



# OLD UNBLOODIED



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Rue Paltine was home to surely the most venerable of all stadiums, with a history predating even the earliest written records. Few locations could match such an impressive heritage, and even those of a similar age lacked intact structures to speak of their proud legacy. Armed with such knowledge, a person could easily be forgiven for assuming no other pitch might ever compare.

Yet, the Old Unbloodied managed to do so.

The castle was the opposite of the ancient holy ground in Rue Paltine in every sense, although no less proud. Before the Century Wars it had been a simple fortress overlooking a river crossing, on the lonely border between Skald and Erskirad. Ghalsch, then a sleepy village, had been the only nearby landmark worth note, the rest flat plains stretching for endless miles in all directions.

Yet that same bland landscape transformed the importance of the location with the advent of the war. Thanks to the shrewd political machinations of the Bacchal order, neighbouring Piervo remained a neutral territory throughout the conflict, a haven armies could not march across. In the opposite direction was the ocean, and a region known as Hullbreakers Bight; no navy dared waters so treacherous to have earned such a title.

And so, surrounded by land ideal for an army to march across, the outpost that would assume the mantle of Old Unbloodied became the only warden preventing the Erskirii military from marching directly into Skald.

It served with distinction. Time and time again, its thick walls were tested but never found wanting, its spires resolutely unbroken no matter the siege engine or artifice arrayed against it. Nearby Ghalsch burned, only to be rebuilt in the land safely behind the border, the city walls slowly climbing up as high as the fortress until they became battlements either side, and the castle the beating heart of the settlement.

Come the end of the war, the fortress had earned itself the singular martial distinction of never once having fallen, and the legend 'Old Unbloodied' in doing so. When the unification officially became law and the flag above the fortress had been lowered, it was with great solemnity; it was the first time since the beginning of the horrific conflict that had almost destroyed the world. The banner of the Empire of the Free Cities flew now from the same point, but beside it a replica of the Old Skaldic Empire's black eagle standard in regal tribute.

When architects came to building stadiums in the years following, with no wars to be fought, the Old Unbloodied had been a prime candidate for repurposing. Opposite the river sat flat land that had been salted by one spiteful general or another, frustrated by their lack of ability to overcome the defences. It had been simple enough to expand the fortress walls and create a stadium over such a location.

Honour faintly remembered the last days of the war, and the legend of the impregnable fortress. She'd

never seen it during those years, her mercenary band operating on the far fringes to the east, but had been fascinated by how familiar it felt when first she came here to play in the semi-finals. For older veterans that partook in the game, it was a melding of two worlds—one which had brought civilization to its knees, and the other the hand that pulled it back up to its feet.

And so, once again she stood inside the walls, waiting for the beginning of the game and marvelling at her location as she had each other time.

The Farmer's Guild had made their way to the finals, and this match would decide their opponents. On one side of the pitch, a sea of crimson ebbed and flowed, hundreds of dyed jerkins and tunics, flags, and scarves sporting the deep red of the Butcher's Guild.

They were a dangerous team now, in every possible sense of the word. They'd always been a pack of wild dogs, feral and volatile, pushing at the limits of what the laws of the game might allow. Frequently their actions had even led to sanctions and fines. But now, they were under new captaincy. The Master Butcher had been a brutal taskmaster, yet also respected. The Flashing Blade ruthlessly hungry for success but lawful and considered.

Boar was none of those things.

The Beast was a monster, baying for blood to gorge itself, uncaring for friend or foe, only interested in cleaving a bloody path of destruction. Honour wondered if the man even knew the game could be



won by scoring goals. He certainly didn't care. In all her years, she'd never seen him touch the ball. Not once.

Rumour was that he'd been appointed by the Guild after they grew disappointed with Fillet's lack of results, although Honour doubted that. Although there were no new trophies in the cabinet, Fillet held a respectable record for a new captain. More likely she was working off an injury that the Guild didn't want to be known—and restoring the captaincy to the Master Butcher was a political statement the Butcher's Guild didn't dare make.

Besides, the escalating level of violence in the game was a perfect match to Boar. He was as happy as a pig rolling around in its own shit. Honour just hoped someone would stick a knife in him and leave him there.

Their opponents were newcomers to the Big Leagues, and relative unknowns to the First Lady. This alone was of significant interest, but enough to thrill her even more when she considered their team's unconventional nature.

The Blacksmith's Guild were a team like no other. They appointed their captain using a non-traditional system that Honour couldn't fathom, the role fluid throughout seasons and sometimes seemingly even during games. On occasion, it appeared as though they had three captains in place of the standard one; others, they were isolated pairs of master and apprentice with no team cohesion whatsoever.

