

Feathered Death

By Steve Cook

"We pulled out of the dive at the last moment," Dirk said, leaning forward over the beerstained table. "Jura's wings snapped out, crack! Like a ship's sail in a storm, and before the enemy could do anything we were on them. Beak stabbing down, talons rending, and me in the middle of it."

He paused to drain the mug of bitter ale and grinned. "Copperback, she was there. Her snake twenty feet long and big enough to ride, with fangs as long as your forearm! Scales shining like copper coins, blindingly bright. One bite, and you'd be gone from the poison before you ever lost enough blood. And then her on its back, long black hair streaming out behind her, a curved sword in each hand, calling out in challenge across the battle. She'd never forgiven me for the last time I'd defeated her, y'see, and we'd crossed swords five times by now without either one of us having a lick of a win over the other."

One of the youngest soldiers, eyes wide, pushed a fresh mug towards the old man. "What'd you do?"

"Don't encourage him," another recruit said, but Dirk ignored him.

"Three soldiers stood between her and me, each one more fearsome than the last. The first, a huge Plainslander, yelled something I never heard and charged! I ducked into the swing of his sword and stabbed my dagger in under his helmet, and down he went. There was chaos around us as the rest of the airstrike piled in, hawks shrieking, blood turning the soil to mud. The two men in front of me squared off together, and I vaulted backwards to avoid their wicked swings – these two were armed with morningstars, you understand. I threw my dagger into the eye of one of them at the perfect moment, his weapon flying around and

catching the other one in the face, and then I was over their bodies and up to Copperback.

We faced off, the thrill of battle upon us,” he said. “I pulled out my hand crossbows, each one primed and ready to fire, my finger tightening on the trigger as I took aim. Twang! The bolt sped across the space between us, her snake bucking to avoid the shot-”

“And you heroically slew the dreaded Copperback,” the heckler said, sarcasm dripping from every word. “Would you listen to this fool?”

Dirk’s eyes widened, but the barman was quicker. “Hey, O’Connell. I recognise that snivelling voice anywhere. Shut the hell up and let the man tell his story.”

O’Connell snorted. “Why? To hear him tell it, he was responsible for all the victories we’ve had since the moment of his birth, and the rest of the 5th division were just backup. If even half of the rubbish he said was true, we’d have won this war a long time ago.”

Dirk half rose out of his seat. “Now you listen here, you gobby little shite, you wouldn’t even be born if it wasn’t for the sacrifices of me and those like me. Why, I ought to come round this table right now and thrash you to within an inch of your life.”

“But you won’t,” O’Connell sneered, “because you’re old and weak and you spend your time drinking and making up stories instead of helping.” The young man stood up, his thin features twisted in disgust. “I’ve got better things to do than listen to this. Come on, lads.”

The small group stood, perhaps ten in all, and made their way towards the door. The youngest looked back with something approaching awe tinged with regret. Dirk raised his mug in salute at the boy, then froze as O’Connell noticed and signed a rude gesture back.

The barman came over to pick up the empties the soldiers had left and patted Dirk on the shoulder. “I’m sorry that happened.”

“Not your fault they’re arseholes, Cory. No-one’s fault but theirs.” Dirk shook his head and took a sip, grimacing at the sour taste. “I guess... they’re right, though, aren’t they. I mean, look at me. I’ve got a bum knee; can’t piss, apart from when all I can do is piss; and...” He lifted the mug and sighed. “This. Too much of this.”

Cory stopped piling the earthenware mugs into his hand and sat down opposite Dirk. "Now you listen here. We'll have none o' that. I remember the stories my dad used to tell me. Said you were a hero, and that's the truth of it, no matter how long ago it was. Feathered Death's got a kill count longer than O'Connell's bar tab, and as far as I'm concerned you're always welcome here."

Sadness welled up in Dirk as he reached out and patted Cory's arm, not daring to look the man in the eyes. "You're... you're a good man, Cory, and that's the truth of it." He climbed to his feet, wincing as his joints protested. "I think I'll be heading home now, though. Got... stuff to do."

As he shuffled unsteadily through the bar, Dirk tried not to look at the other patrons, tried to push O'Connell's words out of his mind. Outside the full moon gazed mistily down at the silent street, and halfway along the road he paused, leaning heavily on the wooden fence that ran the length of the street.

Clouds began to gather, stealing the light away. Somewhere off in the night he heard raucous laughter, and the unmistakable sound of O'Connell holding sway, and in the darkness and the fine drizzle that began to fall, every ringing mockery was a lead weight around his neck.

