

The Bloody Judge

There was a peace to killing.

Men pressed him from all sides, crushed together. His own soldiers pushed against his back and to either side. Ahead, the enemy were forced before him by their own sheer numbers. He met them with remorseless savagery, slashing and stabbing, reaching for any inch of unguarded flesh. The black moonsteel edge of his sword glittered in the sunlight. Dark as night and sharp as broken glass, it shattered steel and splintered bone with a hunger all of its own. Spears and swords broke. Armour ripped open like skin beneath a tiger's claw. Entrails spilled across the ground to join the bloody mess of severed heads and arms. His feet slipped and slid beneath him. Sweat stung his eyes. The air stank of iron and death. Blood ran down his blade and over his gauntlets. He could feel it finding its way through the cracks and joints and seams, oozing down his arm underneath the leather and the metal scales. A part of him forgot his name, forgot why he was there, forgot everything and gave itself over to the savage he kept inside, letting it fill up every pore, every hair, every thought. The rest looked on as if looking down on the battle from above, ready to tell the madman when to stop. Yes, there was a peace to killing. He'd always found it so.

A spear glanced off the scales covering his ribs. A bone cracked but he barely felt it; an instant later he split the spearman with a thunderous blow. The pain shot up and down his side with every breath. He screwed up his face and howled. Tasted blood in his mouth as he stepped over the fallen body and sheared an arm from the soldier behind him. Damned sword was a horror of its own. It would cut through anything.

The Tethis soldiers broke and ran. He held his sword high, signalling his men to hold and not to pursue. He was breathing hard, and still each breath came with a wave of pain. Under the sun he

was drenched in sweat. There was a breeze across the battlefield – he could feel it now he had some space in front of him. He wanted to take off his helm and let the wind cool his head, but he didn't. He'd been in too many battles for that.

'Shield line!' he roared. The ground right ahead was churned to mud, littered with spears and shields tossed aside by the fleeing soldiers. Bright sun glinted off discarded helms. He watched the Tethis soldiers go, scattering into the long grass, racing for the line of trees ahead. On another battlefield cavalry would have charged them down and made the slaughter complete, but Queen Gelisya had chosen her field well, edged with hummocks and holes and hidden ditches, and so he made himself be still and watch them go. The savage inside wanted their blood but the savage was always on a leash – always except in the thick of battle.

He looked up and down the line of his men, the shield wall packed hard again. *Berren. My name is Berren. Berren the Bloody Judge. Berren the Crowntaker.* Berren who'd once been a thief-taker's boy. He'd killed a king. Queen Gelisya's father. *Ten years of hell and misery and now I will end it.* He still tasted salt and iron. Blood. His or someone else's? He didn't know and he didn't care. His men raised their swords and their spears and banged them together and roared. One tight line of them. A wall of shields and deadly steel.

'On!' He lowered the moonsteel sword, pointed to the trees and snarled at the pain from his side. His hands felt sticky inside his gauntlets. A steady march. No reckless charge at the wood. If there was a trap then he'd not fall into it. They'd come at the enemy one last time, if there were any of them left. He'd smash them before the Dark Queen could rally. Ten years and she'd cost him every drop of blood she could take from him, her and her vicious coven. Their feud had defined them both.

A knot of the enemy emerged from the trees, half a dozen swordsmen packed tight. They ran straight at him, one mad suicidal charge. Pressed around by his own men in the wall of shields he had nowhere to go. He bared his teeth. The men either side of him readied their steel, and then Berren saw the seventh man, hidden between the screaming swords, and a flood of rage swept through him. A man in the colour of death – grey robes, grey cowl

– and at the sight bloodlust clamped his head in a vice and roared, all else forgotten. As the swordsmen reached him, crazy-eyed and wild, he bashed and battered their swings aside with his shield. The men either side of him lunged and slashed. One of the swordsmen barged into him, staggering him back, but the press kept him on his feet and he drove the moonsteel blade straight through the man’s mail and into his heart. Blood sprayed over him as he snapped the sword away and the man fell, already dead. Another struck at him but his armour took the blow and turned it aside, and then the grey sorcerer was in front of him and it was the easiest thing in the world to drive his moonsteel through the heavy robes, through flesh and blood and bone until the point emerged from the man’s spine and only its hilt stopped Berren’s hand from reaching inside to pull out the warlock’s entrails. The surviving swordsmen turned and ran, four of them still on their feet. Madness.

