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Bloodsong

Melvin Burgess

Penguin Books Ltd

Extract

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Sigurd

Regin said, 'It's time.' He smacked his lips. An old guy like him, it's all he can talk about. Adventure! And all the time there he is scowling away like it was a problem with the carburettor.

'A monster, Sigurd. A real live un. It's perfect.' He licked his face like it was dipped in gravy.

'I'm too young,' I said.

'Too young!' he scoffed.

'I'm fifteen. Just a boy.'

'Some boy, Sigurd! What about it?' Regin crossed his arms and flopped down. He's a skinny old pig, Regin, but not stiff like most of them. He has a long bendy neck like a dog so he can lie flat on the ground and lift his head up in the air and stare straight at you.

'I'm not going to do anything marvellous, Sig,' he told me. 'I just want to be around watching you do it.' He tipped his head to one side and smiled. 'What's up? Scared of it?' he teased.

'You won't get me into any of your crazy plans like that,' I said.

For a practical person, Regin's very romantic. He crosses every 't' and checks everything twice and makes sure you have enough spare pants packed, but really, he's living in fairyland. Killing dragons! I've got an

adventure in mind, don't doubt me. I'm a Volson. It's what we do. But slaying dragons? Come on!

Look around you, what do you see? Not much, you might think. It's a beautiful place here – sand dunes, sea, the river winding its way down. Alf's a good ruler. My father Sigmund knew what he was doing when he sent my mother and me here when the war broke out.

Sigmund was a great man. He made friends out of enemies, peace out of war. He healed this country. That's what good government does.

Then the foreign planes came and nuked London flat, and my father and all his plans and organisation with it – vaporised the lot. Even the foundations of the buildings in Central London melted, they say. No one lives there any more. Even the dust has blown away. There are trees charred with the heat of the blast as far away as Slough, but the Volson principles are still alive here in Wales. There're children playing and people going about their business, all at peace with each other – at least until the next little tyrant wants this stretch of beach and a few slaves, or until some foreign power decides we're getting above ourselves.

I want everywhere to be like this. That's my adventure. I want to put this land back together. I want the kids to grow up knowing that their kids are going to have more than they had, not less. Glory? Stuff that. War is the only dragon I want to fight.

'It'll make your name,' said Regin. 'They've been trying to finish Fafnir off for years. He's the real thing. It's your chance! You can show everyone what you're made of.'

'There's no such thing as monsters, just people gone wrong,' I said. It's an old pigman proverb, but in this case it's true – Fafnir really was a man gone wrong. He'd changed a lot, but you can always tell where a creature began. He'd grown enormous, given himself all sorts of wired-up senses – infra-red, sonar, radar. He was about the most technologically advanced organism on earth, but he'd been a man once.

It makes you think. Who'd want to do that to themselves?

You know the story. The dragon on Hampstead Heath? Everyone thought it was nonsense until the first dodgy-looking photos began to circulate. That's when Regin went off to investigate. He's a clever old pig, Regin. He came back with proper evidence.

'Grrru. Must be ten metres long,' Regin croaked. 'Armour-coated. Some sort of liquid crystal. Look.'

He dug in his pocket and pulled out – well. It looked like a limp jewel; that's the best I can do to describe Fafnir's scale. It was flat, three-lobed; it glinted and shone like a gem. Colours shot out from somewhere inside it as Regin draped it lightly over his fingers. Later I discovered it did that even in the dark. Maybe it was still alive.

'Diamond won't scratch it, bullets won't pierce it, but it's as flexible as skin.'

'Wow.' That set me off. I wanted to go straight down to the beach and try to shoot holes in it, but Regin wouldn't have it.

'Nah, nah!' he said. 'I need to run some tests on it.' He took the scale back and waved it in the air. It was like tissue paper. If you threw it up in the air, it floated down like a leaf. You could roll it up like leather. That was some piece of engineering.

'This is the secret of beating him,' he snorted. 'Once I find out how to get through his skin, I can make a weapon that'll kill him.'

I laughed at him, but I felt a thrill go through me despite myself. 'It sounds like a lot of danger for not much gain to me,' I said.

'It's not just the glory. It'd be a good deed, Sig! He terrorises the whole area.'

