Deconstructing the Siege of Pale Aftermath Scene
from Gardens of the Moon
By Steven Erikson

1163rd Year of Burn’s Sleep (two years later)
105th. Year of the Malazan Empire
9th Year of Empress Laseen’s Rule

Through the pallor of smoke ravens wheeled. Their calls raised a
shrill chorus above the cries of wounded and dying soldiers. The stench
of seared flesh hung unmoving in the haze.

On the third hill overlooking the fallen city of Pale, Tattersail stood
alone. Scattered around the sorceress the curled remains of burnt
armour – greaves, breastplates, helms and weapons – lay heaped in
piles. An hour earlier there had been men and women wearing that
armour, but of them there was no sign. The silence within those empty
shells rang like a dirge in Tattersail’s head.

Her arms were crossed, tight against her chest. The burgundy cloak
with its silver emblem betokening her command of the 2nd Army’s
wizard cadre now hung from her round shoulders stained and scorched.
Her oval, flesh-flaccid and pale.

For all the smells and sounds surrounding Tattersail, she found
herself listening to a deeper silence. In some ways it came from the
empty armour surrounding her, an absence that was in itself an
accusation. But there was another source of the silence. The sorcery
that had been unleashed here today had been enough to fray the fabric
between the worlds. Whatever dwelt beyond, in the Warrens of Chaos,
felt close enough to reach out and touch.

She’d thought her emotions spent, used up by the terror she had just
been through, but as she watched the tight ranks of a legion of Moranth

Commented [SE1]: Recall the classic paragraph structure as taught in grade school:
introductory sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence reiterating the
introductory sentence. Now, granted, that’s fine for essays and whatever, but fiction plays
by different rules. Or does it? This opening paragraph is utterly blunt in its structure, but
instead of setting forth an argument or premise, it makes use of sensory details. Three
sentences: three senses. Visual (ravens and, more importantly, smoke). Aural (shrill
chorus, cries). Olfactory (stench – but oh, look, that concluding sentence does something
else, doesn’t it? Why? It gathers up the visual sense as well [the one used in the
introductory sentence] to wrap up the paragraph in a, holy crap, elliptical fashion! “Give
us a break, Erikson! You weren’t thinking all that when writing that sentence!” “No,
mate, give us a break. I was. Now watch, as I fucking prove it.”

Commented [SE2]: I tend to build scenes cinematically. That’s why the preceding
paragraph arrives as a floating POV, like a camera fading in, sounds rising, etc. But now
it’s time to give us our POV. But I still want to have my sentence carry more stuff, so I
didn’t just write ‘Tattersail stood alone.’ On the surface that could work, especially since
the rest of the paragraph starts laying out the immediate area surrounding her (though I’d
need to throw in the hill and city somewhere). Instead, I lay out two additional details,
both of which will prove important in the tale to come. Third hill. Fallen city of Pale.
These offer setting details but not in themselves overwhelming (one hopes). Recall, the
reader is assembling details, carrying the burden of the opening paragraph’s details
(ravens, smoke, dead and dying, seared flesh). But now we’re on a hill, which seems a
good position to be in if we’re going to watch 1) Moranth legions entering city, 2) the
approach of WJ and co. Of course she’s also on that hill for another reason: because she’s
a sorceress and that’s where the magic users position themselves. But we don’t know that
yet. Though, of course, I do. As for her state of mind, well, that makes it even more
important to be on a hill: so she can see all the people her magic failed to protect.

Commented [SE3]: Technically, all that’s happening here is the camera closing in,
the POV’s psychic distance drawing ever closer. By the end of this paragraph it’s closed
right in to her face. But I also want to shush from a few more details: the cultural garb
and military insignia, her status as a member of the wizard cadre. And the fact that she’s
physically and spiritually battered.

