intriguing from page one where we're following a young mage who is spying on her master.

Overall I think this book was definitely one of the better ones in my bunch and I am looking forward to continuing the series hopefully too as it seems to already have a few others out. I would recommend this one for sure, 4*s

Adrian Collins says

Originally reviewed on Grimdark Magazine by C.T. Phipps.

Grimdark comes in a variety of shapes and sizes but tends to be viewed as epic trilogies or doorstopper series. Rarely do we get to see what I term to be “pocket-sized fantasy” where the adventure begins and ends within in a single 300-page volume. Darkstorm, by M.L. Spencer, challenges that by telling a stand-alone story as the first installment of The Rhenwars Saga.

Darkstorm by M.L. SpencerDarkstorm has the premise of saving the world (like so many other works of fantasy) but deconstructs it at every turn. A magical cataclysm is going to wipe out all magic-using individuals on Earth and destroy sorcery as a whole in a few weeks. A secret cabal has made a pact with Xerys, the god of the underworld, despite him being considered the Lord of Evil. They hope this pact will save the world, elevating Xerys to the pantheon of gods who oppose him. Repulsed by this, archmage Branden Reis raises an army to slaughter the cabal so the disaster can happen unimpeded. Branden's brother, Quin, and Quin's lover, Merris, serve as wildcards in this conflict. Quin and Merris find both options for dealing with the looming apocalypse unappealing but have no better solutions. Betrayal, lies, and destruction follow across every page.

Part of what makes Darkstorm effective is that the author doesn't seem to have any particular attachment to the heroes. Protagonists are killed, corrupted or driven insane with no more warning than what may (typically) happen to a supporting character. The author has crafted an extraordinarily dangerous world where the “heroes” are no more immune to its dangers or temptations than anyone else. Indeed, by the

ending of Darkstorm, I concluded that they were exactly the wrong people for the job of saving the world. There's no happy ending and the heroes' choices are highly questionable, making it all the more effective as a work of fiction.

Branden Reis is convinced he's the hero and he's taking a principled stand against evil but the massive collateral damage of his actions makes him come off as self-righteous at best. His casual dismissal of not only the lives of his fellow mages but the destruction of an entire civilization's knowledge also hints at a disdain for his own profession. He's never more unsympathetic than when he uses his relationship with another archmage to manipulate her into helping him bring about the end of the cabal's plan.

Quin, by contrast, is a character who wants nothing more than to lie back and coast on his seemingly meager magical talents. He has wasted the majority of his gifts and spent them in pursuit of pleasure. Branden tries to rouse Quin into helping him "save the world" but the latter remains skeptical, not the least because Branden's own plans are insane. I warmed to Quin quickly as he was a far more likable character than his brother.

My favorite character is Merris. For much of the book, she seems to be the protagonist and we follow a YA fiction-style journey of her: from being a former street urchin turned wizard's apprentice to now being turned to something else. In another book, she would have risen up to be the savior but here, her callous selfishness and her lack of a strong moral core turns her into something else entirely. Really, I wish the entire book had been from her perspective as that would have been a really fascinating deconstruction of "coming of age" dramas.

The world-building is coherent and straight to the point with very little in the way of exposition. New details about the world come into play as they become necessary. We get a general sense of who the major factions are, what they worship, what the cultures are like, and so on through dialogue rather than being told via narrative description and commentary. I think the book's shortened format harms the narrative to an extent as this is the kind of story which could have been told in three books without losing anything. The characters and setting are rich enough that the events could have stretched out so we could spend more time with them.

The conclusion feels a bit rushed. Much of the latter half of the book is filled with dramatic reversals and character decisions that, while in character, feels like they don't have time properly breathe. The ending is dramatic and moving but I couldn't help think it could have been stretched over at least half-again the size of the book.

Is it grimdark? Yes, I think so. The protagonists are flawed individuals who make morally ambiguous choices in an impossible situation. But they are well-written, interesting characters. The heroes make terrible choices and the consequences of their actions are not always good. For those who want a short epic fantasy, I think Darkstorm is a really good choice.

