



RESURRECTION



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Heavy rain had washed a tide of drenched soil over the steep path winding up to the remote graveyard. Now turned to treacherous mud in the downpour's aftermath, it sat idly over loose stones, a trap for those foolish enough to risk passage to this lonely place.

As Hemlocke climbed, slipping and scrabbling at vicious branches and roots with her hands, she swore misery upon every Old One she knew from the domains and moons of water. It was their torrent that had been unkind to the shrubs, stripping away leaves to reveal sharp thorns and bristles that rubbed and bled her fingers raw.

Once, the Witch might have been too respectful to curse the Old Ones. But those ancient creatures had proven themselves impotent by now, either unable or unwilling to save her when false prophets had come for her skin. Despite the sense of betrayal, Hemlocke didn't blame them. Accusations and petty notions of were the preserve of mortals, and not the gods. She despised herself just as much, besides. Not for siding with the dead-men and adopting their funereal rites, but for accepting the Ferryman's cost of salvation.

She crested the footpath at last, and almost dropped to her knees from exhaustion. This high up, the wind buffeted her, an angry storm of sylph and djinn twisting her robes and trying to drag her to the edge where she might be thrown from the perch. The Witch banished them with swollen hands and wicked tongue.

This was truly a wild land of spirits and storms, and

did not welcome human intrusion.

In Hemlocke's experience, mankind was ever keen to demonstrate its folly, trying to tame the wilds. How little they truly saw. Even the cabal of hunters in the north had forgotten spirits like these. When her breath at last returned, Hemlocke placated the restless spirits as their host assembled once more, assuring them she would depart before the sun fell.

It was a pact she did not intend to break.

Hidden deep in a pocket Hemlocke wished was bottomless and holed, it lurked. A shard of midnight black onyx, carved and polished into a perfect oval; a dark and unholy tear.

To the foolish eyes of the ill-informed it was worthless for anything more than a paperweight.

Hemlocke was neither foolish, nor ill-informed. For a long time, the shard had tainted her soul, stealing her destiny and visiting her with dire omen. Even when it had been sated with a soul of its own, a sharp and jagged vein of hunger remained, taunting her.

At last, she would be rid of it. At last!

Then her bond would be paid, and her life returned.

Hemlocke walked between the stones, searching for the one she knew must be here. Strange souls sat atop some, watching her. They were all very old. Most were at the cusp of being forsaken. Their features had eroded to a skull-like visage, great sloughs of skin having fallen away to leave bleached bone beneath, or even empty voids where no hint of physical presence could sustain

itself. Such was the fate of souls that could not feast upon humanity to sustain their presence. No matter how powerful the desire, how vibrant or desperate the hunger, nothing could live without vital essence, either their own or something stolen.

Finally, she found the stone. The Ferryman's final resting place, where his remains had been banished far from the eyes of man. Unlike the other stones surrounding her, each home to a shade in some varying state of decay, Obulus' was bare. No soul dared to earn his ire by resting there, not even the mischievous imps that typically cared little for such things.

It was time. The storms had passed, the omens clear.

The Witch found herself fumbling at the last, as her fingers found the shard. She held it in both hands, slowly raising it over her head, and offered the lifeless grave a final, baleful glance. Then she closed her eyes, and smashed it into the grey stone with all her strength.



The gale outside tore at the Master Butcher's den, far stronger than usual following the unseasonal torrents of rain. Ox grimaced as it broke his vigil over the lad in the bunk opposite, and with his concentration waning, aches returned from complaining muscles.

In spite of the discomfort, he offered the sleeping boy a satisfied smile. Layne was another night free of night terrors, those nightmares increasingly as banished from

his mind as his addiction.

A wisp of wind found its way in through some open window, running over the Master Butcher's skin and biting to his very bones. Shaking it off, he slowly stood, feeling the blood rush through legs still fatigued from the previous night's work.

A mirror was opposite, and Ox saw in his reflection a tired old man, long overdue retirement from a brutal life. He wore a long gash over his left eye, from brow to nose, dark scab in stark contrast to flesh still pale from his long time served as a prisoner.

If Layne had never looked better, the Master Butcher had to admit he felt quite the opposite.

The wound was a final gift from de Corella, the final blow the paladin had struck before Ox's cleaver had done for the man. The Master Butcher had left the weapon embedded in the man's skull as repayment. Blood for blood, and a near eye for one destroyed by the metal edge. A sadistic part of Ox that he'd thought left in the darkness underground had enjoyed the fearful expression permanently etched in the bastard's remaining eye and set upon the corpse's features.