Commented [SE4]: Our POV finally slips into the interimal, into seeing and feeling as
Tattersail. Technically, you can see how each paragraph thus far steps us in towards our
chosen POV protagonist. This is why the full of use of senses is important: it establishes
immediacy. Now, as reader, one is hopefully still carrying the shrill overhead cries of the
ravens, and the dying and wounded soldiers on all sides, and the smoky haze, and the
appalling visual of emptied armour.

Commented [SE5]: While the prologue and chapter 1 offered details on sorcery in this
world (putting it mildly), in this instance I’m offering the first real POV that comes from a
place of understanding that sorcery. But I’m keeping it tied to the visceral: that chaos,
after all, was what Tattersail just went through. This also serves to reinforce her feeling
of fragility at this moment (but of course she’s tougher than she thinks, and that’s hinted
at with this sentence. After all, she’s familiar enough with sorcery not to fear its
proximity. Even Chaos seems to be something she could, if desired, reach out and touch.
(That’s a brave lady, folks).
A dozen fires raged unchecked through the city. The siege was over, finally, after three long years. But Tattersail knew that there was more to come. Something hid, and waited, in the silence. So she would wait as well. The deaths of this day deserved that much from her – after all, she had failed in all the other ways that mattered.

On the plain below, the bodies of Malazan soldiers covered the ground, a rumpled carpet of dead. Limbs jutted upward here and there, ravens perching on them like overlords. Soldiers who had survived the slaughter wandered in a daze among the bodies, seeking fallen comrades. Tattersail’s eyes followed them achingly.

‘They’re coming,’ said a voice, a dozen feet to her left. Slowly she turned. The wizard Hairlock lay sprawled on the burnt armour, the pate of his shaved skull reflecting the dull sky. A wave of sorcery had destroyed him from the hips down. Pink, mud-spattered entrails billowed out from under his ribcage, webbed by drying fluids. A faint penumbra of sorcery revealed his efforts at staying alive.

‘Thought you were dead,’ Tattersail muttered. ‘Felt lucky today.’

‘You don’t look it.’

Hairlock’s grunt released a gout of dark thick blood from below his heart. ‘They’re coming,’ he said. ‘See them yet?’

She swung her attention to the slope, her pale eyes narrowing. Four soldiers approached. ‘Who are they?’

The wizard didn’t answer.

Tattersail faced him again and found his hard gaze fixed on her, intent in the way a dying person achieves in those last moments. ‘Thought you’d take a wave through the gut, huh? Well, I suppose that’s one way to get shipped out of here.”
His reply surprised her. [The tough façade ill fits you, 'Sail. Always has.] He frowned and blinked rapidly, fighting off darkness, she supposed. 'There's always the risk of knowing too much. Be glad I spared you.' He smiled, unveiling red-stained teeth. 'Think nice thoughts. The flesh fades.'

She eyed him steadily, wondering at his sudden ... humanity. Maybe dying did away with the usual games, the pretences of the living dance. Maybe she just wasn't prepared to see the mortal man in Hairlock finally showing itself. [Tattersail prised her arms from the dreadful, aching hug she had wrapped around herself, and sighed shakily. 'You're right. It's not the time for façades, is it? I never liked you, Hairlock, but I'd never question your courage — I never will.' She studied him critically, a part of her astonished that the horror of his wound didn't so much as make her flinch. 'I don't think even Tayschrenn's arts are enough to save you, Hairlock.]

Something cunning flashed in his eyes and he barked a pained laugh. [Dear girl,' he gasped, 'your naivety never fails to charm me.]

'Of course,' she snapped, stung at falling for his sudden ingenuousness. 'One last joke on me, just for old times’ sake.'

'You misunderstand — Are you so certain? You’re saying it isn’t over yet. Your hatred of our High Mage is fierce enough to let you slip Hood's cold grasp, is that it? Vengeance from beyond the grave?'

'You must know me by now. I always arrange a back door.'

'You can't even crawl. How do you plan on getting to it?'

The wizard licked his cracked lips. 'Part of the deal,' he said softly. 'The door comes to me. Comes even as we speak.'

