

A Taste of Gold and Iron Transcript

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Amber: Hello, my name is Amber. My pronouns are she and her.

Jamie: Hi, I'm Jamie. I go by she/her. Today we'll be discussing *A Taste of Gold and Iron* by Alexandra Rowland. Alexandra Rowland is the author of several fantasy books, as well as a co-host of the Hugo Award nominated podcast *Be the Serpent*, all sternly supervised by their feline quality control manager. They hold a degree in world literature, mythology and folklore from Truman State University.

A: (synopsis) Kadou, the shy prince of Arasht, finds himself at odds with one of the most powerful ambassadors at court, the body father of the queen's new child, in an altercation which results in his humiliation. To prove his loyalty to the queen, his sister, Kadou takes responsibility for the investigation of a break-in at one of their guilds with the help of his newly appointed bodyguard, the coldly handsome Evemer, who seems to tolerate him at best. In Arasht, where princes can touch-taste precious metals with their fingers and myths run side by side with history, counterfeiting is heresy and the conspiracy they discover could cripple the kingdom's financial standing and bring about its ruin. Other prominent characters include Sultan Zeliha, who is Kadou's older sister; Siranos, who is the body father of Zeliha's daughter and the heir to the kingdom; Eozena, the commander of the Kahya, Tadek, who used to be a Kahya and was turned into an armsman; and Melek, another trusted Kahya, whose pronouns

are *çe* and *çir*. Some content warnings include panic attacks and anxiety, violence, sexual content, alcohol use as a coping mechanism, and kidnapping. So the Kahya are the royal guard, but they're almost more than that. They have sworn fealty to the throne and their entire lives are devoted to the royal family.

J: The Kahya were based off of the Janissary Guard for the Ottoman Empire. Like the Janissary, the Kahya are identified at a very young age and they get lots of training to become guards. So that's not just going to be limited to fighting. It also incorporates all of these different things where they're incredibly well-rounded individuals, very educated. And then even when they're serving in the guard, they also get stipends to go ahead and continue their education, all sorts of things. So these people are incredibly skilled, very knowledgeable, able to handle a wide range of things.

A: Yeah, they're extremely accomplished in a lot of different ways. I think it mentioned that some of them, after they're in the guard, go on to become like political ambassadors. They go on to do all sorts of important things for the country other than just being a guard. But they're also not seen as servants to them. It's a symbiotic relationship where they are absolutely loyal to the royal family, and as a result, the royal family cares for them. And throughout all that, the important thing is that they should be able to trust the royal family implicitly and the royal family should be able to trust them implicitly. Which, of course, for someone with anxiety is not super easy. So Kadou is, the book description calls him shy. But you'll find out very quickly that Kadou has severe anxiety that affects his relationship with everybody in his life, including the people closest to him. Which, in this case, are his sister, who is the sultan, and the people around him protecting him, who are the members of his core guard of the Kahya. And Siranos,

who is the body father of his niece, the heir to the kingdom, is someone that he can't tell if the reason he's reacting poorly to him is because of his own problems or because they're really there.

J: And then Kadou's Kahya, acting off of the anxiety that Kadou feels around Siranos, act to protect him when they're out on a hunt. And that results in the death of two of his Kahya. And Evemer is appointed to his guard after that point. And so that's also why Evemer has such cold feelings to Kadou to begin with. So he's going in with those negative assumptions, and Kadou is already feeling horribly because two of his Kahya had died because of what he had shared with them. They had died trying to protect him.

A: And Evemer comes in with these preconceived notions of what a prince is supposed to look like and supposed to act like because it is his whole life, and Kadou does not fit that. And because of the way Kadou is two people that he was close to have died. And I think some of his problem comes from if he's serving this person who is supposed to essentially be his whole life, he should be somebody worthy of that. And at first, it doesn't seem like he is because he let this part of himself mess up so badly.

J: And Kadou really is a very ethical, very deeply feeling individual. So he really is what a prince or royalty should be as far as Evemer's standards. But he doesn't let himself see that at first because Kadou is so ruled by his anxiety. And his anxiety also has complicated his relationship with one of the other Kahya. They have become intimate because this person is very good at talking him down when he's very upset. And in this world, sexuality is just very...

A: Yeah, it's like a non-issue, just part of the society. So in this world, the lineage is matriarchal. The child belongs to the mother, and if she is married to the father, the child also belongs to the father. But if she is not, the father does not have a claim on the child until she said so. So when we were calling Siranos the body father of Zeliha's daughter, it just means that he is the one who made it possible to have a child. But he doesn't have any claim on her unless Zeliha says so. So Kadou actually has more of a claim on his niece than the biological father would. All that to say, Kadou's preference is for men. But functionally, it doesn't make much of a difference who he is interested in. Either personally, in like a social sense, nobody really cares. And politically, in the sense that even if he had a child, he would not necessarily have claim on it. Kind of like how sexuality is a non-issue, gender is also a non-issue in most regards in society. So in Arasht, the sultan is a woman, it's Kadou's sister, that is only because she is the eldest. So as soon as she has the baby, the baby is next in line, and then Kadou. And the book actually opens to Kadou being so relieved that he now has a niece who is next in line for the throne. So he is one step further away from ever having to be the sultan.