‘For Talon and Syannis!’ he hissed. Vicious triumph coursed through him, blood pumping hard and full of victory. He stared at the warlock, at the pale pasty skin of the sorcerer’s face, the lines, the wrinkles, the sheen of sweat, the tattooed sigils, the dark flecks of blood, the dying gleam in the eyes, then snapped back his sword. ‘One less of you.’

The warlock’s lips drew back. ‘For Saffran,’ he whispered. The sorcerer’s hand emerged from the sleeve of his robe and pressed a strip of paper covered in sigils to Berren’s breastplate. Berren lurched back but there was nowhere to go in the crush. With a finger from his other hand, the warlock slashed one last bloody mark onto the paper.

Berren reached for the warlock and grabbed him. ‘What have you done? What is this?’

The warlock was laughing. Blood ran out of his mouth and down his robes. He clutched at himself and clawed handfuls of it and threw it at Berren’s face, then crumpled and fell, lips drawn back across his teeth, grinning blankly at the clear blue sky. Berren felt dizzy. For a moment his vision blurred.

Madness? They’d come at him to do this. They’d been ready to die. The warlock had given his life.

The sigil clung to him, fluttering in the wind. Cold fear spread across his skin. He tore at the strip of paper with his gauntlet but

the metal fingers were too clumsy. It seemed stuck. He plucked at the strip of paper again but it wouldn't come free. Stuck fast. His heart was pounding now, harder even than in the thick of the battle. Sweat ran into his eyes. He tore off his helm and lifted his sword. 'Stop! Stop!' Then the sword fell out of hands. He was shaking so badly he could barely stand any more. He threw off his gauntlet and tore at the paper with his fingers, but when they touched it they tingled and went numb. The numbness spread up his arm. He pawed at the thick leather straps of his breastplate but his fingers had lost all feeling. They seemed to belong to someone else.

His friend Tallis One-Eye beside him him threw down his sword and shield and grabbed at the paper too but it slipped through his grasp.

'Get it off me! Get it off me!'

Tallis gripped Berren's shoulder. Threw off his own gauntlet.

Berren fell to his knees, gasping shallow panicked gulps of air as though he was dying. The world slowly spun. Tallis's fingers closed over the strip of paper. The spear-pinned and arrow-pricked bodies lying in the grass ahead shimmered into darkness. He could hear the dying warlock's laughter.

The sigils began to tear.

Skyrie ... The name oozed inside his head.

Bellepheros



An Unexpected Departure

Nine months before the Adamantine Palace would burn in the rage and fire of woken dragons, Bellepheros wiped his brow. It took him a few seconds to realise that Queen Shezira's knight-marshal hadn't followed her mistress away. She leaned in to speak quietly in his ear.

'Grand Master Alchemist. A private word, if you please?'

They had their quiet word and she gave him a spherical glass bottle, stoppered and sealed with wax. It fitted nicely into the palm of his hand and, from the way its weight shifted, it was filled with a liquid of exceptional weight. The knight-marshal had no idea what it was, but Bellepheros did. There was nothing curious about what was inside, but what was intriguing was where it had come from and how several such bottles had found their way into the knight-marshal's hands. It was a long journey home, though, and there would be plenty of time to ponder and plenty of comfortable inns and fine wine to help him think. Not that the knight-marshal's bottle would be top of his thoughts. Queen Aliphera's death – *that* was the mystery that needed thinking about. Fallen from the back of her dragon? A tragic accident? Absurd, but he'd been through the whole of Prince Jehal's eyrie with his truth-smoke and questioned everyone he could think of and what had he found? Nothing.