I shrugged. 'There's a lot of suffering nearer home. Why start with him?'

Regin stood up. He shook himself. 'He's got the bullion,' he said and he cocked his head at me with a little smile.

I looked up at him. I wasn't smiling now. 'You know that?'

'Sure as I can be.'

'We better get going then.'

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A nation needs gold. How do you build roads? With gold. How do you build schools and hospitals? With gold. How do you feed and clothe people? How do you get them the good things of life? How do you raise an army? Fight disease? How do you make a people grow? Gold, gold and more gold. That bomb didn't just destroy the centres of business and government. It destroyed our gold reserves as well. We've been living like beggars ever since.

Some people say the gold just melted away to nothing, vaporised. Another story is that my father's first son, Styr, came back to take it away before the bomb fell. All I know is this: a nation needs gold. Sigmund spent a lifetime raising the wealth to make this country hold together. If Regin was right, I could get it back overnight.

The gold. That's the beginning of everything.

Regin got to work straight away, but it wasn't going to be easy. Fafnir was cutting-edge stuff. He'd been using viral-recoding – using viruses to carry DNA into the cells to change you from the inside. Easy as catching a cold, much superior to the old womb-tanks. A lot of people didn't like it at first – you might remember the fuss in the papers. Viruses mean disease, and people found it hard to accept they could be used for our benefit. But it's clever stuff. You can just get on with your normal life while the changes take place. Very superior. What's more, with recoding

you never had to stop. You could change day by day. As time went by, Fafnir was only going to get bigger and deadlier and harder to kill. A lot of people had already tried and failed to work him out – but they weren't Regin. If anyone could do it, it was him.

First problem: that scale was more or less indestructible. We couldn't dissolve it or burn it; we couldn't file it or scrape it or chip it. It had no reactions. Regin couldn't get so much as a molecule off it. If you couldn't get a sample, how could you run tests? On he went, poor old Regin – genetics, physics, chemistry, reason – nothing could get to grips with it. It drove him mad because – well, as he kept saying, if it didn't react with anything, it couldn't be there. You wouldn't be able to see it because light would go straight through it; you wouldn't be able to touch it, because it wouldn't react with your skin or flesh. It wouldn't even make a noise. But the scale did all those things. Nothing reacted to it – but there it was. Impossible!

Now, where did something like that come from?

You know those old stories about the lift shaft in the old Galaxy Building, where my grandfather used to have his headquarters? Nothing could scratch it or dent it; it never even got dirty because nothing would stick to it. It was still glittering like it was brand new when it was a hundred years old. That disappeared after the bomb too – so maybe it wasn't indestructible after all. What if Fafnir got his hands

on that? Nothing else I ever heard of was as tough as that scale.

Regin's theory was that it was some sort of crystalline structure, diamond most like, but bound together in another way.

'Like what?' I said.

'Like the breath of a fish. Or the sound of a cat walking, or the roots of the mountain,' he grunted, and then started laughing down his snout to himself, 'Grun grun grun!'

'Really? Really, Regin? Are you joking?' God-power! Regin says this world is full of objects we can never see or hear. He says the gods walk about among us all the time, but we can never know it because we can't react with them – only they can react with us. That's how they guide lives and affect us in ways we can never tell. He says there are many universes, all packed up together in exactly the same place as this one. Someone – some god – had made this scale move across from one universe to another. It was a god-object.

'Can Fafnir only be killed by a god? Is that what you're telling me?' I said.

Regin looked at me over his specs. 'No. I'm saying he can only be killed with something from another world. Now what might that be? And didn't I tell you? This is made for you.' He nodded. 'It's time to find out.'

I felt a thrill go through me then. He was right:

this was mine. He must have known the whole time. What was the only thing that ever cut into the Galaxy lift shaft? What else could cut a hole in Fafnir's hide but my father's knife? What was left of it, that is.

The knife was given to my father by Odin himself. On the day my aunt was married to King Conor, he appeared and plunged it into the lift shaft and only my father was able to take it out again. Everybody knows that story, and the story of the terrible war that followed. But not so many people know the story of how the knife came to be destroyed.

