



# TRIUMPH OVER ATTRITION



Copyright © 2021 Steamforged Games Ltd.

It was almost exactly how she remembered.

The sea breeze a refreshing tickle playing across her skin, struggling against the heat from the overhead sun and the densely packed stands. Hard stone underfoot, colours mottled by age and the elements, but nonetheless unforgiving to tumble on and a bastard for rolling the ball. The pillars surrounding her, Solthecian suns proudly carved across their surface, warring for attention with a hundred Guild banners and pennants.

Rue Paltine wasn't a new place to Honour. Always the site of the first leg in the Sovereign States' semi-finals, she'd stood here three times before under blue banners, wearing the hammer and mallet upon her breast.

And therein lay the source of Honour's discontent. Certainly not the unique pitch, or the many hundreds of anonymous faces peering out from the stands. Not even the colours and symbols adorning the flags, the style of the jerkins, or the music drifting in and out of earshot. Those things could all be different, but still feel familiar regardless.

No, the change was the allegiance upon Honour's kit. The twin hammers were gone, their iron replaced by a scythe crossing an ear of wheat.

Turncoats were exceedingly rare in the world of Guild Ball. To step onto the pitch wearing rival colours was a transgression like none other, and tantamount to a death sentence. Whatever raw talent these players possessed was rendered irrelevant by their betrayal.

A turncoat represented a stain on their former Guild's honour, one that could only be wiped clean with blood.

Honour had never imagined she might join such dubious company, let alone be celebrated for it. Yet somehow, away from the Mason's Guild, her profile seemed higher than ever. Her title had become protection from retaliation. Murdering the First Lady of Guild Ball would present such a reputational loss for the Mason's Guild, it easily eclipsed any shame they bore from her perceived betrayal.

She'd even heard her former Guild praised in some quarters, for the excellence of their academy in training her. For all that Honour didn't much entertain idle gossip or hearsay, she couldn't help but roll her eyes. The reality was that she had succeeded in spite of the Mason's Guild. And unburdened of the weight of their expectations, she was thriving.

Unlike her former team and their relentless pursuit of victory, the Farmer's Guild were simply happy to play on a stage this large. They were heartfelt, and passionate. Their advancement from rookie matches to the big leagues had been an inspiration—and she had not only been an intrinsic part of their journey, but also their deep sense of camaraderie.

It was a vital breath of fresh air, and why as Honour looked around at her surroundings, she felt her heartbeat race like she was seeing them for the first time.

On the other side of the pitch, the Fisherman huddle broke, and Corsair gruffly ordered his players

into position. Honour was surprised, truth be told. It wasn't their formation per se; Corsair himself, flanked by Tentacles and Kraken, the heavy-duty cage she knew the old pirate liked to field. The Hag sat deeper in the backfield behind them, also where Honour would have expected her.

Sakana's position was more of a head scratcher, playing off-centre like a fullback instead of the wing, where Honour would have thought his pace would be better suited. She wondered if Corsair had mind to use the Numasai player like a sweeper, and made note to keep an eye on him once the game began.

The final figure was Jac. The animosity between the brawler and his captain was well-known, perhaps demonstrated by his far-flung position on the right wing, far away from where Corsair stood. Jac wasn't at all suited to such an exposed position, with none of the pace a winger needed to stay in the game. It presumably meant he had another purpose for being there.

But more than the strange formation choice, Honour was confused by the pirate's line-up itself. The Fisherman's Guild were blessed with a wide and deep roster, even more so with the news that the Navigator's Guild had signed on as affiliates. Yet, Corsair seemed to have gone out of his way to build a team without any of his side's younger and more agile players.

She wondered how he planned on playing the game without young legs to run at pace or score goals, two things the Fisherman's Guild were famous for.



High in the stands, the timekeeper's assistant lowered the first flag. Honour looked across to Grange, ready and rolling on the ball of his foot, keeping limber. The young captain looked determined and focussed, with none of the jitters she might have worried about a few short months ago. Inwardly the First Lady beamed. He was well on his way to becoming one of the most dependable and reliable captains in the game.

