

HOUSE
OF
OPEN
WOUNDS

ADRIAN
TCHAIKOVSKY



An Ad Astra Book

Hell – The Butcher

He does look a bit like a butcher. Not the murderer sort but the jolly figure serving up paper-wrapped parcels of sausages and ham. A family butcher, so to speak. The sort of man – ruddy-faced, rotund, moustached – who always has a disarming joke at his own expense. A pillar of the community. And that last is true. For a given value of pillar. For his own definition of community.

It is a vision of hell.

The air is made of screaming. Like a picture where the gap between two objects is revealed, after a squint, to be just more of the same, here the gap between throat-stripping shrieks is just less-insistent sounds of men and women in agony. A hierarchy of torment so constant and yet so varied it becomes something close to a choir.

Here, then, is the choirmaster. A great weight of a man who nonetheless passes through the bloody clutter of the space with an appalling deftness. Like the thing in your dream, that cannot possibly follow you into the small spaces, and yet does so in defiance of reason. His bulk is gravity, demanding the attention of everything around him. It's a wonder the rivulets of spilled blood don't orbit him in a wheeling astronomy of gore.

Behind him his minions, his attendant devils, are hard at work. Time enough for them when you've escaped the pull of this man, this bloody-handed emperor, even now stomping to look over the new arrivals thrown to his mercy.

His face is a thing of parts. It can clench like a fist, open like a flower. In other moments, with the rigour of his profession lifted from him, it's a good face. A friendly thing to see. A broad smile, such as might be used to persuade you to open your door to him at night. His moustache, which right now is crusted with red, can make him seem clownish and harmless. The mass of him, which can drive a cleaver through a limb or give bite to the teeth of a saw, becomes the ungainly comedy of a dancing bear. When he wants it to. Right now, though, he's working. The worst kind of torturer, who preys only on those already in agony. No fit and healthy victims come to his dungeon to be broken. He takes the leavings, and his people make them squeal.

Spilling into his tent now: a flurry of men and women, some in full uniform, others stripped to their shirtsleeves. They are whole as yet. They aren't *his*. And those that are his, well, their uniforms are already ragged, holed, sodden, scorched. The fit set down the stretchers of the infirm and retreat. Nobody wants to spend time in the Butcher's company when he's working. Most especially not the howling victims set at his feet.

One figure remains. Uniform jacket open, slovenly, hanging improbably from her shoulders as though it'll slough off any moment, save it never does. She's been outside with the bearers, taking details, and she bends to the Butcher's ear.

"Taking the wall. Caught a bonecutter, then counterattack." The words almost stripped of their regular meaning, a code between her and the Butcher to give him context.

He casts a look over the array of the agonised, a workman inspecting the damage; a clerk, today's agenda for the meeting. Nearest to him a man whimpers with his leg laid open. *Sword-stroke*. Next, the woman without a hand, screaming at the stump. Then three silent ones. He sees where their uniforms are shredded, the ripped edges presented outwards where the shards of shattered bone erupted from *within*. Then the next, and the next. The pucker-and-scorch of baton-shot. The man whose head is laid open so that the jigsaw of his skull is present

for any budding puzzlesmith to piece together. The woman – the loudest screamer in the place, whose leg was splinted by some cack-handed amateur who doesn't understand how bones go.

The Butcher works his first magic. The silent man whose ribs were shattered on one side can still be saved for future torments. Blunt-fingered hands signal and that stretcher is hauled deeper into hell where the devils can get to work with saw and tongs. The woman with the shattered arm, she can be saved. She goes to the foreigner with the shimmer skin, staring up with eyes pulled so taut it's a wonder her lids will ever close again. The gutshot man can be saved. He's placed in the far corner for a scouring and a working over, back where a weird old man plays a weird old pipe, skirling and squalling on it as though mocking the screams of the afflicted. It's all a part of the service. A necessary component of this precise and exacting hell the Butcher built.