When he finally pushed open the door to his cottage, it was all he could do to light a candle and slump on his bed, listening to the rain as it picked up in tempo. He stared up at the wall beyond the candle, to where a single giant hawk feather hung, silent and laden with dust and memories. Blindly, hardly even aware that he was doing it, he slid open the drawer of his bedside cabinet and took out the powerful metal crossbow that was in there, a bolt fitted to its flight groove, and laid it across his trembling knees.

"What would you have me do, Jura," he murmured, running fingers that were bent and knotted over the well-worn arms and stock of the crossbow. "The day you fell, I lost everything. And look at me now..." He squeezed his eyes shut, ignoring the tears that fell

down his cheeks and into his beard, picturing again the battlefield. His shot, held just a moment too long, soared across the space between him and Copperback; her snake mount lurched down, taking the blow to the eye at the same moment as its fangs sank deeply into Jura's breast. There the two of them stayed, locked together in death, the hawk and the snake.

The surge of battle had carried him away at that moment, the sheer press of people coming between him and his hawk ensuring she vanished from sight under a hundred booted feet, the shouts of the soldiers merging with the jeers from the bar. In the darkness of his home he cried fresh tears as he considered the crossbow.

For long minutes he sat, tremulous finger on the trigger, as the despair in him curdled, solidified, became something else.

Outside, the storm reached a crescendo and died away, the moon emerging again to shine in through the window.

"No," he murmured. An image of Jura, her head proud, her wings spread, drifted through his mind, sharpened, took form, and a fragment of his old self flashed through him. The muscles in his arm tensed, the crossbow snapping up almost of its own accord; the bolt flashed across the room and took the wick off the candle, snuffing it in an instant.

"Never."

He got the second crossbow out from the drawer and sat in the dark, stroking the dully-gleaming metal, feeling the well-worn grooves that fitted his hands so perfectly.

"I'm coming to find you," he whispered, staring into the darkness. "Jura, my girl."

Before the sun peaked over the distant hills, he had secured everything he was likely to need into an efficient pack that he could just about sling onto his back. The two crossbows he hung from his belt, fastened with leather straps designed to pop open when pulled, and

across his chest went the slim bandolier of wooden bolts, each one trimmed with hawk feathers. Into the straps of his pack he wove the huge feather from his wall.

No-one saw him leave the town, and by the time he stopped to rest a moment and look back he was already far enough away that it was impossible to pick out individuals.

“Not like any of them would miss me anyway,” he muttered, then smirked. “‘cept maybe Cory. I owed him a couple of silver, heh!”

He turned away and carried on walking, his hips clicking and the nagging pain in his knees building to a dull heat. He stopped often at first, then less frequently; as the day wore on he found the pain became a distant thing, that he could stand taller and that his shoulders ached less under their load.

Mid-afternoon came and went, and as the sun set he made camp, warm next to the glowing fire and under his bedroll and furs.

He slept dreamlessly, and woke up feeling stiff but alert. It took him until after his first cup of coffee, warmed in a small pan over the fire, to realise that he didn’t have a hangover for the first time in years.

By the third day he was striding out, whistling a tune from his childhood between gaps in his teeth. A half-eaten apple in hand, he climbed to the peak of the latest hill in a long series and paused, looking out ahead. Slowly he nodded.

The scene before him was crystal-cut into his memory. *There* was the hill where they had organised themselves, where the 5th division had marshalled to his call. Down *there* was where they had dived from out of the clear blue sky, thirty men and women on lightly-armoured battlehawks, onto a mustered force of Plainslanders. His throat constricted as he traced the line of their battle with his eyes. *There*, perhaps, he had faced Copperback. There Jura had fallen.

He blinked, and the battle disappeared from his mind's eye. In its place there was a smoothly-sloping pasture ringed on three sides by gentle hills, and at the midpoint between the hills a farmhouse surrounded by fields full of crops.

Smoke was rising from the chimney, and as he walked across the grass and through the memories he caught flashes a silhouette moving around inside the house. The farmhouse was big enough for a small family perhaps, made of white-painted wood that stood out starkly from the landscape. Nearer the house, the well-trodden route had eaten away at the grass to create a dirt path that led straight to the front door, and as he walked up to it he tidied his shirt up, combed his beard out and slung his pack down before knocking.

"Coming," a woman's voice echoed from inside, and he rocked back on his heels, lining up questions in his head. The door swung open and he smiled, meeting the eyes of the old woman that had answered.