Another gust rattled the panes, causing a door to move on its hinges and then slam shut once more.

Ox stiffened as he sensed the figure in the shadows. His hand toyed with a skinning knife concealed at his belt.

'You'll have no need of that, Master Butcher.' The rasping voice was cracked and hoarse, but the words distinct enough, and their owner familiar all the same.

‘You’re hale for a dead man, Ferryman.’

‘We both are.’

Obulus stepped away from the corner, the light revealing pink and blotchy skin stretched far too taut across his bones. He scratched at his throat’s inflamed flesh with an emaciated hand, the nails grown to talons.

Ox nodded. The Ferryman’s point was well made. Even after his return, he’d counted himself a dead man—even more so last night, until he’d made his escape. ‘And what draws you to haunt me?’

There was a long pause, as though the Ferryman was deciding how much or little to reveal. In the end he shrugged the indecision away, turning to face the low fire in the corner, eyes watching the flames ebb.

‘My duty to the Empire is done for now, the union protected.’ He paused. ‘Yet, other trials doubtless lie ahead. They always do. And, Butcher, know I am ever appreciative of allies, even amongst the dead.’

Ox scratched his beard and raised an eyebrow. ‘You expect me to sign on with you?’

His comment was met with a strange hacking sound, which he only belatedly realised was Obulus laughing through a ruined throat. ‘I expect that I won’t leave you much choice, Master Butcher. Such is always my way of things. But I would much prefer you to willingly follow. You are far too hard a man to have as an enemy, and we have never called ourselves such.’

The Ferryman’s eyes settled upon the sleeping figure in the cot, and his eyes lit as warm as the fire. ‘I am

relieved that you found a home for that one. When I founded the academy and established the Free Cities Draft, he was always the vulnerable one, always the deeply troubled genius. Had my former colleagues adopted him... he would have been needless lost down in a hole, soul and wings denied.'

His sudden change of subject was startling, although nowhere near as much as his intimation. Ox stroked his beard thoughtfully. 'You've controlled much, Ferryman. Did you orchestrate the breaking of the Union, also?'

'Oho, no. That alas, was the work of Pious VI. The despicable man was, for all his faults, certainly adherent to his adopted title. He couldn't endure the stain on the Solthecian Order's creed, by all accounts. Yet, at least he had the good foresight to let some slip through his grasp, with a little aid from my agents.' Obulus stopped to cough, the sound sharp and hard. 'The Witch especially, was instrumental. I had plans, too, for another of your accomplices, until he stole Brisket instead.'

Gutter slept upstairs, equally as exhausted as Ox after the previous night. She too had shed some of her demons in past hours, dark silhouettes left dancing over Benediction and Grace's corpses.

When no reply came, the Ferryman continued. 'You should be proud, Master Butcher. You breed your people well. Brisket was no simple pawn for me to control.'

A saddened cast struck itself over his features, turning his eyes back to the fire. 'So many lost souls, their blood on my hands in the name of defeating this threat to

our way of life. I can only find justification, and indeed, solace, in the knowledge that the church would have sacrificed many hundreds more in their inevitable wars.

‘I have little sorrow for spiteful agents like Venin, or Mist.’ His voice was a mumble. ‘Yet I am deeply sorry that the boy was the one I needed to finally convince her, to serve as her call to arms.’

No matter the twisted logic, Ox felt his blood boiling. His mind raced with thoughts of throttling the life from the Ferryman, and leaving him dead in the streets for all to see. ‘And Brisket?’ he forced the words through a clenched jaw and grinding teeth.

‘She might have lived, had she poisoned the Bacchus as Hemlocke suggested. Of course, I knew she never would. She was far too stubborn, too proud.’ A pause, then a sideways tilt of the head to regard the Master Butcher. ‘I’ve been told you joined her for the murder, reliving your former life as hatchet man once final time. I can tell it was no simple feat from your appearance. I trust that she sold herself dearly?’

‘Ask her yourself.’

Ox had the satisfaction of seeing Obulus entirely undone, as a weary Brisket appeared in the doorway, eyes still bleary.

‘Ask me what? Who are you talking to?’

‘No one. A ghost.’ Ox didn’t need to turn back to the fire to know that the Ferryman had departed. ‘He’s left now. I imagine he has business yet elsewhere.’

Dead men told no tales, after all.



The members of the Shadow Council squabbled. Once, they had been a proud group, each figure composed and seemingly immune to irascibility. Although animosity had ever sat in the room, clogging the air as much as the pipes that several of the men and women smoked, the measure of the room had been dignified no matter the venom behind the words.

