

The Bloodbeard Chronicles, Volume Two

Vagaries and Violence: Part 1

He wandered through the noisy cobblestone streets of the Trade District bazaars, and the hush, shaded alleyways of the Silk District. He drifted through the city without determination or reason, not hearing the bragging merchants, or the bought-and-sold ladies who entertained desperate men in second-story brothels. He walked through a sea of perplexing humanity and absently wondered where he might be going. He didn't know. Perhaps he did not care. He was too far away to care. He was in a buried, forsaken temple far to the east...

The beast was wholly unrelenting, cracking with some primal and furious glee in the act of consuming living tissue. Bren was knocked from his feet when the gargantuan elemental struck the spiral staircase, and his head collided with an armor-clad arm of one of the panicked trulks. The heat was unnaturally intense. It destroyed the air in his lungs and ignited his clothes in the shortest of instants. His vision blurred...so, so hot...he was burning...the world fell away quicker than he wanted it to...

Temmon, the Second-Half City, was a city grown from squalor and strife. What was once a place where poverty was inescapable, where beggars, whores, and orphans were commonfolk, was now a mighty city of underkings and their tiny kingdoms. Forty years ago, Temmon was the poor district of the great royal capitol of Carthasai. It rose from the dirt by the hands of thieves guilds and seedy merchants, becoming an empire to rival the splendor of its sister city, just across the Temmon River. Common criminals had done the impossible in building something from nothing, and not destroying each other in the process, much to the chagrin of Carthasai officials.

Brennek let himself get lost in a city he had never been to in an attempt to numb the ever-sunken feeling in his gut, or the troubling thoughts of his mind. The previous weeks had been the most difficult of his life, and he carried the demons of frustration and confusion with him since. His escape from city labor six years ago had brought the excitement and fear of exploring a growing and dangerous world, and he had started to build a life of discovery. He risked his life often, but he had been struck deeply by the events at the ziggurat and the Festival. They had left Brennek with an unfamiliar weight on his shoulders. His mind wandered away from him.

He awoke with a snap of consciousness and rolled up onto his knees. The fire was gone. The titanic beast was raging about the room, screaming with a ferocity that only the embodiment of flame could muster. His companions were no where to be seen. He remembered...a bleary sight of someone running past him...that horrible fire...everyone disappeared in a crackle of blue sparks. Did he make that up? No. Why did...

They left him. They...left?

How long had he been unconscious? Brennek's mind began to sort through the possibilities, but they were banished with another overwhelming burst of flame. The elemental swiped at the stairs with its fiery arms, hoping to consume anything other than charred and melted bits of clothing that had fallen off the unfortunate groups of adventures before they vanished.

Brennek shouted and flailed about helplessly, then stumbled over the stone railing...

Bren's hand found the gentle pressure of a swinging tavern door without much hesitation. He didn't even know where he was, after all, and taverns don't seem to change from place to place. Indeed, the tavern looked unsurprisingly familiar. People who drink, people who talk, people who talk loudly, people who pour drinks for other people, people who don't want attention. There. All was right with the world.

No. That was a lie. *I see what I can't see.*

Brennek couldn't recall what the tavern was named. Something Dwarvish. A few of the stone folk sat at various tables or on various barstools. The place would likely grow exponentially more crowded in a few hours. The human bartender towered before his counter and patrons. The floor might have been elevated behind the bar, or the man could've had unusually long legs. Bren bet on the former. The waitress, Dilly, whose name was barked out just then by some eager customer, was a fair Dwarven lass with a huge braid of bright yellow hair dangling to her waist. She smiled at Bren and waved her hand out to the idle room, offering him a pick of seats before drifting off to the bar. His gaze followed her curiously until she disappeared into a back room. He sat at a corner table, back to the wall.

The sight was familiar, but no less distant. Brennek didn't associate with others. He didn't speak much, or care about the same things, or do things for the same reasons. His feeble understanding of active society and culture made him a stranger - even among his own race. Until a few weeks ago, he would have been entirely unbothered by that thought. Bren was Bren was Bren, who did things because they made sense and for nothing else except some quiet sense of justice that he enjoyed. Bren enjoyed helping people with uninhibited actions. That made sense, at least.

There were those that stole. Some for greed and selfishness, others out of necessity. Stealing made sense. Though, stealing for greed sometimes gets you beheaded in front of a very large crowd of people.