"Why, hello, I was wonderin-"

Her eyes flicked to the feather on his pack and she bit back a gasp. His throat constricted around the words as he took in her hair, still long, still mostly black, and the quirk of the mouth that was no longer cruel but embittered by age. His gaze fell to the belt cinched tightly around her waist, the simple undyed linen of her dress giving way to bright copper snakeskin.

"You," she said, sounding more tired than anything. "I should have figured you'd get here eventually. Come to finish the job, have you?" When he didn't reply she tutted and stepped to the side. "Well either way, best come in. You're letting all the heat out."

He nodded, stepping into the house so that she could close the door behind him, and he slowly brought a hand to one of his crossbows as she began to bustle around the kitchen.

"Tea's just on the boil, there's probably enough for two if you want. Biscuits, too, and a cake. I'm guessing you're thirsty at least." She looked back, large spoon in hand, and raised

an eyebrow. "You going to sit down or you going to shoot me? Because honestly, one of those means my back will ache a bit less tomorrow."

"...no," he said, letting his hand drop. "No, I suppose not." He perched uncomfortably on one of her wooden chairs and looked around the room. Everywhere, copper snakeskin glared back at him, from cushions to lanternshades, to the pair of slippers she wore as she shuffled around the kitchen. Part of one wall was covered with what appeared to be faded pictures of a young warrior drawn by children, stick-like arms holding on to the reins of a giant snake. A pair of curved swords were hung on hooks over the fireplace. "You *are* Copperback, right? How did you come to be here?"

"I live here," she said. "And it's Alice. Just like I'm betting your real name isn't 'The Feathered Death'."

He blinked at the cutting edge to her voice. "Dirk."

"Well then, Dirk. After that battle... I lost Harrachia, my mount. Closest friend, really, I suppose. Oh, don't shift around like that; you got him good, and war's war. Besides, I seem to remember old Harry getting your bird but good."

Dirk nodded, taking the mug of tea she handed him and blowing the steam away. "Aye. Jura... your snake bit her. She was dead before I even had a chance to shout." He sipped at the tea, staring into its brown depths. "I'm sorry," he offered, then shook his head. *Where the hell did that come from?*

"Me too," she said. "After that, I didn't do much fighting. They wanted me to train the next set of recruits but I said no. Decided to come out here, secured the land and built the house – with a little help, naturally." She sighed and drummed her fingers on the table. "Guess there were too many memories to ever really leave this place."

He nodded. "If you swap the years of farming for drinking, that's pretty much me."

"Oh, I do plenty of that. Got a nephew, comes out every couple of weeks with some vital supplies. Red, white, whatever he can find." Alice shook her head. "I guess I got tired of

being a symbol, you know? The young ones, they wanted a legend, something to rally around, and me? I just want to be able to get up in the morning at my own pace and without my back throwing itself out."

"And the cold weather makes everything ache."

"You can't just... go when you want to."

He scowled. "And dignity? Forget that."

"And the young ones, they talk down to you."

"No respect these days."

"None."

They fell silent for a long minute and Dirk finally relaxed back into the seat. "I truly didn't expect to find you here," he said. "I thought perhaps you'd have died, or..." He scratched at his beard. "Honestly, I didn't really think about it. The idea of growing old never really occurred to me when I was young, and I've been too busy living it for the past few years to spare it a thought."

"And what about now? What'll you do?" She leaned forward and put her elbows on the table, resting her head on her palms.

"I don't know. War's a young man's game."

"Or a young woman's."

"I suppose-" he began, then broke off. "Can you hear something?"

She cocked her head to the side. "My hearing's not that good," she said. "What've you got?"

"Sounds like... hawks. And shouting." With barely a wince he rose to his feet and moved to the door. "Lots of shouting."

As he opened the door and stepped out, his heart sank. "You'd better get out here," he called back over his shoulder.

In the air above the house a dozen hawks circled, close enough that he could see their riders. O'Connell was one of them, a fierce expression on his face as he swung a sword large enough to throw his hawk's flight off-balance.

"I have no idea what they're doing here," Dirk said, striding past his pack that still rested on the ground outside. "Must have followed me. I'll get rid of them."

"I don't think it's that simple," Alice said. "Look over there."

Undulating over the hillside came ten snake-riders. They were armed and armoured, more than one carrying a bow large enough to bring down a giant hawk, and Dirk realised with a sinking feeling that they were on a direct intercept course – and they would meet at the farmhouse.

"They've clearly been keeping an eye on me," Alice said, coming to stand next to Dirk. He looked across to see her hefting the swords from her wall, gnarled fingers wrapped tightly around their hilts. "Hope I still remember how to use these."

"You think it will come to that? Can't we just explain-?"

"No time! They've seen each other!"

