

# THE BLACK TRILLIUM SIMON MCNEIL

SOMETIMES, WHEN THE WALLS of the ancient city press around too much and I feel a yearning for the open spaces, I like to climb up to the highest tower I can find and just sit with my feet dangling over the edge, watching everything below me. The sky seems bluer than it does on the ground, almost as blue as it does in the lands of the red-brown dust that were my home.

I miss home but I can never go back. There is no home to go back to, not anymore. It's all dust, bones and broken dreams now. No crops grow in the lands of endless dust. The rivers are dry. All they produce is refugees and lots of refugees end up in Trana. I don't have to like it. I don't like it. The buildings make the places all too narrow.

When I tell people I hate the tall buildings they look at me strangely. They ask me, "Didn't I see you sitting on the edge of the 390 building just the other day?" I just smile and explain that it's OK being at the top of the buildings. I don't mind it when there is just the sky above and the streets below. I'm not afraid of high places even though I come from the flattest land. It is the narrow places I don't like, the tunnels and the streets.

It's better in the districts a bit farther out from the center. Kensington is nice, though too crowded, the same with Queeneast. I like Blasted Port; it's nothing but open spaces. The problem with Blasted Port is that it's not a good place for a girl to be all on her own with no family. I'd almost rather be out there anyway. The bandits are mostly in it for a profit, and there's no profit in harassing a girl with nothing but the clothes on her back.

I guess if it wasn't for Boyd I'd probably have left Broken Tower by now, would have left behind the skeletons of buildings with their ribbed rebar showing through the crumbling concrete.

But at least I felt like I had a place in Boyd's court, even if it was as unstable as the ancient towers.

I crossed Confederation all on my own. I had to stick a man with a knife once when he tried to force himself on me. These city people all think desert girls are easy prey; we're loose girls they say, we're asking for it. They learn fast that trying to force a desert girl is asking for it. I was hunting scorpions for food while most of the two-penny bandits in Trana

were still playing games in their parents' yards.

Boyd respected that. He came from out west too, even farther off, in the lands beyond the mountains and I've always suspected that he thought the same of city folk that I did. Too soft, too weak, too coddled.

Boyd calls me the Scorpion Girl and leaves me right the fuck alone except for when I come to his court. I'm welcome there. He sees to it that I have food if I'm hungry, somewhere to sleep when it's cold. He never tried to force himself on me or nothing either. We have an understanding, a mutual respect, and if somebody needs watching, he knows I'm good at sneaky.

I thought about Boyd, about being a sneaky refugee girl, dependent on his patronage to make my way while the chill of early winter bit into my bones. I hugged a ragged old hide coat closer and hunched my shoulders against the cold.

"LePine's up to something, follow him," Boyd told me the last time I saw him.

He had a good point. LePine, the Under God-damned high minister of Confederation in Trana, was up to something. Boyd was sure of it and if I had read the signs correctly he was probably right. It all came down to Bart MacMillan and his fucking wars. The king of Confederation. It had been his damn wars that drove me to Trana in the first place—they drove the 'Tobans west and the 'Tobans figured they'd return the favour, pushed my people into the Great Desert. And then I'd ended up here, far from home.

Now MacMillan had his eyes on the Southlands and Boyd was sure that LePine wanted to involve Trana. Like it or not, Broken Tower was the closest thing I had to a home. I was damned if I was going to sit idly by doing nothing while Confederation drove me out of this one too.

I was sitting in my favourite spot, looking north at the boundary between Broken Tower and downtown, wrapped in my thoughts as tightly as my winter clothes, when I heard a scrabbling behind me. Nobody ever came up high like this. The scavengers stayed away because they couldn't tear any more rebar out of the walls without risking pulling the ceilings down on their own heads. The smiths and the merchants never had cause to come up this high and nobody bothered living up at the tops of the towers; at least, nobody sane.

Nobody sane except me, that is. I don't think I'm insane after all. I turned to look and said, "Hello, is there anybody there?"

The response I heard couldn't really come from a human throat. The best I could describe it would be as a nasty chuckle, a noise full of mirth and viciousness, a clicking sound that promised pain. I reached into my jerkin and found my knife there. A girl had to be ready for trouble.