Unease coiled around her insides. Behind her, Tattersail heard the crunch of armour and the Rattle of iron, the sound arriving like a cold wind. She turned to see the four soldiers appear on the summit. Three men, one woman, mud-smeared and crimson-streaked, their faces almost bone-white. The sorceress found her eyes drawn to the woman, who hung back like an unwelcome afterthought as the three men approached. The girl was young, pretty as an icicle and looking as warm to the touch. Something wrong there. Careful.
The man in the lead – a sergeant by the torque on his arm – came up to Tattersail. Set deep in a lined, exhausted face, his dark grey eyes searched hers dispassionately. 'This one?' he asked, turning to the tall, thin black-skinned man who came up beside him.

This man shook his head. 'No, the one we want is over there,' he said. Though he spoke Malazan, his harsh accent was Seven Cities.

The third and last man, also black, slipped past on the sergeant's left and for all his girth seemed to glide forward, his eyes on Hairlock. His ignoring Tattersail made her feel somehow slighted. She considered a well-chosen word or two as he stepped around her, but the effort seemed suddenly too much.

Well,' she said to the sergeant, 'if you're the burial detail, you're early. He's not dead yet. Of course,' she continued, 'you're not the burial detail. I know that. Hairlock's made some kind of deal – he's thinking he can survive with half a body.'

The sergeant's lips grew taut beneath his grizzled, wiry beard. 'What's your point, Sorceress?'

The black man beside the sergeant glanced back at the young girl still standing a dozen paces behind them. He seemed to shiver, but his lean face was expressionless as he turned back and offered Tattersail an enigmatic shrug before moving past her.

She shuddered involuntarily as power buffeted her senses. She drew a sharp breath. He's a mage. Tattersail tracked the man as he joined his comrade at Hairlock's side, striving to see through the muck and blood covering his uniform. 'Who are you people?'

Ninth squad, the Second.'

'Ninth?' The breath hissed from her teeth. You're Bridgeburners.' Her eyes narrowed on the battered sergeant. 'The Ninth. That makes you Whiskeyjack.'

He seemed to flinch.

Tattersail found her mouth dry. She cleared her throat. 'I've heard of you, of course. I've heard the—'

'Doesn't matter,' he interrupted, his voice grating. 'Old stories grow like weeds.'

She rubbed at her face, feeling grime gather under her nails. Bridgeburners. They'd been the old Emperor's elite, his favourites, but...
since Laseen’s bloody coup nine years ago they’d been pushed hard into
every rat’s nest in sight. Almost a decade of this had cut them down to a
single, undermanned division. Among them, names had emerged. The
survivors, mostly squad sergeants, names that pushed their way into the
Malazan armies on Genabackis, and beyond. Names, spicing the
already sweeping legend of Onearm’s Host. Detoran, Antsy, Spindle,
Whiskeyjack. Names heavy with glory and bitter with the cynicism that
every army feeds on. They carried with them like an emblazoned
standard the madness of this unending campaign.

Sergeant Whiskeyjack was studying the wreckage on the hill.
Tattersail watched him piece together what had happened. A muscle in
his cheek twitched. He looked at her with new understanding, a hint of
softening behind his grey eyes that almost broke Tattersail then and
there. 'Are you the last left in the cadre?' he asked.

She looked away, feeling brittle. 'The last left standing. It wasn't skill,
either. Just lucky.'

If he heard her bitterness he gave no sign, falling silent as he
watched his two Seven Cities soldiers crouching low over Hairlock.

Tattersail licked her lips, shifted uneasily. She glanced over to the
two soldiers. A quiet conversation was under way. She heard Hairlock
laugh, the sound a soft jolt that made her wince. 'The tall one,' she said.

'He's a mage, isn't he?'

Whiskeyjack grunted, then said, 'His name's Quick Ben."

'Not the one he was born with.'

'No.'