It was the dawn of the final war. My father was confident that morning, according to my mother, Hiordis. The population was loyal, we were well armed, he was a brilliant general. There had been many wars before in his long reign and he'd won them all. There was no reason to suppose this one was going to be any different until Odin showed up.

He appeared in their bedroom – don't ask why, it's not the sort of place you'd associate with him. My mother was sitting up in bed watching my father do his exercises. I tease her about that. She looks down her nose at me and lowers her great eyelids and purrs slightly – she has some lion in her, my mother – and she says nothing, but I think maybe she liked to sit there in bed watching the king limber up. She was younger than him by what? Eighty or ninety years? Oh, kings can live a long time without

getting old. He used the tanks for that. In another ten years he would have ruled for a century.

Then Odin opens the door and walks right in. A smell of carrion came in with him. My mother pulled the covers up to her face. He walked right up to my father and held out his hand.

And my father's face just crumpled. That's how my mother described it: he crumpled. Suddenly he looked all his one hundred and twenty years. He knew at once that the god wanted his knife back. It meant the end.

He was never too keen on the gods, old Sigmund. Mother says that whenever the subject came up, he used to hold his finger to the side of his nose and say that there were a few questions needed answering before he was going to have any dealings with that bunch of crooks. He only had one prayer. 'Have the grace to leave us to our own affairs. Amen!'

You can't blame him. A god who loves warfare and death and calls it poetry? What's that about? A god who steals secrets from the dead? Whose side was he on? Not the living, that's for sure. So, instead of quietly handing it over, Sigmund snatched the knife from the table where it lay close at hand and stabbed him instead. That was my father. He tried to murder God! And you know what? I think the god loved him for it.

That knife had cut diamond and tungsten for him as if they had been bananas. Odin turned away but,

sure enough, it grazed his neck and left a long red scratch. Calmly, Odin took it out of Sigmund's hand. He didn't seem angry at what had happened; he just smiled. Then he rubbed the knife between his hands. A fine grey dust fell to the floor – all that was left of the indestructible symbol of Volson power.

'See you later,' said Odin, and he turned on his heel and walked towards the door.

But Father wasn't done yet. Naked as he was, he ran after Odin, grabbed him by the shoulders, heaved – and flung him to the ground.

'I told you,' he hissed. 'Stay out of our affairs!'

'I *am* your affairs,' growled the god. He stood up, pushed Sigmund to one side and left the room. By the time Father got up and opened the door, the corridor was already empty.

He told Hiordis that at least he had met his god naked, just as a man should.

That same day, Sigmund sent Hiordis, still pregnant with me, out to stay with Alf on the far coast of South Wales. The next day, they dropped the bomb on London. Puff! All gone. Hiordis says they picked up radar traces of planes, high up in the stratosphere. We thought they'd just come to keep an eye on things, same as usual. But we were getting too powerful and this time they came to squash us.

Hiordis and Alf didn't want to give it to me at first. I was too young, I could wait a few years, Fafnir

would still be there when I was older. Blah blah blah, wait wait wait. They had a point – I'd made it myself to Regin. OK, OK – I want to go and fight the worst monster you ever heard of because my mother says I shouldn't – so maybe I'm young and stupid. Well, maybe you have to be young and stupid to do a thing like this. To fight a dragon! As soon as she started, I felt the strength inside me, I felt the certainty. I was ready.

'You're not at your full strength,' complained Alf.

'It's my time,' I told him. And in the end I got my way. Neither of them could refuse me anything. People can't. I don't know why: no one ever says no to me. So I'd better be bloody right, hadn't I?

My mother went to fetch the dust. When she gave it to me my life began. I was stepping on to a road that stretched from now to my death. There were no diversions, no way back. I'd started up, and nothing could ever turn me off till I was dead and gone. I could feel the weight of years gone and the weight of the years to come passing through that moment. Destiny was there, and not just mine either. I am the destiny of this whole nation.

You think I'm arrogant; I'm not. I was made for this – literally. My father designed me for it. Every gene in my body was picked for just this purpose. My mother brought me up for it; the gods shaped me as the keystone for this time and place. It's no credit to me. I have less choice than anyone. I'm

more a machine than a human being. Sometimes I wonder if I'm even human.