"Come out where I can see you," I said and I tried really hard to sound bored, like I wasn't impressed by Mr. Crazy-laugh in the shadows at all. I was scared sick.

Just another one of those clicking little chuckles answered me.

"I don't want to have to go looking for you," I said and I wasn't lying at all.

In the gloom of the building behind me I saw somebody, some thing, moving. It was shaped like a man, naked and hunched over, almost crawling. I knew what that meant.

Trana didn't have the Broken, not like Edmonton did or some of the other towns that

survived in the desert. This one had probably slunk here from Cleveland. I couldn't think of any closer nests. I hated and feared the Broken the same as everybody. They were cannibals, freaks; twisted and deformed into something less than human by whatever had been done to them, whatever they had done.

They also rarely travelled alone. I was trapped and facing an unknown number of horrible enemies.

There was no need for pretence any longer. You can't reason with one of the Broken and you can never scare one into submission. I drew my knife and prepared to show them why I was called the Scorpion Girl.

I bit back my fear and tightened my grip on my knife. My hands were shaking so hard I balled them up into fists. My legs felt soft as porridge, quivering from fear, ready to flee. Later, somebody I cared about told me that that shaking feeling was caused by adrenaline. In a fight adrenaline might save your life but it's just as likely to get you killed. The trick is to control it, to let the fear and the anger and the rush of blood throbbing in your ears all ball up into a white-hot knot of speed and focus.

Over the singing of the blood in my ears I could still hear the insect-like clicking of the Broken. I could see it moving in the darkness. The Broken weren't graceful beasts. They could hide in shadow, lurk and surprise, but it wasn't their strength. The strength of the Broken was in savagery.

I took a small step forward. I had to be aggressive. The Broken used fear well. There was something about them that spoke to a primal human terror. They were us at our worst, stripped of reason, compassion and sanity so entirely that they were lower than beasts.

Against them, fear was a weakness. They would exploit that fear, turn it into a weapon that would kill me as surely as their teeth.

In the darkness the thing lurked. I saw a flash of bright green eyes and I knew it would pounce soon. I readied myself to stab the moment it pounced. It stayed in the shadows. I took another step forward. Still it waited. Why was it waiting? What was it waiting for? I checked my lines of sight as much as I could with my peripheral vision. I couldn't take my eyes away from the Broken I'd seen but I'd hate to walk into a trap.

The fear threatened to choke me. I could hardly breathe.

The Broken leapt. It was no better in sunlight than it had been in shadows. Its skin was cracked and oozing. It had scaly growths and claws for hands. Its eyes glowed ever so slightly, a sickening green like algae on a dirty pond. It—he—was naked and aroused by the violence.

I stabbed out with my knife, "fast as a scorpion," I hissed to myself. And of course a scorpion sting has its venom. I couldn't generally get scorpion venom, not this far east, away from the desert. So I coated my knife in rattlesnake venom. The snakes around Trana weren't as venomous as the ones in the dry land, but the venom would still make whoever felt its sting sick. The little knife bit the Broken in his throat. Hot blood sprayed onto my arm, across my face. My nostrils were full of the stink of the beast.

He didn't die immediately. Instead he thrashed, pinned to my knife. I hadn't needed the snake's venom, the blow was fatal. It just took the Broken a moment to realize it.

The Broken's thrashing was no weaker for the wound in his throat. He lashed out again and again and it was all I could do to hold onto my knife. I tried to pull it back but a glancing blow threw me from my feet as I did. I landed unceremoniously as the stricken creature staggered about, clutching at his throat. By happy chance my knife was still in my hand.

I scrambled to my feet and stabbed him again, and again, and again. His clicking turned into weak attempts to scream, the sound frighteningly human as he died but my first thrust had severed his wind pipe and it wasn't loud. Soon he dropped to his knees, his clawed, scaly hands pressed to his throat, trying to hold the blood in. He buckled and his hands fell away as he tried to catch himself before hitting the ground. His palms left a pair of bright scarlet prints on the cracked concrete of the floor. And then he rolled to his side and lay still. As soon as he dropped to his side in an expanding pool of blood I ran for the stairs.

And then I heard the bellows of the rest of the pack.