Stanislas Sodonon says

And it's done!

I've completed my first foray into the Rhenwars Saga.

And I am torn to shreds between satisfaction and despair.

So much good soil, such vigorous seeds... but the tree didn't grow as tall as I'd hoped it would.

Small things kept popping up. And then they grew.

So let's talk about it (usual disclaimer applies).

The 1st chapter

We get right down to it. Someone's about to buy a one-way ticket to the Down Under. Strong start. I like.

The writing is a bit... lyrical, I'd say, but it gets the job done.

There's a lot of "feelings" in the air. I'm generally not too good with that, but it's not overly distracting.

Curiously, although the subject matter is rather grim, I keep getting an disconcerting impression of bright interior scenes. I've kept that impression, consistently failing to tell night from day throughout the book. Curious.

The Good

The plot. The concept is simply superb, and something I've been dying to see authors try. FINALLY, no Evil Antagonist(tm)!! Just people with different ideas about what is the right way out of a mighty pinch. I kept switching sides like a turncoat. That felt good!!

The philosophy. Some heavy topics in this book. Can there be such a thing as self-doubting self-righteousness? Well I found it here. And it was quite well done.

I really liked how Braden (annoying prick!) kept talking the talk without walking the walk, and getting his nose rubbed in it.

I liked Quin. He was the most well-built character (because *balanced* would be out of place in this world). He brought the most colour to the story. And that's a shame, but you'll get why in just a few.

I liked Merris. Yeah I said it. I really liked her. More than all the others. And I'm frustrated...

The... less good

The concept of what a DarkMage *is*, how to get (fall?) there. That needed more delving into, since it was instrumental.

The whole "Status in Calador" thing gets a long introduction, and then is not used anymore.

By the first third of the book, we are told what the Big Issue is. And it is BIG. So big in fact, that I cannot for the life of me understand WHY it just disappears in the background so easily.

My biggest peeve: The female characters felt... underwhelming. Almost archetypical damsels in distress or sly bitches. And that was quite... weird, considering the author is a Gal amongst gals.

Merris got me frustrated. She had all the trappings of an extremely complex personality. (view spoiler) She could have been one of the most satisfying characters I've read this year. I could feel the weight of her past in her schizophrenia. I could sniff MEGA DRAMA beneath the veneer of aloofness and lunacy. if *only* I'd had *some* flesh around her!! She felt like a huge missed opportunity.

No, 2 paragraphs about some past abuse and a few lines on her being an ex-street urchin is not enough, considering the massive impact she has on the whole story. She *deserved* more backstory. She deserved more fleshing out.

Actually, they *all* deserved more! But she deserved more!!!

The downright confusing

Remember when I said I kept getting pushed out of the book by small things? Here are a few:

Do you know how many instances of people *tossing/throwing their heads back* (to down some liquid) there is in this book? a few, to say the least...

The dialogue tags are... varied, quite a slew of 'em; *wondered* and *informed* being among the most jarring. Dunno 'bout you lads, but when someone "wonders", I personally almost always equate it to inner dialogue... As to "informing", well it's so formal it knocks you right out of the flow of dialogue.

Some sporadic POVs that really were not necessary.

The narration tends to get a bit melodramatic at times. I had to remind myself several times I wasn't reading some Danielle Steel. Naked chests and stuff...

(view spoiler)

And the ending was a massive *Huh???* moment. (view spoiler)

So it's either a setup for me to read the next books and fill in the blanks (soo manyyyy). Or it really is the end of that ARC... and I'm pissed off...

Conclusion

I am torn. I really am.

This book has so much going for it.

I go out of it with the strong feeling that the author tried to say/do too much in too short a space/time. I don't yet know what subject matter the next books cover, but I really feel like this one deserved to be 2 to 3 times longer. The impending crisis was just too momentous, and I felt I was being dragged along at blinding speed, desperately trying to cling to the blurring world and THE PLOT by my bleeding fingertips... Rushed to an end that felt totally anti-climatic.