Who profited from the queen's death, then? Her first daughter Zafir would take the crown. Was there something between her and Jehal? Maybe so. The other daughter, Kiam? Her brother Kazalain? But then you didn't have to try too hard to find half a dozen kings and queens and princes who might be quietly joyful at Aliphera's passing.

He left the Veid Palace the next morning. He borrowed a carriage from Prince Jehal – the least the Viper could do for wasting so much of his time – and took a handful of soldiers for an escort

while he was at it because apparently there were bandits on the road to Farakkan. From there, the Pinnacles and the Silver City – Aliphera’s palace and home – were straight on his way back to the Adamantine Palace. It wouldn’t seem odd for him to pass through and stay for a day or two. Maybe there he might find a clue.

He tucked the knight-marshal’s bottle under his seat, carefully packed in straw. The alchemists at Clifftop could find their own way back. They had better things to do than smoke out a murderer. Alchemists had their business with dragons, not with men.

Two days out of Furymouth, in the middle of nowhere, the carriage stopped. He had no idea why; but he was trying to read and it was hard work at the best of times squinting to make out the tiny words – he’d have to have some scribes make copies of books with bigger letters – and so it was a relief to have a pause in the jolting up and down. Going by river would have been so much easier and more pleasant. He’d been ruing his decision to visit the Pinnacles almost ever since he’d left, but it needed to be done.

He heard a shout from outside. Alarm. Then several screams and cries of terror. Then silence. He sat very still, exactly as he’d been a moment before with the same words right before him but now they blurred as his eyes glazed. He listened, hardly daring to breathe. Not a sound.

The carriage swayed slightly in a gentle gust of wind and then the door burst open. An odd-looking man stood outside. He was small and his skin was dark from the sun. His hair was black and slick and he was panting and sweating. Strangest of all, though, was the black robe edged in woven strands of red and blue and white. It struck Bellepheros as more suited to a palace or a temple than to robbery on the road.

‘Out, you!’ he snapped. He had an odd lilt to his voice.

Bellepheros snapped his book shut. ‘Who in the name of the Flame are you?’ Indignation scoured a frown across his face. Then he saw past the man to the body on the ground outside. His heart skipped a beat and started to race. ‘What do you want?’

The man reached in and grabbed him by the wrist and pulled. He was strong and Bellepheros almost fell out of the door on top of him, but the man moved nimbly aside and Bellepheros sprawled out into the road instead. Dry autumn leaves covered the ground,

yellows and reds and browns rustling gently in the breeze. Birds sounded in the trees to either side. The carriage stood still, the horses standing in their harnesses as if nothing had happened. One of them snorted and stamped a hoof. There was no sign of anyone else. Every bit a tranquil autumn morning if it hadn't been for the blood and the dead man at his feet.

'People call me the Picker.' The odd-looking man climbed into the carriage. He rummaged around and came out holding Lady Nastria's bottle and Bellepheros's book. 'That all you got in there?'

Bellepheros sat up. Around the carriage Prince Jehal's soldiers were lying in the leaves, every one of them. They weren't moving. Bellepheros stared at them. 'Are they dead?' he whispered, his mouth suddenly dry.

'Yes. Shame for them. Wrong place to be.' The Picker climbed onto the carriage and hauled Bellepheros's chest off the roof. 'You really need all this? Can you do without it?' He went over to the horses and set about freeing them from their harnesses. Bellepheros rose shakily. He looked up and down the road. He had no idea where they were. No idea how far it was to the next town or village or what chance there was of someone else coming along.

'Are you a bandit?' *One man?* Bellepheros crouched beside the closest of the bodies. Expertly killed. One slash across the neck. Blood everywhere, pooling about. The leaves were sticking to it. This one hadn't even drawn his sword before he'd died. Bellepheros peered into the sun-dappled shadows between the trees. Jehal's soldiers were spread around the carriage, six of them. They hadn't had time to close up. It had happened with murderous speed. There had to be more than just the one man. 'Where are the rest of you?' He had a knife of his own, as every alchemist did. A little thing. He slipped it out of his belt and cut a little slash into his palm.