Either could be devastating, and the fluidity was fascinating. This approach might even be the future of the game.

The First Lady suspected it might make practice on the training ground impossible, for the simple fact the Blacksmiths were able to rely on their natural physical aptitude and individual conditioning over any sort of team practice. Each of their players were powerfully built from their craft, even the hungry rookies whipcord lean.

She envied their regime greatly, but wondered what might be achieved with a degree more cohesion even more so.

From what Honour had gleaned during her own scouting and that of the pundits she'd spoken to, the Blacksmiths didn't maintain a proving ground whatsoever. They trained behind closed doors, and only came together to decide the captain's mantle, before going their separate way once more. How such an unconventional team had managed to reach this far in the Sovereign States was quite the mystery.



Their excitement undiminished by long hours under a sweltering sun, the crowds roared for their heroes as they jogged onto the pitch. The Blacksmiths were first, Ferrite wearing the stripes this time and leading them out. She offered the stands a winning smile, an

expression not shared by her apprentice, who scowled in every direction he glanced. Iron was monstrosly broad of shoulder, a hulking brute at the start of the season yet now even larger from long days of drills.

Anvil followed the pair at his own pace, his massive hammer held aloft to the skies. Sledge joined him, one heavy arm around fellow apprentice Bolt in a show of camaraderie, the two in stark contrast given their builds. A rolling sound like thunder heralded the final player, a sound quickly taken up by stamping feet in the Blacksmith stands as Lady Justice rode onto pitch astride Judgement.

Honour had to give it to the woman. Her entrance was spectacular.

Cheers from the opposite end of the pitch drew the First Lady's attention, as she watched the Butcher's Guild file out. Unlike the Blacksmiths, the squaddies led the way. Honour saw Tenderiser dragging Truffles by a heavy chain, nodding at the prudence of a goalkeeper, smiled to see Gutter and Shank, and raised an eyebrow when there was a pause for some moments.

From where she stood, she could see the Butcher sidelines, where officials in red were speaking urgently. A few feet away Fillet and Meathook looked on with curiosity writ plain across their features, until one of the officials peeled away and headed in their direction.

Meanwhile, Boar broke out onto the pitch at last, viciously shoving his way past anyone in his way and sending them sprawling. His mouth foamed, and blood

ran down his chin where he appeared to have bitten himself. Muscles bunched tight around his neck, he hunched over like a prowling animal, powerful strides propelling him forward. An oversized cleaver dragged over the ground behind him, leaving a deep gouge in the soil.

It didn't look like he was stopping at the line.

Honour's eyes quickly shot back to the Blacksmith team, where she thought she saw Anvil grin under his beard, before she dragged her head back towards the Butcher dugout.

In the shadow of Old Unbloodied, the crowds were going to witness war once more.

A crowd of officials had gathered around Fillet by now, the woman's curiosity replaced by clear irritation. With Boar already on the warpath, they were still missing a player, and about to start the game. Tension seemed to be growing in the air, bickering voices audible even over the sound of the confused crowd.

Eventually, Fillet leaned over and whispered in Meathook's ear, the other woman nodding, squeezing her captain's arm and kissing her on the cheek before running over the line. She was just in time as the horn sounded, the timekeeper doubtless forced to do so by Boar's charge.

The Beast was hurtling down the pitch, well ahead of the starting line. His team bellowed a war cry, and began sprinting to catch him. Someone out of sight made a pretence of kicking the ball into play, but



Honour doubted most even noticed.

She shook her head. The entire season so far, Butcher plays had been built around using Boiler as a sweeper to great effect, the lad luring the opposition into overcommitting by playing in the pocket and then switching to counterattack. Their line-up was painfully one-dimensional without him, and would have to rely on brute force alone.

They needed a sweeper to bait the trap—and for all her well-honed capabilities on the pitch, Meathook wasn't the one for the task.

If Boar cared, it wasn't showing. He was screaming now, berserker blood upon him, fury infectious enough to have caught most of the others, even Tenderiser running out of position to take the fight to the opposition. As far as she could tell, Boar wanted to win this quickly. Or maybe he just wanted to hurt people.

'Hold! Hold!' Honour could hear Anvil shouting instructions to the other Blacksmiths, his immense shield close to the ground like a wall, and his body braced to take Boar head on.

Judgement wheeled up and down behind the line, champing at the bit as Farris resolutely stared down the Butchers from her raised position. She was either the strike, waiting for the red tide to break, or a bulwark ready to ride in to plug any gaps that emerged. Honour guessed the latter.