She rolled her shoulders against the weight of her cloak, momentarily
easing the dull pain in her lower back. 'I should know him, Sergeant.
That kind of power gets noticed. He's no novice.'

'No,' Whiskeyjack replied. 'He isn’t.'

She felt herself getting angry. 'I want an explanation. What's
happening here?'

Whiskeyjack grimaced. 'Not much, by the looks of it.' He raised his
voice. 'Quick Ben!' The mage looked over. 'Some last-minute negotiations, Sergeant,' he
said, flashing a white grin.
Hood's Breath.' Tattersail sighed, turning away. The girl, she saw, still stood at the hill's crest and seemed to be studying the Moranth columns passing into the city. As if sensing Tattersail's attention, her head snapped around. Her expression startled the sorceress. Tattersail pulled her eyes away. 'Is this what's left of your squad, Sergeant? Two desert marauders and a blood-hungry recruit?'

Whiskeyjack's tone was flat: 'I have seven left.'

'This morning?'

'Fifteen.'

'Something's wrong here. Feeling a need to say something, she said, 'Better than most.' She cursed silently as the blood drained from the sergeant's face. 'Still,' she added, 'I'm sure they were good men, the ones you lost.'

'Good at dying,' he said.

The brutality of his words shocked her. Mentally reeling, she squeezed shut her eyes, fighting back tears of bewilderment and frustration. Too much has happened. I'm not ready for this. I'm not ready for Whiskeyjack, a man buckling under his own legend, a man who's climbed more than one mountain of the dead in service to the Empire.

The Bridgeburners hadn't shown themselves much over the past three years. Since the siege began, they'd been assigned the task of undermining Pale's massive, ancient walls. That order had come straight from the capital, and it was either a cruel joke or the product of appalling ignorance: the whole valley was a glacial dump, a rock pile plugging a crevice that reached so far underground even Tattersail's mages had trouble finding its bottom. They've been underground three years running. When was the last time they saw the sun?

Tattersail stiffened suddenly. 'Sergeant.' She opened her eyes to him. 'You've been in your tunnels since this morning?'

With sinking understanding, she watched anguish flit across the man's face. 'What tunnels?' he said softly, then moved to stride past her.

She reached out and closed her hand on his arm. A shock seemed to run through him. 'Whiskeyjack,' she whispered, 'you've guessed as much. About – about me, about what happened here on this hill, all
these soldiers.' She hesitated, then said, 'Failure's something we share. I'm sorry.'

He pulled away, eyes averted. 'Don't be, Sorceress.' He met her gaze. 'Regret's not something we can afford.'

She watched him walk to his soldiers.

A young woman's voice spoke directly behind Tattersail. 'We numbered fourteen hundred this morning, Sorceress."

Tattersail turned. At this close range, she saw that the girl couldn't be more than fifteen years old. The exception was her eyes, which held the dull glint of weathered onyx — they looked ancient, every emotion eroded away into extinction. 'And now?'

The girl's shrug was almost careless. 'Thirty, maybe thirty-five. Four of the five tunnels fell in completely. We were in the fifth and dug our way out. Fiddler and Hedge are working on the others, but they figure everybody else's been buried for good. They tried to round up some help.'

'A cold, knowing smile spread across her mud streaked face. 'But your master, the High Mage, stopped them.'

'Tayschrenn did what? Why?'

The girl frowned, as if disappointed. Then she simply walked away, stopping at the hill's crest and facing the city again.

Tattersail stared after her. The girl had thrown that last statement at her as if hunting for some particular response. Complicity? In any case, a clean miss. Tayschrenn's not making any friends. Good. The day had been a disaster, and the blame fell squarely at the High Mage's feet. She stared at Pale, then lifted her gaze to the smoke-filled sky above it.

That massive, looming shape she had greeted every morning for the last three years was indeed gone. She still had trouble believing it, despite the evidence of her eyes. 'You warned us,' she whispered to the empty sky, as the memories of the morning returned. 'You warned us, didn't you?'