The Picker nodded at the bodies. 'I done that. Indeed. Just me.' He finished with the horses and led them alongside the carriage. Then he picked up the bottle and tossed it at Bellepheros.

Bellepheros caught it and backed away. 'That? *That's* what this is about?'

'That?' The Picker frowned and shook his head. 'Stupid, is you? Can't be leaving it lying about is all.'

'Do you know who I am?'

The Picker started trying to lift Bellepheros's chest onto the back of one of the horses, but it was too heavy. He set it down again and put his hands on his hips and frowned. 'Friends I got about the place, they sell what's in that bottle to who wants it. You and I knows what for but they just sells to whoever asks. I has a question, though. What's wrong with boats?'

'What?' His wits were coming back to him. 'Listen, whoever you are. I see you know how to kill men, but I am an alchemist. I don't want to hurt you but I will if I have to. Harness those horses back to my carriage, please, and then I suggest you go away before anyone else comes along this road.' He squeezed his fist. His blood oozed over his wrist.

The Picker snorted. 'I knows exactly who you is. Bellepheros. Grand master alchemist of all the nine realms. Important fellow, right enough.' He glanced around at the bodies lying in the leaves. 'Didn't expect I'd get to you quite so simply, mind. You coming with me easy or shall we make it hard?'

One man and he'd killed half a dozen armoured soldiers of Furymouth without so much as a scratch. Bellepheros peered at the Picker. He had pale skin, but if you looked past that, if you closed your eyes and listened to the way he put his words together, he clearly came from across the sea. 'You're a Taiytakei.'

The Picker laughed. 'Does I look like one?' Then he frowned and kicked Bellepheros's chest in frustration. 'Going to have to come back for that. You really need it all?'

'Your skin makes you one of us. But you speak like one of them.'

The silence after that was an awkward one. The Picker didn't move. He looked Bellepheros up and down. 'Asked you,' he said, after the silence had become as brittle as glass, 'what's wrong with boats? Don't like them, is that it? Make you sick-like? Seems a right- and proper-thinking fellow like yourself, heading home from Furymouth to the City of Dragons, he'd get a boat. Plenty enough of them, after all. That's if he's not going on dragonback. All sorts of difficult *that* would have been. Could have done a boat without this mess though.' He gestured at the dead soldiers. 'Man has a talent for something, doesn't mean he always wants to use it.'

Taiytakei. They knew who he was. Not some bandit, then. Bellepheros looked at his hands. They were shaking. He walked

slowly to the chest, to where the Picker stood.

The Picker scratched his head. 'Where's a good place to put this, nice and out of the way?'

Bellepheros wanted to say he was sorry for what he was about to do but that felt ridiculous. He drew back his fist and then flicked his hand sharply, flinging droplets of blood straight at the Picker's face.

The Picker vanished. Disappeared with a small pop of air. The drops of blood splattered over the side of the carriage. The painted wood fizzed and pitted and burst into flames that slowly sputtered and died.

'Waste of time, that.' The Picker was a dozen paces behind him, breathing hard as though he'd just run up the entire stair of the Tower of Air. A sheen of fresh sweat began to bloom across his skin. 'Waste of time to run too.'

'I know what you are!'

'Makes the two of us then.' The Picker held up whatever was in his hand. As it caught the sun, Bellepheros saw it was a short sword with a blade so fine and thin that it was invisible save for the blood that still dripped from its hilt and where its edge sparkled as it cut the light. 'Look at you. Full of books and learning. Doesn't surprise me that you know.' He turned his sword over in his hand, looking at it.

'Blades so thin the sun shines through them.'

The Picker nodded. 'So they cast no shadow, you see.' The Picker wiped the blood from his invisible blade and sheathed it again. Bellepheros tried to think what he could say. What else he could do. No point in asking what the man wanted – *that* was obvious now. Him. They wanted him. The Taiytakei wanted an alchemist. Beg for mercy?