And it frustrated me, because I WANTED MORE OF THIS WORLD! I WANTED MORE OF QUIN AND MERRIS!!! Damn it!

When was the last time I complained that a book went too fast?...

Final score: 3.5

Julian Green says

Disclaimer: I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Epic Battle Rap Review for Darkstorm – M.L. Spencer

Yo Dis Jay, Epic Battle Rap Review,
Here to tell you, what he think true.

Darkstorm be epic fantasy, twisted plot yo canna see,
Wild ride no prediction, mad protag antag friction,

Bound by love, fits like a glove
Under threat of war, making the score

Brimming with magic, damn full of tragic
Until the sacrifice, like added all spice

Jay love the mayhem, drilling into brain stem
Wild action ride, pumping heart beside

Book brings the storm, this ain't lukewarm
Down came the rain, bringing the pain.

It's time for the score, bring the jive
Darkstorm a tempesting 4.5 outta five.

Catharine Glen says

Great read, review to come...

BookLoversLife says

It all starts with a young mage, Merris, who overhears something from her master and a stranger. It causes her to have to flee and take refuge in a place where she never thought she'd be. Seeking help from two brothers, one a battlemage and one a drunk, they need to figure out what exactly is happening, how deep it goes and how to stop it.

It took me a little while to fully immerse myself into the world the author was setting up, but once I did, I ended up really enjoying this. This book doesn't believe in happy endings or sparing characters, and I really liked that. I liked that all the characters are flawed and the world is muddy, is good really good and is bad really bad or worse!! The plot itself was fast paced and intriguing. We are brought into the story right from the start when Merris hears her master talking to a stranger, and it's pretty much none stop after that. There was plenty of things happening to keep me hooked and I'm looking forward to seeing where the author takes it from here.

All the characters were well written and developed and, for me anyway, were the best part of the book. Each of the characters were flawed and each has baggage and seeing them grow and develop throughout the story was awesome. I feel like Quin had the most growth during the story and he was my favourite! Merris grew a lot too, though I'm still not too sure how I feel about her!!

In all this was a great read. Filled with magic, intrigue, demonic plots and so much more, it has made me excited to read more in this series. This author is one to watch!!

Simon Wright read this well. His tones and cadences worked well to bring the atmosphere to life and I enjoyed his performance. I did find though, that his female voices needed work and he sometimes didn't differentiate who was talking enough that I found myself confused at times.

I was given this free audiobook at my request and have voluntarily left this review. This in no way affected nor influenced my thoughts.

C.T. Phipps says

Darkstorm is an interesting novel because I can't help but think of a high school class of Forgotten Realms, Dragonlance, and other short fantasy novel series with Rhenwars sitting in the back as the Goth chick. It's a book which superficially has a resemblance to all the fun Dungeons and Dragons "adventure" fiction where there's a threat to the world, a misfit party of adventurers, evil villains, and a ticking clock forcing everyone to put aside their personal baggage.

The thing is, in this case, the heroes fail miserably in trying to get their act together and it has a much more cynical take on human nature. There's also a good deal more sex, lies, and personal betrayals that make the story quite a bit more interesting than your typical dark elf with two scimitars tale.

The premise is Merris is a young street orphan turned mage who is trying to follow her master to get some juicy details she can use to blackmail him (due to him wanting to throw her out). She gets more than she bargained for when she discovers he's become part of a cult of demon-worshipers. This results in her hooking up with two wizard brothers, one a successful battlemage while the other is a handsome but broken drunk, as well as the beautiful lover of the former.

The battlemage, Branden, is determined to stop the cult, even when he discovers that they're using demonic magic to stabilize a cataclysm that will kill all magic users in the world. It's a plan which will permanently make worshiping their equivalent to Satan as part of their religion but most wizards are apathetic about religion anyway. Personal flaws and jealousy tear into the makeshift group even as none of them, save one, really like their need to stop the cultists.