Such times seemed sadly passed.

Pious VI had achieved many things during his tenure. The most insidious had been stoking the hatred felt by the Guilds towards one another beyond the traditional exploitative bonds and pacts. Over the months, they'd been pushed first to thinly veiled threats, then eventually open violence. Despite the Bacchus' death, the hourglass had apparently been broken, and the grains of sand already spilled out. It would take something quite remarkable to seal them back inside once more.

The loudest voice by far came from the figure in the seat stamped with an old numerical "11" stamped on it, spittle exploding from his mouth and running through his beard. The Lord Chamberlain of the Butcher's Guild was a powerfully built man, with shoulders most privately joked were broad enough to pull a wagon, and a bull-headedness to match. He smashed his fist into the table repeatedly to underscore each word, the impact spilling his goblet and sending the glass vessel

plummeting to an untimely demise on the floor.

In the seat to his right, the Lord Huntress looked entirely uninterested with the current state of affairs. Ever since the Fisherman's Guild had lost their seat and the Hunter's Guild had reclaimed their position on the Shadow Council, she had held her voice. During each meeting, baleful eyes stared across the table from under hood at each figure, as though seeking to skewer them in place.

At least for now, most ignored her. The Lord Chamberlain of the Mason's Guild was arguing with the High Artificer from the Engineer's Guild, who had surprisingly offered a full-throated defence of the representative from the Messenger's Guild, cowering in their seat.

By and large the others watched curiously, either waiting for a moment to shout their own agenda over the din, or already having done so and been drawn into a seething war of words with their neighbours.

The only figure to truly retain their calm was the Grand Master of the Blacksmith's Guild. A wizened old man near atrophied to extinction, he was the longest serving individual here by far, and very far from his best. His voice was too frail to best any other present, even if he had chosen to raise it.

Silently, a side door slid open at the back of the gloomy room, unnoticed by all.

The Grand Master felt a hand descend upon his shoulder, the clasp firm and unfriendly. Irritation

wrought upon his features at the intrusion, the man looked upwards through cataract-ridden eyes, mouth already framing a scathing rebuke. Upon seeing his tormentor, the voice died in his throat and his rheumy eyes blinked, averting themselves and finding a better home on the floor beside his chair.

‘Oh, Otto. The years have not been kind to you. I remember you a far more formidable man.’ The voice was a snake’s slither, deadly and sinister.

Despite its low volume, it carried to the furthest corners.

One by one, the voices broke away, or stalled in the owner’s throats. Their eyes all turned to the shadowy figure standing behind the Blacksmith, fingers still rooting the Grand Master to his seat. As each recognised the figure’s pale garb, the colour escaped from their faces, leaving them ashen and corpse-like.

The true Masters of the Shadow Council had finally returned to the chamber, after their long absence.

The Physician’s Guild.

Satisfied to have cowed the room into submission, the hooded figure finally released his grip and began a slow circuit of the table, striding confidently towards the chair marked “XII”. As he passed each figure, they sank silently into their chair, where they sat numbly, watching under lidded eyes.

Finally, he took his seat, a thin smile barely visible under the hood when he saw the glass that had been left for him. If any present felt relief at the gesture, the sentiment soon fled when he began to speak.

'Enough of these petty squabbles. You chatter like children, and I do not suffer fools amongst my vassals.' One hand brought the wine to his lips, the deep red liquid inside brushing against his lips for the merest moment. 'I am the Master Chamberlain of the Physician's Guild. Do any of you doubt me?'

Silence reigned.

The General Secretary of the Astronomer's Guild shook their head, gulping, and even the fierce Lord Huntress dipped her head in submission.

'Good. I had assumed compliance.'

A silver coin appeared in the hand of the Master Chamberlain, his fingers twisting it until it was mesmerising in the light. 'And now I have returned, we shall resume our control over the Empire of the Free Cities. A reasoned, measured, and considered reign. And your institutions shall not fail or test me, lest they and their members meet the same fate as the late Bacchus.' He chuckled. 'Yet, none of this is of your concern.'

He reached up with one crooked hand, and pulled back his hood to reveal his face before continuing. Several in attendance gasped.

'My true identity is at last revealed. And now it is time for you to pay the Ferryman his due.'

Unseen agents had already descended upon the room, figures robed black, wearing long beaked masks. In unison, they reached into their robes and withdrew long knives, silver muted black by grease and oil.

Each dropped a bright silver coin in front of their victim.

And then the blades fell.
As the screams began, Obulus smiled and took another
draught of his wine.