Anticipation and excitement ran like wildfire through the stands, warring with a heavy veil of

suspense. Honour felt her heart racing, and the hairs on her arms standing. She was no stranger to the game, or violence for that matter, but this exchange threatened to be something else entirely.

The two sides were seconds away. Once again, the world held its breath, the moment as powerful and vital as ever.

Then the unstoppable force met the immovable object.

The Beast roared like some ancient behemoth from mythic times, muscles bulging as he swung the massive cleaver downwards. Anvil didn't blink, forcing his shield forward, the early point of contact sapping some of the weapon's momentum. Even so, the strength behind the attack sent the Blacksmith backwards a pace, his steel shoes creating muddy trenches where Anvil kept his balance and remained flat-footed.

Boar's cleaver had buried itself deep into the pitch, but the crowd roared its approval as the Beast tore both of the smaller blades from the strapping on his back and renewed his assault. Anvil's shield would be of little further use, one corner also struck into the earth from the force of the impact, and bent inwards around the grip to boot.

Anvil released it and gave the sheet of metal a hard kick, unconventionally shield bashing Boar across the brow. The Butcher reared backwards with a cry, dropping a cleaver to clutch at his face with one meaty hand. When he pulled it away again, it was slick

with blood, and Honour saw that the hard edge of the shield had sunk deep into his eye socket to inflict untold damage. She paled at the messy pulp, even at a distance.

Anvil was made of sterner stuff, advancing past his shield and swinging his weapon in a wide arc, both hands clasped around the haft. His fury undiminished, Boar leapt forward, swiping his smaller weapon across the Blacksmith's belly, severing several strands of white hair, and painting the rest red as it broke the skin beneath.

Beside them, Tenderiser struggled with Sledge, the younger man fighting with his back to Anvil, and being pushed ever closer to the ruined shield. The Butcher had dropped his mallet and pulled one of the knives from his belt, looking to fight dirty.

Sledge stepped left, trying to create room, but was hemmed back in again, scraping his shoulder against the bloody tip of his master's shield and leaving red on his tunic. Faced by the sinister Butcher, the apprentice's normal composure seemed absent, eyes darting around desperately.

Suddenly Boar crashed into him, sending both men to the ground in a thrashing tangle of limbs. Honour saw Boar turn the unexpected collision to his advantage, landing several heavy blows into Sledge, and the smaller man turn limp.

Anvil approached resolutely, hammer held in one hand. The other reached for Sledge and roughly pulled him up and out of the way before the shrieking Boar

could inflict a more severe injury. Tenderiser saw his opportunity and stabbed the older Blacksmith between the ribs, his knife sinking all the way in to the hilt.

The First Lady heard Anvil grunt and thought she might have seen his footsteps falter as he turned to face his new assailant, before he was able to right himself once more. The knife still hung from his skin, flesh around the wound discoloured where blood vessels had burst.

Boar rose like a prize gladiator. Blood dripped from his chin over his heaving chest, and his mouth was locked into a cruel smile. His eye was a gory hollow. Somehow, it added to his appearance. His agony had apparently been soaked up by his bloodlust, leaving only fury now.

Anvil roughly pulled his tower shield out of the ground as the predators stared at him, the other hand clenched white-knuckled around his hammer. Unlike Boar, the wild animal let loose from its cage, the Blacksmith stood proud; but no matter how formidable he might have been, he was no match for the pair when injured and protecting a prone apprentice.

Boar gave him little chance to rouse his teammate and charged in, entirely eschewing a weapon and reaching for the throat. He met the head of Anvil's hammer, the blow hitting him square in the temple and sending him lifeless to the ground. Tenderiser was more fortunate, heavy hand grasping his knife and tearing it out of Anvil with a savage wrench. The pitch



underfoot turned crimson as the Blacksmith started to bleed out, and Honour realised the severity of the injury.

Boar was down, but Anvil wouldn't be long to follow.

Movement to Honour's side drew her attention away. Too engrossed in the fight, she'd lost track of what was occurring on the other half of the pitch. Now, a spectator to her side—a heavysset man wearing Blacksmith colours and looking for the life of him like one of their apprentices—was pointing. Further along the pitch, Bolt had claimed the ball, and dribbled his way down the field, keeping it safely under control. He need not have worried. The Butchers had left near enough an open goal without their safety player.

Meathook was heading back to intercept, but she was cut off by Ferrite, who deftly tripped the Butcher, and then stood between the two.

Bolt was on to get the first goal of the game. Without any pressure, Honour smiled to see the lad take his time and take his shot neat. The Blacksmith's Guild went ahead, and Honour wasn't sure that this Butcher side hadn't met their match.

But the question remained... where was Boiler?