I like the characters as they're fairly well-rounded for the short time we get to be with them. All of them are suffering from some heavy character flaws while having better qualities too. The villains' motivation is arguably far more sympathetic than the primary hero's. While doubting any plan which begins with, "harnessing the power of hell for the greater good", I find the way Branden casually dismisses of thousands of magi lives as well as the destruction of civilization even more psychotic. It strikes me as coming from a martyr complex than a genuine sympathy for the multitudes (possibly also the fact he seems to be a self-hating wizard).

I was also a big fan of the character Quin. He is my sort of character in that he started with a mind full of high ideals and then decided to get drunk and laid a lot instead. He owns his flaws, which makes him a good deal more likable than his brother Branden. Merris starts as the plucky female protagonist, a mix of Harry and Hermione really, but goes down a much darker road as events show her to not possess a strong moral core.

I really liked Merris' story in the book as too many people in fiction react to changing circumstances by putting their foot down. A lot of us adapt to survive in new circumstances, occasionally doing terrible things

in the process. There's a bit of a "cliffhanger" in the middle of the book which is resolved with a cheat regarding her but I enjoyed it anyway.

The book is full of action, mostly spell duels, and I have to say works very well as a kind of dark fantasy version of a D&D game. It just so happens to be a D&D game full of sex, lies, betrayal, and hell worship. The ending of the book is also a great deal more apocalyptic than I expected it to be and I appreciate the author didn't pull any punches. Not everyone makes it out alive and that saddened me because I actually grew fond enough of the group that I would have read an entire series about their adventures. That's a pretty hefty endorsement right there. World-building wise, everything is coherent and it doesn't get bogged down in the minutia like so many other authors. Two rival mage empires and a Mongol culture to the North. Boom. Got it.

In conclusion, I recommend Darkstorm for someone who wants a quick easy-to-read fantasy epic. It condenses what other authors would have expanded to three novels into one and while some of the character developments feel a bit too swift, it still works enough that I wrote this review and have already picked up the second volume.

9/10

Luke Hindmarsh says

Character driven and original. A must read.

The strength of this book is in its unusual characters. You've got Branden, who is hidebound and stiff necked but at the same time carries guilt over his past. His approach is that ever dangerous utilitarian principle of the greater good. The kind of attitude that can steamroll over normal people. Merris is an enigma. She seems to be one thing but is a chameleon, shifting her identity to fit with whoever she is in the company of. This is a fascinating trait and one I've encountered in the real world. Who she is deep inside is a large part of the core mystery of the story. If there is anyone inside. Quin is more like the decent hero with a good heart who has fallen from grace and off the wagon because of his past. Never an innocent but someone who is fundamentally a good person but has had that ground out of them by circumstance. An idealist with their dreams shattered. Probably my favourite character. The most powerful female character in setting is... oh, I've forgotten her name. She's massively important but at the same time a bit of a bland person. Set against the incredible characterisation of Merris and Branden she's left in such shadow that she didn't really make that much impact on me. An insignificant person in a position of power. It actually makes her a good character. Not everyone should be leaping off the page. That's not true to life. Spencer gets this detail dead right.

Plot: well it's original and though in its denouement there is a degree of predictability, that doesn't detract from the set up to that point. I wasn't surprised by the resolution though the events leading towards it did surprise me. So the execution of the plot was exceptional and the plot itself very good until the final few pages when it wrapped up in a satisfying but not mind-blowingly brilliant way. A good ending but overshadowed by the fireworks that came before.

Setting -- interesting but somewhat underdeveloped. That means you avoid infodumps but I felt there could have been more fleshing out of the setting to truly immerse me in it. That said, this is a story that is carried by the characters and so this issue only occurs to me in retrospect after I've finished the novel.

After finishing this, I'd enjoyed it so much I picked up the author's other novels.