Thirty-one stories, sixty-two flights of stairs, six hundred and twenty steps: I counted them—it was the only thing that kept me from thinking of the death that awaited and the all-too-human death I'd caused. I had to make it just that far to reach the ground, the street, help. I heard the roars from behind me and before me. I clutched my knife in a white-knuckled grasp and fled downward to freedom.

On the twenty-fifth floor a Broken leapt at me out of the darkness. I didn't see her until it was too late. I would have been a dead girl except that her jump was too powerful.

She threw me against the wall hard enough to knock the wind from my lungs and I felt her hot breath against my face. I squirmed, eyes squeezed shut. I think I screamed. She lost her grip on me and I was free but on the ground below her. I kicked up by instinct, my foot connecting with her scabby gut.

She staggered into the gap at the edge of the stairwell. The years had left the stairs crumbling and unsafe at the best of times. Thrown over the edge, she fell all the way down, occasionally bouncing over an out-cropping of concrete. After the third time that happened she stopped screaming.

I scrambled back to my feet, tears streaming down my cheeks. I wasn't sure whether I was crying from pain, fear or remorse. These things weren't human, they were mindless beasts, driven to feed and to kill and nothing more. It was fear. I was afraid. I cried for myself. These are the stories we tell ourselves. Sometimes we learn to see past them.

With newfound respect for the crumbling edge of the stairs dropping twenty-five stories to my side, I continued my desperate flight. It was dark in the stairs. Farther down the walls were pocked with holes where prospectors had broken through, hunting steel, copper wire, plastic pipe if they were very lucky, but the prospectors didn't like to climb so high even as this.

Twice more as I ran the Broken caught up with me. Twice more my knife flashed and the Broken dropped away screaming and bleeding and the tears stung my eyes worse every time. The stench of blood in my nostrils was making me sick and my head throbbed like a drum with the surge of adrenaline.

I reached the ground level and fled into the street. Despite the cold there were some men

in the street below the 390 building, smiths and founders taking a break from the eternal heat of the forge. When they saw me fleeing from the building I don't know what they must have thought. I'm not large, I must have looked not much more than a girl to them, but I was spattered with blood, held a bloody knife in my hands. Tears ran down my cheeks, washing away the blood in streaks.

"Here now," one of the foundrymen said. "What's happening, why are you covered in blood?" He eyed the knife with the nervous glance of a large man who didn't want to make a bad mistake. Of course, he didn't know what action would, in fact, be a mistake.

I dropped to my knees in a bank of fresh snow, soiling it with the filth from my clothes, and the knife fell from my grasp. A crowd was forming around me. There were questions being asked but I couldn't hear them through the pounding of my head. I retched and was violently ill.

The first thing I heard, the first thing that broke through the din in my head, was the same man saying, "Give her some space, she needs air." I supposed he'd decided the best course was to help. Perhaps he recognized me. I was known to the court. People thought me one of Boyd's pets, an exotic reminder of the harsh climes he hailed from before he came east, into soft lands. I'd scoffed at them because I had my pride but in this moment I didn't care what he thought. He wanted to help, that was enough.

I gulped down the air with shuddering breath. After a few tense moments I croaked, "Water, please."

It was only then that I realised how thirsty I truly was. My legs burned, my throat burned, my entire body was aflame with the after-effects of battle. A canteen was placed in my hands by somebody. I don't know who. I drank. The water was bitterly cold and it was flat and it tasted of snow.

I drank half the flask in a draught even though the cold hurt my mouth and throat and then felt I might be sick again, but I held it down. "There now," the founder said. "Take it easy, take your time, but you'll have to tell us what happened in there."

"The Broken," I said. "Have to warn Boyd." It just sort of popped into my head; I had to warn Boyd, had to let him know that the Broken had come into Broken Tower. He'd know what to do, he'd have a plan. I began to chuckle: the Broken in Broken Tower. It seemed fitting somehow but I realized that this was a mad thought.

Half the crowd disappeared. Some probably to look for the Broken; others, the smarter ones, were probably putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the tower. It's what I would have done.

The foundryman led me to a bench of roughly hewn concrete and set me down. It was under the awnings of a forge and the heat from the metalworks radiated out. The warmth was delicious. I hadn't realized how cold I'd been. He asked me to tell him my story and I did. I told him about the attack on the top floor, how I'd fought past three others to make it to freedom. I told him I didn't know how many more there were.