Hiordis kept the dust in a small wooden box, inside another box, inside another box. Originally, it was in a single steel box. My mother only realised what was going on when she looked into it one day and it seemed to her that the dust had grown. She got quite excited about it at the time, she told me, until she realised what was going on. As the dust moved, it was wearing away at the steel, and it was gradually getting mixed up with steel filings. That's why she kept it in wood after that – it was easier to tell apart. Once it wore right through a box and when she picked it up it spilled out all over the floor – it took her ages to clean it up. So she kept it in several boxes to keep it safe.

I opened the box – and there it was, waiting for me. It was like sand – well, it was sand, in a sense. Some sand. I took a pinch of it between my fingers and rubbed it on the buckle of my belt. It was like scrubbing an apple with a wire brush: the buckle just rubbed away. Then I rubbed a pinch on my tooth: nothing. And if I wasn't sure before, I was then. It was with me as it was with my father. The dust could cut anything – but not me. It was tuned in to me. It was *mine*.

'Godworld!' said Regin, and I just smiled.

I think Regin could've spent the rest of his life experimenting with that dust, but I didn't have time

for that. All I was bothered about was what sort of weapon to make it into, and how to use it.

We spent hours trying to work out what the best means of attack was. We watched the few scraps of film there were of Fafnir, read everything anyone had ever written about him. What his habits were, what he ate, what he did, everything. And you know what? No one knew hardly anything. No one had even seen him eat. He did everything in private. About the only piece of what you might call personal detail there was about Fafnir was this: he liked to swim. There was a pool on the Heath not far from his citadel and, once or twice a week, he'd come down to swim. There was a great path made where he crawled. It got like a mudslide when it was wet.

It wasn't much, but it was enough. This was our plan. We'd dig a hole in that track where I could hide myself, cover me over with some sort of lid, then mud, and then smooth it down so there was no disturbance. When Fafnir passed over me, that would be my chance.

'What do you think?'

Regin squinted at me. We were sitting in his lab by the window. There was that acrid laboratory smell, but outside the rain was pelting down in grey sheets and you could smell the wet earth and the cool air.

'It might work,' he said.

Then I had a nasty thought. 'What if he's wired for X-ray?' I said. 'He'll spot me lying there under the ground.'

Regin thought about it. 'There's a hundred skeletons buried in the earth. Men he's killed. You'll just be one more. Infra-red would be more of a danger, but anyway, we can find something to mask you. And how about this? We can dig up one of the skeletons and replace it with you, so that he won't notice you even if he can remember what lies under the ground.'

I liked that! The worm would think one of his own dead had risen up to take him on. And Odin would like it. God of the dead, god of killing, god of poetry. It'd be a plan that'd suit him well.

But we still had the problem of what weapon to use. That wasn't as obvious as it seemed either. On the end of an armour-piercing shell? What if we missed? What if the explosion blew the dust off the end before it penetrated? It wouldn't even break Fafnir's skin if that happened – the blast would get flung downwards and I'd get it.

How about bullets?

We tried it out – a titanium bullet with a layer of dust on the surface. It got through the scale all right, but then it was spent. It fell out the other side like a slug coming through a lettuce leaf. So then we tried making a titanium bullet with dust mixed in right the way through it. Better. It came whacking

out the other end, but – I didn't like it. There wasn't that much dust; we'd only be able to make a handful of them. The risk of missing was too high.

We must have been through every type of firearm there was before the answer suddenly dawned on me.

It was ridiculous really. Regin thought it was hilarious. 'Obvious!' he said. 'So simple! Why didn't I think of that before?'

With this weapon I could carve a hole in the monster two or three metres long, from his heart to his arse. I could have his guts on the floor next to him before he knew what was going on. The beauty of it was, I'd use his own strength and weight as he passed above me to rip him open. All I had to do was stick it up out of the pit as he went overhead and his own momentum would do the rest. Fantastic. Fafnir was about the most advanced piece of technology on the planet and we were going to kill him – with a sword!

We both laughed like maniacs, but you know what? Inside me my heart was fizzing. To kill a dragon like that, hand to hand! Oh, man! This was going to be the boldest thing you ever heard!