Damien Black says

A suspenseful and lugubrious fantasy tale, *Darkstorm* is aptly named indeed, for it offers a foreshadowing of things to come. And those things don't bode well for humanity. Two high civilisations, Caladorn and the Rhen, are on the brink of war, their rival ruling synods of warlocks at daggers drawn. But underpinning this mortal conflict is a much graver danger, and averting this may involve a diabolical pact with the forces of darkness. This story thus revolves around a moral dilemma on a large scale, namely, do the ends justify the means? The supernatural forces of Hell appear destined to intersect with the all-too-human struggle for survival, as a society's most gifted but morally flawed warlocks contemplate doing the unthinkable to save the civilisation they have built.

As such this tale is political in nature and has complex plot developments, some driven by character and others by the nature of the world they inhabit; *Rhenwars #1* presents a web of intrigue entangling a host of actors caught up in world-shaking events that they struggle to control. *Darkstorm* is also beautifully written by an author who is clearly well versed in the English language and not afraid to show it: the prose is powerful and evocative, but for all the splendid descriptions of temples, towers, landscapes and cities, the reader never loses the sense that this is a world on the brink of a precipice.

I won't go into the protagonists in too much detail because that would constitute a plot spoiler, but suffice to say that Quinlan Reis, a talented warlock who feels driven to drown past pain in the bottle, is an intriguing anti-hero; his fraught relationship with his brother and fellow mage Braden, Caladornian ambassador to Aerysius, the capital of the Rhen, is marred by tragedy and allows the author to give her protagonists depth while maintaining the fast pace of a thriller. And right from the start we are obliged to question the elusive Merris, an acolyte mage who becomes embroiled in skulduggery for motives of her own. Her character development is shocking, but clues as to her true nature are cleverly interwoven into the early narrative.

The world is revealed gradually and again there is a sense of much more to come: future history waiting to be written, much of it cataclysmic I suspect. The pastoral steppe culture of the Reis brothers' homeland in Kazahar is a pleasing counterweight to the tense city halls of Bryn Calazar and Aerysius that their destiny has obliged them to navigate, and again I expect the geographical scope of Spencer's world will become more apparent as the *Rhenwars Saga* progresses.

Brooding and grim and surreally beautiful, *Darkstorm* is a fast-paced book with a lot of twists and subtexts that probably rewards rereading; it comes equipped with a glossary at the back, testimony to the author's meticulous construction of a fully functioning world with its traditions, hierarchies and superstitions, including a detailed magic system. My only criticism (if such it is) is that the novel could have been longer: I understand there is a trend towards shorter books nowadays, but it isn't one I hold with. The *Rhenwars Saga* is clearly intended as a dark fantasy on an epic scale that will reward an intelligent and patient reader who likes to be left with questions as well as answers. Highly recommended for sophisticated fans of the genre.

Rob Hayes says

Time for a little disclaimer. It is, unfortunately, impossible to really separate the narrator from the words when reviewing an audiobook. But I have tried.

Darkstorm is a prequel of sorts to M L Spencer's Rhenwars Saga. The author told me this when I started the book, and pointed out that it's probably not the best place to start the series. However, I was after an audiobook, and book 1 was not yet ready (I believe it will be soon and is probably a better place to begin your journey into the Rhen). She was not wrong. There are points where I found myself a bit lost and confused, and I feel if I had a broader knowledge of the world, it would have all made a bit more sense.

Right, so Darkstorm is the story of 2 brothers, Braden and Quin Reis as they struggle to stop a corruption within their order of mages from opening up a portal to hell. Yup, that pretty much sums up the plot in a single sentence. It's a mad ride!

The story is fast paced and frantic, with a few big twists along the way, and a hell (;-) of a lot at stake. I mean, let's be fair, the stakes rarely get higher than 'the world'.

So normally I'd have given this book 4 stars (just keep reading). It's fun and dark, sword and sorcery, short and very enjoyable. BUT! I am a picky audiobook consumer. Narrators can make or break a book. Some really bring the characters to life, and others... Well, I'll just point out here that I did NOT get on with the narrator. He made everything sound like a breathy whisper, and I don't think he captured the tone of the story at all. Honestly, he made the book sound like a romance novel rather than a fantasy.