J: So another interesting thing, this world has a third gender where it has neopronouns, *çe* and *çir*. And there's a large number of people of this third gender called *oryasilar*. And they are throughout society. So they're doctors, they're multiple Kahya, and they're treated with the same respect as everyone else. The main character that we interact with who is this third gender is Melek; *çe* is one of Kadou's immediate Kahya. So the people who interact with him on a regular basis.

A: Evemer is the main guard for Kadou. But so that Evemer has a chance to sleep, Melek is the person who watches over him the other 12 hours of the day. There's also an instance in the book where some loyalties are questioned. But Melek is one of the first people that Kadou and Evemer agree is somebody that they can trust.

J: Other interesting aspects of this world are the presence of certain gifts such as touch-tasting, where it's not only royalty, but there are certain people throughout society who have the ability to feel a coin and be able to judge the purity of it. For Kadou and for everybody else, it seems like it's a form of synesthesia where your senses can interact in different ways. So when he is feeling a coin, he'll be able to experience other sensations like smells and that kind of thing. And the reason the book is called *A Taste of*

Gold and Iron is usually iron is a really common kind of material, and so it's not that interesting. But when he holds a piece of iron that Evemer has given him, he gets all of these very romantic feelings and different senses that really impacts him. And so *Taste of Gold and Iron*.

A: That was so interesting. So you get to hear Kadou. The book is narrated back and forth between the two main characters, and in some of Kadou's chapters he touches a coin or something and you get a whole picture of what that quote-unquote tastes like for him. He has an image and a flavor he associates with it, which is, first of all, just so interesting. And in the case that you were just mentioning, that Evemer gives him some iron, his strongest association with iron changes. So now it's something completely new that will always be associated with Evemer, which is just so interesting. So I have no way of confirming this, as we didn't get the perspective of anybody else who has touch-tasting, but it seems like the flavor of any metal is specific to the person. Melek actually I think is also a touch-taster, right?

J: It's been like over a week since I've read this, and details do not stay in my head. I remember we do interact with another character who is a touch-taster, and they also mention smells and tastes that they associate with a certain metal, and it's not exactly the same as Kadou.

A: It's also such an interesting element of the world-building here. The world-building in this book is so fascinating to me. It's very obviously influenced by history, specifically, I guess, Middle Eastern history—the Ottoman Empire, so like Turkey-ish—which is fascinating, but it's also just sort of tweaked in certain ways that are so interesting and unique. So the reason that it's such a big deal that there may be counterfeiting is because this country is known worldwide as: their standard will always be this combination of metals, and it will never be different, and the reason they can always know that is because of their touch-tasters. So their economy is much stronger than anywhere else in their world. So I just thought that was such an interesting element. You wouldn't think that a book about the potential counterfeiting of some coins would be so intriguing, but it really is. Just the whole structure of their economy and their society is so well-developed.

J: I thought the author did a really great job of balancing discussion of mental health issues, the romance, and then the political intrigue, but then also the very much real danger that the characters were in some of the time, along with like familial stuff. I think there's a lot in here to appeal to different people.

A: Definitely. I would absolutely agree.

J: So along with touch-tasters, this world also has truth-sayers, people who are able to listen to other people and determine whether or not they're speaking truthfully, and so that also comes into play with portions of the book.

A: There is one character who, she's so funny. She's very much like neutral. She's not good and she's not bad, but she's firmly gray. What was her name? I remember she reminded me of Avatar. I might not be able to find it, but she is great. She also, in ways that we cannot share because of a lot of reasons, is definitely influential in moving things along. While we're talking about characters who I happen to love, so in the incident in the beginning of the book where stuff goes wrong, one of the Kahya is named Tadek, and he is trying to protect Kadou so much so that he accidentally contributes to a couple of people dying. He didn't mean to, but it sure did happen. So he would have been potentially executed, I think, if Kadou hadn't stepped in for him and taken responsibility for him entirely, but it also meant that he was no longer a Kahya. So he became Kadou's armsman, which is like kind of a nebulous, I think they essentially made him his secretary. But anyway, so Tadek's around. He—I can't say too much. It's a little unclear where his loyalties lie early on, so I don't want to say too much about him. Other than that, I love him. He's so funny.

J: He's very much a character that sees to the truth of matters, and he likes needling other characters. So Evemer is a very, very serious individual who takes himself seriously, takes interactions very seriously, and Tadek just loves trying to get under his skin. And so that provides a lot of humorous moments in the book as well. Tadek really supports and really cares for Kadou throughout the book. Besides trying to come to terms with his new position and what his possibilities look like for his career, he's also trying to figure out his now relationship with Kadou because they had been more intimate, but then Kadou put the kibosh on that because he felt like he was being overly familiar with somebody's Kayha, and that was sending mixed messages.

A: I think he's also trying to figure out what he wants as a person and not just what he thinks other people, and specifically Kadou, want of him.