The second flag dropped, and the crowd hushed in anticipation. The timekeeper raised the horn to their lips and took a deep breath.

For a moment, the world stood in calm silence.

Then the horn sounded, and the game began in an explosion of sound and colour.



Bushel's strike rebounded from the stone goalpost with a satisfying thud, the ball quickly finding the ground and rolling away. The crowd roared their appreciation, but the young woman kept her head, jogging back down the pitch with only a raised hand and a lopsided grin, eschewing her trademark knee slide.

Honour offered her teammate an approving nod. She'd gone over the specifics of the spectacular pitch with the team on the way to the stadium. All flagstones, so unusual now, but how the game had originally been played. Much better for sprinting at pace, but kept the ball rolling overlong. It hurt like hell when you fell on

it, and deep grooves ran across the granite, sure to tear strips from exposed flesh if you tried anything so foolish as an extravagant celebration.

Apparently, Bushel had been listening.

The Farmer's Guild already had two goals to their name, the Fishermen side unable to stop the initial Farmer attack after the kickoff, nor the second Farmer drive after the goal kick.

That punt had been a play that left Honour spitting; rather than pass the ball out to a player, the Fishermen had kicked the ball into the corner of the pitch, Corsair content to ignore it and barrel his prison formation down the field.

More concerned with how to retrieve the ball than watching the rest of the play, Honour hadn't seen the cage jaws spring open until it was too late. Poor Tater bore the brunt. He'd advanced a step too far and been dragged into the cage, beaten bloody by a wall of harpoons and spear tips.

At least his sacrifice allowed Bushel the space to get upfield and retrieve the ball, Hag no great threat to the nimble Farmer, and Sakana pinned in place by Grange. And now the goal had given Honour's side a healthy lead to their opposition's single take-out.

The challenge would be getting the final points, Honour knew. As she surveyed the pitch, the Fisherman's Guild took their goal kick, this time landing the ball in the cage. It wasn't a surprise, but her heart sank all the same. She knew all too well what

happened next in the Fisherman playbook. Corsair didn't intend to score any goals, at least not until he'd laid low enough Farmers that a goal would finish the match—and until then, the ball would stay trapped inanimate inside of the same gaol that Tater had fallen foul of.

It was a challenge she wasn't quite sure how to overcome.

Regardless, the first step would be to marshal the team into formation. Millstone and Peck were where they should be, but the Fisherman strategy didn't need a dedicated goalkeeper or defensive marking. The First Lady shot Millstone a look and gestured for her to run forward, and the tough woman quickly left her position by the Farmer goal. Peck followed obediently.

That was the easy part.

Honour saw Tater wasn't yet ready to limp back onto the pitch, still sitting on his arse by the sidelines as a sawbones cleaned a long cut across his brow. He'd be back, although not for several all-too-valuable minutes.

And in the meantime, Bushel and Grange were both in trouble.



Bushel grit her teeth as Jac's trident blade narrowly missed skewering her, instead slicing across her forearm to leave a bright red stripe and a flash of pain. She backed up another few steps as he pushed forward once more,

careful to stay where she could parry his attacks, and not give free reign for him to strike at her when she was defenceless. The edge of the pitch was getting closer and closer, the cries of the crowd almost deafening.

Experience had taught her that a player's situation could change dramatically without warning, and never had that been truer. Moments ago, she'd scored a second goal, breathless from excitement and the blood rushing to her head as the crowd chanted her name. Now the only thing she could concentrate on was staying on her feet.

Bushel couldn't see past the burly Fisherman's shoulders, but she doubted she'd have much friendly support so far upfield. By kicking the ball out wide, the Fishermen had baited her forward, doubtless knowing the Farmers wouldn't be able to give up on a potential goal run. The lack of strikers beyond Bushel was a weakness in the team that Honour was well aware of and planned to rectify in the Free Cities Draft, but little good that did Bushel right now.