Dirk swore and unlimbered his crossbows, standing back to back with Alice. Overhead, the hawks began to dive on the onrushing snake-riders, and battle was joined.

Almost immediately two of the hawkriders were dragged to the ground, fangs sinking into feathers, and a snake was lifted high into the air by two more before being dropped to its death. Weapons clashed together, sword against sword. Alice and Dirk edged back towards the house but the edge of the brawl came closer. Without warning, a young soldier with a hawk emblazoned on his chest stumbled out, saw the two old people, and charged on Alice.

"Damnit, stop!" Dirk aimed, shot, the bolt pinning the boy's foot to the ground, and in a heartbeat Alice was past him. Her form was still perfect despite her years, arm extended, feet solid, and the sword took the boy in the shoulder. She grunted, ungracefully pulling her other leg under her and punched him unconscious with the hilt. As she did, a snakehead

lashed out past her towards Dirk. He had only a moment to aim his other bow at a deep rent in its side and fire. The bolt took the snake hard and it fell to the ground, writhing but still very much alive.

"If I can talk to that boy there," Dirk shouted, pointing at O'Connell, "I might be able to stop this."

"Likewise," Alice said, jabbing a sword at a snakerider with a plumed helm. "Come on, let's get this over with."

"No deaths."

She spat. "Already been too many."

Into the melee they stepped, sword and crossbow bolt flashing, and with every deliberate pace Dirk felt his resolve harden. A fierce grin cut across his face as he stepped, ducked under a sword, fired into the leg of the Plainslander that darted in to finish the job. He felt himself falling back into the familiar pattern of fighting. Fire, step, dodge, reload, over and over, and when he looked over at Alice he could see the same fire alive in her eyes as she parried, disarmed, stabbed into feet and arms. In perfect unison they stepped between O'Connell and his opponent, a huge woman wielding a sword and dagger. Grinning savagely, Dirk brought his crossbow up to O'Connell's neck and nestled the tip in just behind his ear. "Order them to stop," he said. Behind him he could hear Alice giving the same instruction, her swords crossed around the snake soldier's neck.

"You're helping them, old man," O'Connell said. "Helping the snakes! Traitor!"

"No," Dirk said, digging the point of the crossbow bolt in a little more. "Just an old man who's tired of the fighting. Tell them to stop."

The command was almost unnecessary; both sides had fallen apart, most nursing nonlethal wounds on feet or hands, and they regrouped behind their leaders. Dirk, his heart pounding, fought down the urge to laugh in O'Connell's face.

"Now you listen," Alice said, looking around to take in both sides. "This is my land."

The snake leader cleared her throat. "Actually the government agreed you could have the use of it it after your efforts--"

"Shut up, 'Captain' Palk. My land! I've worked it for years, toiled, and no bugger has ever visited me. You ungrateful lot! And I say this: You can all piss off back home. All of you! Especially you, Palk." She prodded a sword in the direction of the Plainslander leader, who growled softly.

Dirk nodded. "Same goes for you lot. I'm not coming back. Tell Cory I'm sorry about the bar tab, but them's the breaks."

Palk folded her massive arms across her chest. "We fight because of your example, Copperhead. You're a legend, and I'm sure the same is true for the northlanders here. They are *scum*, but they are honourable scum."

"Ha! You don't know them at all, do you?" Dirk shook his head. "You clearly don't need a reason to fight, so why don't you take the fight elsewhere? Somewhere you won't be bothering me or this young lady here." He indicated Alice, and she nodded her agreement.

O'Connell scowled. "And what do we tell the General?"

"Tell him Copperhead and Feathered Death are both dead," Alice said wearily. "Or don't. I don't care. Dolt."

Emotions warred across O'Connell's face for a long moment, and then he nodded. "I don't ever want to see you again," he said, pointing a finger at Dirk.

"Likewise," Dirk said. He paused. "Oh, and this is for the other night--"

Before O'Connell could react Dirk swung his hand around, still holding the metal crossbow.

The stock caught the boy across the side of the head and threw him to the ground where he writhed, clutching at his ear and howling.

"Ow! What the bloody hell was that for?"

"If you don't know, you're more of an idiot than I thought," Dirk said. Behind him he could hear the Plainslanders limping away, and he thumbed over his shoulder. "They've got the right idea. Go on. Get!"

Still clutching his bleeding ear, O'Connell staggered to his feet and retreated back to where several of the hawks were standing. Dirk watched them go, aware of Alice's presence next to him.

"Tea should still be hot," she murmured. "Another cup?"

"Thought you'd never ask," he said.