J: And then, of course, Kadou is gradually, very, very, very slow burn, falling in love with Evemer. And I think we notice Evemer falling in love with Kadou before Evemer ever actually twigs to it.

A: So I've said this to you in person before. Evemer gives me very strong Spock vibes. He's so, like, straight-backed, and he knows all the rules, and he follows all of the rules, and he just cannot understand why other people don't do that. And so he gives me just, like, slightly neurodivergent vibes where, like, these are the rules, why aren't you following the rules? Like, this is how society is functioning, and if it doesn't function like that, I don't quite understand what's going on. Also, he plays chess, which is partially why I think of Spock a lot when I read him. But he's great. I love him.

J: I love that he uses chess as his main way to understand the workings of Kadou's mind. So, like, in the beginning, when he's first meeting Kadou, first getting used to him as his charge, he presses Kadou for games all the time when he's coherent, when he's struggling to stay awake, no matter what his frame of mind is, because Evemer is learning how he thinks in those different states by playing chess with him, which is, of course, a very, very Evemer thing to do.

A: It really is. So, yeah, it doesn't, like, shock me that it just didn't occur to him that he was falling in love with Kadou until he's just like, oh, oh, no.

J: Well, in Evemer's defense, he very much comes across as demisexual because it mentions in the book very clearly he only had one somewhat relationship other than Kadou, and it was very short-lived. It was because he really liked that person's spirit. He liked the person's mind. And then with Kadou, there's all of that combination of fealty and feelings where the author, I'd mentioned, like, he had wanted to write a book about courtly love, and that's very much what it is, because Kadou has this responsibility to Evemer as his knight or as the person who's serving him, but Evemer is ready pretty much to risk it all, including his life, if needed for Kadou.

A: That was such an interesting element of it to me because, like, it works so well for romance, just, like, complete fealty to someone. Functionally, realistically, it doesn't always feel like it's an even playing field for both people involved, and I think this book did a really good job of making sure that, like, Kadou was conscious of the fact that he is always in a position where it could be perceived as taking advantage of somebody, and his anxiety makes it so much worse, but Evemer makes it very clear that he's going to do what he wants to do, and if he doesn't want to do it, he will not be there. So I think that was handled very well for a dynamic that could be a power imbalance, but, boy, does it work for a romance. There were a couple of scenes that I just... There's the one scene where, like, after they're not sure about some of the guard, Kadou's like, "I know how to check if Evemer's loyal to me." And it's like, cut off your hand, and Evemer's like, okay. That was just a... it was a good scene. My description of it is very silly, but it was a good scene. It made me feel a lot of things.

J: I was going to say, another good scene is... Do you remember what preceded it? When Kadou goes and, like, they end up washing each other's hair in the baths?

A: Yes! I do remember that, because I was, like, 250 pages in, and I was like, oh, my gosh, finally they're addressing something. Oh, my gosh. I don't usually read slow burns, because I'm a very impatient person, and this is a very long book. So they finally had, like, a kind of moment, and it was in the baths, which is a lot, yeah. Zero to six... well, not 60. They didn't get to 60 for a hot minute, but...

J: Zero to 15.

A: Zero to 15. It was very tender. It was a very nice moment.

J: But yeah, other than washing hair, which sounds very, like, potentially erotic, there was no contact. There was no, like...

A: It was very much about, like, how to trust one another and be vulnerable with one another, and, like, both ways, it seemed like it was really difficult, because Kadou is always concerned that he is taking advantage of these people, even though that is their job, and they are there to do their job and are happy to do it most of the time. Most of his core guards seem, like, very enthusiastic about helping him do what he needs to do, and Evemer is just not used to somebody doing that for him, because Evemer is used to having control of all situations involving Evemer. So it was very interesting to watch both of them confront their hurdles to being vulnerable with another person, and it was done in a very nice and tender way. I liked it a lot, despite my frustration over it being such a slow burn, I did really enjoy it. I loved the world-building. I was extremely gratified when the slow burn finally paid off. I also do think the relationship developed in a more realistic and natural way than it would have otherwise with these type-characters. I don't see Evemer ever rushing into anything, so it was more realistic for them. But I'm glad they finally got there. Despite it being a slow burn, it was still extremely engaging the whole way through, regardless of which part of the story we were talking about. There were a few days where I ran out of time to read it, and the one day I was just on my way home from work just vibrating with how much I wanted to see how things were playing out. So despite being a slow burn, it keeps you engaged the whole time.

J: I feel like I did not mention before how often he's described as exquisitely beautiful.

A: Everyone thinks Kadou is pretty.

J:Everybody! Everybody thinks Kadou is pretty. And then Evemer, of course, greatly appreciates his beauty, and Evemer is described as pretty much being Captain America-esque in form.

A: The one time when they were walking by Tadek, who at this point you don't know if he even likes Evemer or not, I would watch him do his exercises in the rain any day.

J: The book has a really nice balance of humor, political intrigue, slow burn romance. It has a lot. That wraps up our discussion of *A Taste of Gold and Iron* by Alexandra Rowland. We'll see you next time when we discuss *What Moves the Dead* by T. Kingfisher.

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