Those are the highest priority, where a little delay means the difference between live victim and corpse. Now it's time for the Butcher's second magic. His apron is not that of a friendly family butcher. There are twenty pockets in the leather, each with a flap to keep the worst of the ambient weather out, though most have an inch of red at the bottom of them by now. He goes down the line of the brutalised, his blunt fingers finding phials and bottles by long habit, feeling for the nicks he cuts in the corks, to tell him concentrations and active ingredients. A personal love-language of agony and alchemy. The woman without a hand has had the stump cauterised – not battlefield medicine but the side effects of a point-blank baton discharge. She'll keep. He forces the lip of a glass phial to her lips. She chokes, swallows. Her screams fall inwards until their scrabbling fingertips can't reach her lips any more and she's silent. He goes down the line, a bespoke service for each, this philtre or that, based on wound, on whim, on the individual predilections of his busy hands that seem to act on their own recognizance. Sometimes he salts the wounds with powder, stuff that burns and eats away necrotised

flesh, undoes the work of energies and corruption or at least staves it off for long enough.

For a couple, the man whose skull is a puzzle with too few pieces, the woman whose innards are not only no longer *in* but entirely absent, he gives a double dose from the black flask. It's not to quiet them. Or it's not only to quiet them. And the noise doesn't get to the Butcher any more. He's been doing this for years.

The man whose spine and pelvis have shrapnelled out through his skin gets a triple dose. He doesn't need quieting. He's wide awake, obviously feeling every shard and chip and razor-edged piece of himself that cuts a little more with each breath, but the screaming has gone out of him. He's already passed into a silence so greedy that not even the gravity of the Butcher can pull a whimper from him.

Last he comes to the woman with the badly set leg. It's a mess. Someone thought they were helping, is the Butcher's guess. Some infantry regular with pretensions of erudition. It's not just that they clamped the leg straight with the jagged ends side by side, like they were trying to use the leg bones to splint each other. It's that the backwash of necromancy from the munition has already fused the broken stumps into a needle-spined fist of conjoined bone. Leave it like that, she'll need more than a cane.

The Butcher looks back along the line. It's under control, at least until the next consignment of stretchers comes in. Behind him, in the bowels of hell, his devils are at work. Cutting, flaying, rending; stitching, severing, scouring; decanting, disenchanting, decontaminating. Practising each their own particular arts, a collection of miscreants and misfits not otherwise seen this side of the army paymaster's rolls. And they know what they're doing. He doesn't need to micromanage them, nor would he even know how in most cases. But this: this he knows.

One heavy hand comes up with a blade: what's a butcher without a knife, after all? He slits away the splint. Beneath it, the breeches are already a sopping ruin. He scowls, the fist of his

face tightening further. A jagged gash up the inner thigh that he hadn't even seen, because the professional insult of the badly set leg had demanded his attention. She's been bleeding out all this time.

He looks around quickly. Somehow Alv always knows when he's after her. She's just finished up with someone. Her arm is a mangled mess. One of her assistants is putting it in a sling and her face goes tight every time he jostles her. No screams from Alv. No loss of control, not now, not ever, not her. Just that tightness, like an ambassador who's been served the wrong kind of canapes but won't make a fuss. The ragged ends of her arm grind as the man fumbles the sling. Another tautening of Alv's glitter-skin features. The shout of her foreignness here in a room where most everyone is of one nation.

She comes over, trailing attendants. They're all bloodied. They've been in the wars, if not first-hand then vicariously. He shows her the woman's wound. Alv's tight face tightens a whole extra notch. She's not got much left to give. She nods. Alv is like a goddess personifying grudging adherence to duty. Although perhaps not *that* much like, given that there are at least two actual deities currently in the tent and assisting with proceedings.

The Butcher is a good Palleseen soldier. He has no religion. But he'll use it, if it works for him. Just as he'll use Alv and her particular brand of magical fuckery. He only needs results, not five pages of theory with diagrams showing him how it all works.