So I'm giving Darkstorm 3.5 stars (yes, I'm knocking off 0.5 of a star for the narrator), but as always, I round up. So technically it still gets a 4 stars from me. I think I'll pick up the next book in written format.

The Nerd Book Review says

Enjoyable and frustrating!

I interviewed ML Spencer for my podcast The Nerd Book Review ! The book is well written and at times was both enjoyable and frustrating. I thought the storyline was engaging and entertaining but she has a cast of characters that for the most part weren't very likeable. Her "heroes" are deeply flawed people and the character who I thought seemed like the most middle of the road and reasonable was a villain.

If you like a book with characters in the Mark Lawrence mold then you will probably enjoy this book. It's not nearly as graphically violent as his books and most of the violence is achieved by magic instead of a sword. If you need a real hero in your story this is NOT the book for you.

Rebekah says

Betrayal and failure infest this story, with scant moments of triumph. Spencer teases the reader with glimpses of success and hope, making for an experience that compels you to keep reading, to keep hoping the next plot will work out. It's unsettling, mesmerizing, and addictive.

I devoured this book. I read until my eyes were soupy. I had some vague understanding of where things would end up, and I desperately needed to see how it unfolded. I had started with Darkmage, the first book in The Rhenwars Saga, then backed up and read this prequel. There were some things I liked about doing it this way. Darkstorm takes place a thousand years earlier, and thus shows the origins of some of the artifacts and traditions you find in Darkmage. It was cool, knowing where these circumstances would lead, but if you

want a truly spoiler-free experience with this series, then start with Darkstorm.

Those Reis brothers! What can I say about them? They have some issues for sure. I am impressed they still talk to each other after finding out the history that went down between them. Their relationship is fraught with conspiracy and tragedy.

While Braden is more of an optimist and one to take action, Quin has a tendency to be consumed with cynicism, but he keeps going despite all the odds, because he does love his brother deep down and wishes he could feel more like his equal.

Darkstorm really explores extreme choices made with good intentions, how small actions conceived in self-preservation can lead to dire consequences. It's an excellent exploration in moral ambiguity. It teases that line of when and how to defy the rules, that point where justice lives more within revolution than institution. While the sympathetic characters are generally from one side of this conflict, it's clear that both sides are desperately trying to do what they think is right, and the fate of their entire existence is at stake.

Esmerelda Weatherwax says

That was a really fun book, review to come soon.

Fee Roberts says

Darkstorm by M.L. Spencer is the first book in The Rhenwars Saga. Braden and Quin Reis, two brothers of great power, are the only hope to stopping a conspiracy of mages who are intent on unsealing the Well of Tears.

Plot 5/5 : Interesting plot with some twists.

Characters 5/5 : Well fleshed out characters

World building 5/5 : An interesting setting

Pacing 5/5 : Steady pace with spurts of action.

Writing 5/5 : Beautifully written with tastefully written scenes of sexual encounters

Overall 5 stars

M.L. Spencer's beautiful prose, world building, and character development breathe life into this tale of love, betrayal, determination, and intrigue. This is a must read book for anyone into fantasy.

Montzalee Wittmann says

Darkstorm

The Rhenwars Saga, Book 0

By: M. L. Spencer

Narrated by: Simon Wright

This is an audible book I requested and the review is voluntary.

I have to say that as soon as the book started I was drawn to the smooth and attractive voice coming from my tablet. I had not heard this narrator before and I was enticed right away. Loved his voice! This man could get away with murder! He delivered a flawless performance and had me glued to his dreamy voice.

The book was wonderful also but different than what I am accustomed to. My heroes don't die normally!

Sob, sob.... Great world building, interactions, characters, and plot. Loved the fantasy aspects too. Fresh and appealing, dark and alluring. I had bought all three books before I had the chance to review this book. Now I can't wait to read the other books. I may just wait and listen to them!

Enjoyed this book tremendously!