Some people kill other people, either for money, or pleasure, or delusion. Others kill for necessity, to survive. There it is again. *Necessity*. Killing made sense. Killing innocents did not make sense.

Eight months ago, in some far away hunting village, Brennek had killed four men and viciously injured two others for attempting to assault three defenseless workers of the local alehouse. He saved the lives of the two girls and the old bartender. That made sense. It was *necessary*.

Why did some people do such terrible things? Why are so many left to suffer? Brennek always had a strong sense of right and wrong. Rarely though, had he truly thought about what was unfair or unjust.

Two weeks ago, Brennek had been violently betrayed by someone he trusted.

A week later, someone else had decided that he should be left alone to die in the hellish fury of the Terror Lord's temple.

That didn't make sense. Did it? Maybe they-

"Are ya daft? Is that it?" The kindly sweet voice brought Brennek's distant stare to Dilly's pleasant smile at his right. How long had she been there? Had she spoken to him? A moment far too long after hearing her voice, he thought of his most accessible dagger. What if she were a drunk looking for a fight, or a territorial street urchin? He was out of it. Too slow.

She had bright brown eyes that were almost yellow in the waning sunlight drifting through the window to his left. Her apron had some kind of faded stain on it. A grey-bearded dwarf passed behind her and sat.

"I'll, uh..." The weight in his stomach deepened. He grunted, trying again.

"Honey mead, please."

Dilly only smiled and nodded, then left for another table of a Dwarven couple. Brennek let out a sigh of anxiety, and ran his hand over the surface of the table, which was made of some kind of hard redwood. He grasped the edge of the table and

squeezed. The resilient material didn't give to his grip. He frowned.

His thoughts whirled as he stood with a fearlessness he had never known before. No, he was scared. The bent, black metal crown atop his head negated that fear. Crown of lies. That made Brennek angry.

Angry?

A brief moment of confusion at suffering the unfamiliar emotion, then all was fiery chaos.

Every part of him burned, and he had no other choice but to fight. He swung wildly, but with a mind of his foe. He didn't -need- to hit any particular part of the otherworldly creature, as he was entirely engulfed in it. The slender knife in his right hand flared with white witch-light, and the curved dagger in his left pulsed with a green that was barely visible in the hellish onslaught; their enchanted blades biting at the magical ties that bound the elemental to the Material plane. The elemental thrashed and raged and burned and screamed. Brennek lashed at the beast with little left to lose, roaring in swiftly dwindling defiance. He waited to die.

The mead, like Dilly's smile, was refreshingly sweet, as if nothing in all the world were wrong. They paid no testament to worries or pain or strife. Brennek liked mead, but today his stomach could not handle it.

Setting the mug down respectfully, he absently noticed two things. The first was that Dilly had a long, jagged scar running along the back of her left calf, and that it was too rough for a blade slice. He assessed it might have been some kind of tear, maybe from a shard of glass. Brennek knew about bodies and the wounds that could go on them.

The second was that the Dwarven fellow two tables away kept looking at him. After a moment, Brennek's neutral stare finally made the grey-haired dwarf stand and approach him.

He studied the fellow with habitual eye: how he moved, what muscles did what moving, what he looked at, how long, how quickly, how much, how little. Bren found an easy profession in the anatomy of living things. Bodies were the basest and easiest of truths - so much simpler than minds - and he could read them in and out. Bren imagined the older dwarf without clothes, then without skin, then without muscles, then as a skeleton without organs, then reversed the process. It was a curiosity and hobby for Bren. It was one of the things that made him so enormously dangerous.

The distracted daggerman was wondering about the dwarf's weakened hip and knee joints (probably worn through by years of squatting or kneeling), when the elder took a seat directly across from him. He raised a finger to Dilly, who nodded knowingly and went to fetch more drinks.

"Name's Cordo, son," he introduced lowly, "Cordo Stoneknuckle." He leaned across the table and gave Brennek a serious look, who nodded and sipped his mead, only to immediately set it back down. This must be important.

"Ye don't know me, but I know ye. I'm one o' the diggers o' the Delver's Guild tha' went with ye and Duke Cragarr's group to the Terror King's temple." The dwarf shifted in his seat.

"Now, I wasn't on one o' the teams tha' went in after ye, son, but I read them reports Smiley and tha' faerie wrote. Some o' our digger boys wanna know how ye got yerself outta that pit alive."