Another trident thrust, this time aimed at her ankles, and Bushel sidestepped, kicking the polearm away. She tried to dart under Jac's left arm, but he had a clothesline waiting that sent her reeling on unsteady feet, head spinning. As she tried to blink the disorientation away, Bushel felt her legs swept out from under her, then a rushing sensation as she flew through the air, replaced with a jolt as she landed on the hard stone. She tried to speak but felt an air bubble



caught in her throat, a desperate gulp the only sound.

‘Sorry, lass. I don’t like doing this much,’ Jac spoke for her. His expression wasn’t unkind, softened by the crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes. ‘But I can’t let you get another goal.’

Barely able to draw air into her winded lungs, Bushel was helpless to prevent Jac from hauling her over the edge of the pitch and dumping her out of bounds.

‘You, help her walk it off!’ She heard him offer a gruff instruction to a nearby apothecary, his calloused finger pointing first to the white-robed sawbones, and then in her direction.

All she could do was watch as he stomped back towards the action.



Grange heard a chorus of jeers erupt from the Farmer stands, matched by cheering on the opposite side amongst the Fisherman supporters, but had no opportunity to see why. Sakana was a wily and skilled opponent and fought with a dangerous recklessness. More than once Grange had been forced to turn aside a blade aimed at his throat, only to find another strike waiting. He ducked another attempt but couldn’t stop a backhand belting him across the jaw.

Blood filled his mouth, coppery and metallic.

The Farmer had given as good as he’d gotten, though. The Privateer bled from several gashes opened by

Grange's sawblades, visible both over exposed flesh and as bloody patches on his clothes. A tangle of severed threads all stained red told the story of one vicious blow that had sunk into Sakana's belly.

When the spear came again Grange was waiting, deflecting and then locking the exposed blade with a saw, using his greater strength to force it to the ground. The Fisherman grunted in pain, his eyes narrowing as the deep wound across his midriff contracted and the bloodstain darkened.

Grange felt Sakana weaken, saw his arms shaking, and stepped in to drop him, driving the butt of his saw into the Privateer's temple. Sakana turned pale and reeled, but impossibly kept his feet, holding firm through sheer fortitude and earning a respectful smile from Grange.

As he moved to land the finishing blow, the Farmer was caught off guard by the sharp sting of a harpoon, its barbed metal fin cutting through the air to pierce his leg. Despite his shock, Grange saw the attached rope grow taut and hurriedly tore it out, leaving a spiteful wound.

'Bah!' Corsair, the owner of the vicious blade, snarled at his opposite number and advanced with a surprisingly fast gait. One mighty pull brought the harpoon back into his hands, and a smooth action sent it sailing through the air once more towards Grange.

The Farmer was wise to the weapon this time, blocking it with a sawblade, but he knew Corsair didn't

truly mean to spear him with it. He simply needed to stop Grange from withdrawing, so the cage could claim him. At the edge of his vision Grange could see Kraken prowling one way, and Sakana hobbling in the opposite direction, trapping him inside a circle.

It didn't look good.

'Don't want to fight fair, then? Not even against a bloodied opponent?'

Corsair simply laughed in reply, his mirth sinister.

'I'd heard you pirates were a low lot, but I didn't think you were this bad, ganging up on your opponents one at a time. You're no better than a group of thugs in a street gang.'

The same chuckle. 'Call us what you want, Grange. I don't care. Winners choose the names, not the waste we toss out to sea.'

Either side, Kraken and Sakana took a step forward, closing the gap. Another, and they'd probably be within range to spear him while he fought Corsair.

'I'd ask if you want to lay down and save yourself a lot of pain, but I doubt you would, farmhand. Besides, I'd be lying if I said I won't enjoy this.' Corsair grinned, revealing a row of yellowed teeth, spotted with a couple of golden replacements.

'Take a long walk off a short plank, pirate.' Grange spat his disgust on the ground.