Alv kneels haltingly by the woman, trying not to jolt her own ruined arm. She places her good hand almost on the wound. There is barely any blood on Alv. Her pale uniform is almost spotless, and this surely is a miracle far greater than the act she's about to perform.

The Butcher actually braces himself, despite the fact that, of all the actors in this little drama, he's the only one not in appalling physical pain. Alv is doing something to the universe.

Some singular trick of her people. Her attendants, who have learned a little of it, look on and try to learn, using some sense they've developed that the Butcher can't guess at. He feels the tilt point. That's the only way he can think of it. Like a cart he was on once, that was going too fast down a mountain track. Rocking side to side. The moment when he understood that the whole out-of-control contraption wouldn't be righting itself to swing the other way again. That nothing was left but the falling. Like that, but with reality. And the wound in the woman's broken leg closes, leaving behind a wealth of wasted blood suddenly robbed of its cause, a crime scene without the murder. And Alv's face pulls like the drawstrings of a bag as the pain hits her. She goes from kneeling to sitting as her own leg opens beneath the cloth of her breeches. Her attendants are already tying the suddenly sodden cloth off. And Alv's done. Has no more to give. They get her out of the way, off to the side, sitting by those who've already been ministered to by the devils and are waiting to be stretchered right back out of the tent again.

That leaves the broken leg, that clasp of prematurely merged bone. The Butcher rolls his shoulders speculatively. He places his hands on the leg, locks eyes with its owner. She's had a nip from his flask by now but she's still very awake and aware of what's about to happen. There's a lot of begging in that face, and it's something the Butcher is very used to. He's very used to not feeling it, not caring. Taking joy in it, almost. The sign that he's doing his job properly, if people are begging him for mercy.

Three tents along, there are torturers. Actual torturers. The scions of the School of Correct Speech ply their trade on captured spies and enemy soldiers, to scour them of useful information. Delicate morsels to be chewed over by the gourmands of military intelligence. People beg those torturers for mercy, too. And here is the chief difference between the Inquirers of Correct Speech and the Butcher: sometimes they are merciful. When they get

what they want, they withhold the thumbscrews and the irons and the sparking wires. But the Butcher knows no mercy. His job is to take the injured and hurt them worse until they're better.

He feels out the precise topology of the bones, where they've prematurely merged, the necrosis already seeping into the flesh. Act now, without mercy, perhaps the leg can be saved.

He leans on it thoughtfully, like a carpenter testing a joist. The woman whimpers despite what was in the flask. She has the curse of a good imagination, and the Butcher's philtre can keep her mind from the pain of the body, but not from the pain the mind itself can create.

He rebreaks her leg. A single movement, the fullness of his weight, the brute ape strength of his hands. Part-healed bone shearing from bone, the ragged flesh wrung and torsioned. And then the orderlies – the woman who'd given him the brief, plus the olive-skinned man with the weak beard who somehow always manifests just when he's needed and only then – are hauling her onto the Butcher's table. Fresh meat on display for discerning customers. A kit is unrolled for him, the little blades and the large ones. Clamps and grippers and probes and, honestly, if some prankster had switched the tools of his trade with those of the torturers three tents over, would anybody actually spot the difference? But now that his particular gift for triage is no longer needed, he can't just sit idle. It's all go, here in hell. Even the supervising fiend gets bloody to the elbows in the exercise of prolonging pain.

If you prolong pain enough, after all, then wounds heal and your victims live. Some of them may even thank you. And can the torturers say *that*, with all their mercy? He thinks not.