After a while grim-faced men exited the building carrying the gory remains of my escape. Four corpses, three bearing knife wounds, the fourth so twisted from the fall that it hung as limp as a rag doll from the arms of the man that carried it.

I couldn't look. I didn't want to look at the people I'd killed but I forced myself to anyway. Some part of me wanted to remember what I'd done. In death their corpses were undeniably human, despite the claws and the scales. I didn't know what power had twisted them but in that moment I learned an important lesson. The Broken were human. I'd stabbed a man before, and yes, there had been venom on my knife, but that was a little scuffle; a private matter. This was three bodies cut open with my knife, in the cold sunlight and a score of witnesses, in the city where I lived.

I looked up at the ruin I wrought, needing to confront what I'd done. I was horrified and wanted so much to look away, but I couldn't. I was transfixed.

They laid the four bodies out on the ground. I heard the hushed talk: there were no more in there. That they had been the Broken seemed clear enough. Ordinary people didn't have claws, they didn't have patches of tumorous scales. The green glow had faded from their eyes and they just looked milky and diseased instead.

The men knew I wanted to speak to Boyd, and I'd killed. Even though the creatures I'd killed were Broken, this was a matter for him to decide. I heard the decision being made around me. They would take me to Boyd directly. Not unkindly, the folk around led me to his court.

Boyd held court in the shadow of the skeleton of an ancient dome-shaped building, a meeting hall or music hall of the luminaries of a forgotten age. His high throne overlooked a pit, ringed with entrances to the Long Dark but with trees and a pond providing a hint of nature in the bleakness of his little kingdom.

I remember how the light struck the polished steel of the ancient dome behind the throne, a massive heap made from slabs of concrete and hammered steel, sitting atop a raised platform between the dome and the pit that served as his audience chamber. I remember the ice on the square pond in one corner of the pit, new and thin, still mostly black. Strange how a detail like that can stick in the memory.

I also remember that though his chair was in sunlight Dave Boyd sat in shadow. He was bundled in thick furs but the cold didn't seem to touch him. His long hair was tied back at his brow, cascading down his back but it was unkempt. His beard, normally carefully maintained, was scruffy. His blue eyes were all but lost in the shadow of his heavy brow.

He leaned forward in his seat with his chin resting on one hand. When we arrived at his court, my escorts unsure if they were guarding a prisoner or bringing a scout to speak to their leader on important matters, he barely even twitched.

His mind was far away. I suspected it rested in Fredericton.

"Why do you come here covered in blood, Scorpion Girl?" he asked.

The rush of adrenaline past, the sickness of the gore passed, I felt dirty but I was myself again, I was in control again. I glared back at him fiercely. "I come to tell you that I killed four Broken in your domain."

"Please, this is some sort of awful prank, right?" Boyd said.

"Do you know me to pull pranks?" I asked.

Boyd sighed and said in hushed tones, so quiet I could barely hear, "I need no more enemies at my gate." Louder he asked, "You are sure that they were the Broken?"

I tried to answer but I choked on the words. The sight of four twisted corpses arrayed in a row in the snow flashed before my eyes and I felt my legs go weak. I felt the steady hand of the foundryman on my shoulder, supporting me. I glanced at him and tried to let my eyes give him the thanks that could never pass my lips.

"My lord," he said. "They had all the marks of the Broken, plague marks, deformities. The only way I could be surer would be if they were alive and trying to eat people."

Boyd shifted in his seat, agitated enough that he couldn't maintain regal stillness. "There is that. I see no blame here."

I breathed again, hadn't realized I was holding my breath. I realized Boyd's attention was still fixed on me.

"Court is dismissed for the day," he said, not taking his eyes from mine. "Savannah, attend me. We have a private matter to discuss."

I approached the throne as he stepped down. He led me down into the pit below his throne and under the lee of the entrance to the Long Dark.

"Have you learned anything of LePine?" he asked.

"No. I was working on a plan when the Broken..."

"I understand. But leave the Broken to me, I need you to concentrate on LePine."

I frowned.

"Trust me," Boyd said. And I did.

"Alright," I said. "I guess I'll get started."

© 2015 Simon McNeil

<http://www.brain-lag.com/>