He looked up and down the road, as if looking might make a hundred armed riders suddenly appear, riding to the rescue. But no. The only movements were the little swirls of sun-dappled leaves caught in tiny whirls in the breeze.

'You know what's next, right? Clever fellow like you. Want another moment to think it all out? There's no one coming on this road for an hour each way. Likely more. Checked I did, before I came. No rush.'

Bellepheros was quivering all over now. ‘So you’re just going to take me back to Furymouth, is that it?’

‘Stick you on a ship and sail you away.’

He still had his little knife in his hand. Now he held it to his own throat. ‘I won’t let you.’ Standing there ready to cut his own throat, and still he had a head full of questions clamouring to be asked, the sort of questions an alchemist learned to have about everything. *How do you work? Where do you come from? What do you do? How do I make you useful? What happens when we die?* The last always a good one after a bottle of fine wine. Maybe now he’d find out. He was an alchemist, after all, so he knew exactly where to cut, and it struck him as he stood there that the questions were more powerful than the fear, that for him it had always been that way. Dying wouldn’t trouble him that much at all. ‘You can really turn into air, water, earth, as and when you wish?’ He shook his head. ‘Just ... whenever you want?’

‘Fire too.’ The Picker took a deep breath and cocked his head. He walked a little closer and picked up a sack, gestured at the knife. ‘Think that will work? I knows a blood-mage. Worse than you, maybe. And say you’s quick enough to cut before I stops you. I just find another. More men die. Got a good name for me to go looking for?’

Bellepheros hesitated. His hands were shaking. Trying to think it through. Trying not to be afraid because why, what was there to fear? And yet fear had him tight now.

The Picker took another step. ‘Why’s it so hard here, what I do?’ He wrinkled his nose at the dead men. ‘Right you was, about where I’s from. Mostly. But where I learned, it was easy. Easy like talking. Could do it all day long. Here it’s like tar. Took years to get used to it. Still knocks the wind out of me doing so much at once.’ He held out the sack. ‘You need to be putting that knife down now and putting this over your head.’

‘Dragons.’ Bellepheros shook his head. ‘You think taking me will somehow bring you dragons?’

‘That’s what it is, Mister Grand Master Alchemist of the Order of the Scales. Dragons. Always was, always will be.’

Bellepheros shook his head. ‘No.’

‘Going to make this difficult, are you?’ The Picker looked

down at the sack. ‘Suit yourself.’ He turned his back and started to walk away and then vanished in a swirl of fallen leaves, and at the same time Bellepheros felt a hand on his arm, yanking the knife away from his neck and then a blinding pain under his ear where his jaw met his skull. The knife fell from his fingers. He gasped and whimpered and staggered forward. It hurt so much that he couldn’t see, couldn’t even think any more.

The Picker scooped up the sack and threw it over the alchemist’s head. Bellepheros fell to his knees. The Picker hauled him back to his feet. ‘And there’s another thing. That spear. Easy one for a fellow like me, you’d think. But no. Can’t shift that at all, not one little bit. Why?’

Bellepheros still had blood on his hand, blood that could burn or bend wills. He flailed at the Picker through the haze of pain. The Picker caught his arm and bent it behind his back, forcing him to the ground again, knees digging into him, pressing his face to the earth. He could barely breathe. On his back, the Picker was making soothing hushing sounds as a rope slipped around Bellepheros’s neck and drew tight.

‘Peaceful here, isn’t it? Don’t you worry, I’s not going to kill you. Just needs you quiet a bit.’

The rope drew tight. Bellepheros writhed but the Picker had him fast. He choked. Gaspd. His lungs heaved but the rope was tight around his throat. A dark sea roared over his thoughts and drowned them. He felt the warmth of the sun on his hand and the dry autumn leaves crack between his clenched fingers. He heard the distant singing of the birds. And then nothing.