He does what he can with the leg. He has salts to nullify the lingering taint of necromancy about the wounds, that otherwise would only decay even though he keeps a clean tent of butchery here. He has the old man's incessant, ear-offending pipe, which everybody fucking *hates*, even or especially the old man himself, but which is an absolute godsend. A literal God-send, tolerated

here in the heart of the Pal army because the Butcher says so; because it works. He has a box of hungry, hungry beetles that devour dead flesh, that eat the withered fringes of the wound once the necromancy has been scoured away. He has a curved needle and gut thread the colour of snake venom. He has big, thick-fingered hands that are nonetheless nimble as any butcher's when working with meat. And he sets the bones properly, with a little grinding and wrenching. With a certain targeted application of muscular force, pressure of thumbs, clench of his monstrous crusher's hands. He aligns them with the fastidious perfectionism of a clerk lining up his papers with the edge of his desk. He smooths the ragged edges of flesh together and sets two inscribed bone buttons to fasten them together, that will be digested by the woman's blood over a week, and help the muscles knit. He stitches the skin with his poison-coloured thread. No magic there, just a tailor's work combined with the Butcher's utter lack of squeam. He is a man who knows how the sausage is made, in respect of all the many working parts of the human body. His attitude to it all is, he likes to say, entirely sanguine. He enjoys watching people's faces as they try to parse which sense of the word he means.

Then there are the others. The ones who got two, sometimes three, doses from the black flask. It's their time, now. Not because he says so, but because someone new has stepped into the tent, who outranks him and everyone else there.

The grey-faced woman. Not actually grey, although pallid even for a Pallesen. Certainly far paler than the blotchy ruddiness of the Butcher's face even before today's consignment of sprayed blood. Grey in her soul, though. Everyone gets the same impression about her. The Fellow-Inquirer from Correct Speech, come to take her due.

She meets his gaze. Her eyes really are grey, against his brown-nearly-black. They are cold, but he's used to them by now. He's a big man. It takes a lot to send a shiver through him.

He indicates the remaining casualties, the black flask brigade.

Her rightful due. On the forehead of each he has marked a cross in black grease, a sacrament from the lowest and rightmost of his pockets. The Sign of the Forlorn Hope. She nods. She's here because there's a need, and he's only glad that the precise mathematics of how great that need is and how many he had to administer the black flask to have balanced out again. Because some day that need will outweigh his means, and then what will he do?

The grey-faced woman, the Fellow-Inquirer, takes off her black leather gloves. Human skin, some say. Demon hide, claim others. But they're just kid leather, dyed black. And anybody who knows anything about the magical sciences will tell you demons and necromancy don't mix. Opposing poles of the distasteful-but-necessary.

There is a string of tablethi at the grey woman's belt. Golden lozenges the size of a finger joint, inscribed with a word. She mints her own, the Butcher's heard. Uses commands unique to her. Tongue-twisters she practices every night, that nobody else can even say. Not for any particularly eldritch reason but because tablethi are in limited supply and people kept running off with hers and leaving her short.

She speaks the words, bare hands twisting through gestures that aren't strictly necessary but do focus the mind. She is a scientist, after all, and the Pal philosophy prefers to strip away the trappings of ritual from its magical practices. But sometimes a good dramatic gesture, fingers crooked upwards, hands lifting, does wonders for your concentration.

Arise say her hands, even as her mouth says something twisted and harsh.

They get up, those lost bodies. The black flask brigade with the crosses on their foreheads. A symbol known and loathed throughout the army as meaning *Property of the Necromancers*. It shouldn't be possible to slouch *upwards* but they manage it. They stand on shattered legs, stare with closed eyes, with ruined sockets, without faces, some of them. The man with the

shattered skull tilts his head as though listening and a motley of fluids runs down the side of his raw face.

The grey woman nods to the Butcher, accepting her due. Those who cannot be saved can yet serve. Once more into the breach – just the once, because repeat necromancy suffers from dramatically diminishing returns.

When she leaves the tent with her new re-recruits, there is a rumble from far away. Not dramatic thunder, but the last flourish of today's allotment of war. And there will be new casualties – there's a whole string of stretchers heading back from the front. Hell will keep working its devils for hours yet, long into the night. But the actual fighting's reached some sort of stalemate or equilibrium, and so hell's work has become finite. An end is in sight, and the Butcher will be able to pack away his knives and potions and clean the blood from his moustache and try to decide if it was worth it, the thing that got him sent to hell.