Kraken made the first move, the big man either too impatient for their chatter or reacting to a signal Grange had missed. The bulky Fisherman was eerily

silent as he swung his spear around in a long, sweeping arc, the hooked tip a deadly blur of dark steel. Grange met it with a desperate parry, the sound of the blades hitting sharp, and numbness shooting up his arms. He lost his footing from the impact, sidestepping two clumsy paces.

By the time he'd righted himself, the circle had grown smaller again.

Colour had returned to Sakana's cheeks, Corsair's first mate wearing a sadistic smile paired with a vengeful look. He thrust his polearm viciously, giving Grange little time to block the attack. Grange tried to step away but met a hard shove from Kraken, forcing him back onto the sharp end of Sakana's weapon. A flash of pain caused him to cry out as metal pierced his skin and sank in deep.

Grange doubled over as the blade was pulled free, his vision swimming. He tried in vain to lift his head, feeling like heavy weights were tied around his neck and pulling him down the entire time. His reward was a splash of light from the overhead sun, more blinding as his senses closed in, murky shadows chasing inwards from the edge of his vision.

Something else hit him. It didn't hurt nearly as much as the wound in his belly, fading to numbness almost immediately. He dropped to his knees all the same. Around him surged a sea of shouts and jeers, the identity of the voices lost in a maelstrom of noise and the ringing in his ears.





Millstone crashed into the group of Fishermen in a headlong charge, shoulder down. Corsair bore the brunt of the impact and was sent staggering away from the cluster of players, trying to retain his balance. She caught Kraken too, the hulking man pushed away by her momentum. Honour followed in her wake, sheepdog bounding alongside.

The ball skidded away from Corsair, and rolled towards the sidelines.

Sakana stepped over Grange, simultaneously preventing the new arrivals from helping their captain to his feet and protecting his own. Millstone met him with a monstrous uppercut that finally sent the Privateer down, collapsing atop his flag and failing to rise again.

Honour quickly dragged an unconscious Grange to safety behind their position. Despite the blood, she wasn't concerned. He was tough enough to sleep it off. Her companion whined and licked at the prone figure's fingers.

The two Farmers faced down their opponents, but Honour knew this wasn't the game.

Fortunately for the Fisherman, Jac had been able to collect the ball. He awkwardly dribbled it between his feet, heading back up the pitch towards his own goal with his head down in concentration. The First Lady's

cheeks flushed red, but a cooler head prevailed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tater standing by the sidelines, ready to launch back into the game. Bushel too had already returned, the younger woman putting in long strides to get back into position.

Jac was about to get a taste of his own medicine.

Tater met the brawler with a wide sweep of his shovel, enough to distract Jac from controlling the ball, which rolled to a stop and almost tripped him. Bushel swept in and tackled it away before he could backstep, dodging away from retaliation.

The crowd rose to the occasion, the drum of stamping feet and discordant music loudly renewed from the friendly stands, the opposition meeting the play with spiteful jeering.

Honour couldn't afford to look anymore. Kraken and Corsair were advancing on her, and she needed to get back in her own game, lest she found herself giving up another take-out. It didn't matter though. She had faith in her teammates. Regardless of whether Jac was headed off the pitch, or Bushel would get her hat-trick, this game was the Farmers' to lose.

Moments later her trust was rewarded as the powerful horn sounded, signalling the game was over. The Farmer's Guild supporters broke into uncontrollable cheering, and Honour felt a grin sneaking onto her face from the corners of her mouth.

The Fisherman stands opposite were deadly silent, seething with rage. As Honour watched, an old-timer

proudly wearing a blue jerkin stood to offer a mute clap, as he might have done in the past, until a firm hand reached for his shoulder and forced him back down.

Opposite, Corsair's shoulders slumped, like a puppet with its strings abruptly cut. Honour offered him a hand, the same as she'd done for her opponents at the end of every game, win or lose, no matter how hard fought.

He stared her down by way of reply. 'Lightning doesn't strike twice, First Lady. You're going to lose in the finals.'

If he was going to be such a poor loser, Honour didn't mind being a proud victor. She let her smile grow unchecked, casting his sour retort aside, then turned her back on him, jogging down the field to be with her team.