After the heat had taken everything Brennek had, he suddenly wasn't burning anymore. The great beast roared in protest and exploded into bits of raining fire, then all was silent save for the last dying crackles of suffocating flame.

He could finally release the daggers from his grip, and they fell to the floor with a clang. Their hilts were scalding hot. His heart pounded and his head ached with pain and anger. He examined himself and his equipment. Most of his hair remained, though his beard was burned off nearly to his face. Not that Brennek minded. Hair is just hair.

His armor was more or less unharmed, but his clothes were in tatters. Bren's backpack was charred and smoldering, with a large hole in its side where a leather-clad flask of oil had exploded from the terrible heat, causing a burn across the side of his torso. The iron pry bar formerly attached to the pack lay on the floor a short distance away, glowing red. One of his belt pouches felt hard as a rock and couldn't be opened, its contents melted to glass. A few of his daggers would have to be replaced. Some of them no longer had handles, or were stuck firmly into their melted sheathes, or were missing entirely. The magic of his armor alone had saved him from turning to ash. That made him frown.

He wasn't capable of saving his own life.

After several long, peaceful moments of just sitting, a hole opened in the floor far to Bren's right. He considered leaving then and there. What was the point of continuing? Were his companions still alive? He wasn't sure if he cared or not. Another lie - he would miss Gimble.

Cordo gave Brennek a hard stare. The younger dwarf looked back, then at the mug on the table, and had no answer for him. Cordo seemed to accept that. Dilly set down the elder dwarf's mug, which was drained quickly. He smiled and tipped Dilly with a shiny blue coin. "Well, no matter," he said lowly, "Stones be kind to ye, Bloodbeard. This city is too much fer some newcomers to handle," and then he left.

Brennek sat thoughtfully, broodingly occupying the corner near the door. He watched as the night awoke and poured through the bar, slowly embracing a soft, cold sense of comfort that sunlight never had for him. He left before the drunks got too rowdy. He didn't want there to be trouble.

Bren found himself wandering the streets once more, a little more weightless. He found it easier to move through the crowd, for Temmon was bustling with people no matter the time of day. Every step he took through the dark streets stilled his mind a little more, bringing him calm. There was a simplicity in the night that he could walk through without hesitation or fear from all things, external or internal. The dark was a canvas for *his* designs. No one else's.

He swayed through the crowd and disappeared down alleyways. He even found an opportune route to the stone roof tops above and crossed over several winding avenues, halving the time it would have taken to get there by walking.

When he found the streets again, he'd emerged from an alley into a large, well-lit square, where the entertainment and merchandise of the night was different from that of the day. Temmon was the city of criminals, a dark reflection of the shining city across its river, and it showed in the night.

The square was large, easily a hundred paces across. Merchant tents had sprouted up sometime just before dark and filled nearly the entire plaza, save for its center. At the center stood a large metal fountain comprised of four large stone blocks, each smaller than the one below it, making a crude pyramid. Water flowed from the highest block and down over the others, where it gathered in the large pool below.

All around the fountain, the night performers earned their living through the strange and the macabre, juggling knives, reciting dark poems, displaying frightening and exotic creatures in cages, or performing gruesomely fascinating acts of sword-swallowing, flesh piercing, or pain endurance. Some watched with great interest, others walked by nervously. Brennek took it all in.

The night spoke truth with more clarity than the day ever can.

Bren was nearing the end of the plaza when his attention was sharply brought to a mean-looking dwarf he had just bumped into, whose eyes flashed with offense and violence.

“Watch where yer goin’, No-Beard, else I’ll rip yer damned teeth outa yer head!” the dwarf roared. Brennek saw that behind the angry dwarf, a gang of several, equally mean-looking thugs were rising from their seats on an overturned wagon.

Brennek felt the adrenaline trickle into his veins and he knew that his night of peace was at an end. He nodded the most visibly sincere apology he could manage and turned to walk away from the wild, yellow-maned thug.

“Me and me boys are lookin’ for a tussle, ye damned fool,” the dwarf spat, and shoved Brennek hard. But Bren was already falling forward before the push ever touched him, and he easily tumbled forward and agilely came back up to his feet, now facing the thugs with resignation on his face and a blade in his hand.

The night offered more challenges than day ever could.

To be continued...