



THE FREE CITIES DRAFT



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— RESSURECTION —

Amber couldn't have rightly said why she'd come to hide under the old bridge. Perhaps it was familiarity. As a lass she'd played here with the other Brewer kids, mindlessly splashing through the muddy water as children did. She could only dimly remember those days. What little she did recall came with the memory of her mother tanning her hide for dirtying her clothes.

Years later, once they were old enough to start looking at each other with romance in their hearts, this had briefly been a hideaway of an entirely different type. She'd stolen her first kiss here, over on the opposite bank. She smiled kindly at the recollection. Looking back, she knew Stout had been as nervous as she, despite his bullish frame and confident smile.

After that night she'd never even thought about this place, let alone come back.

Until now.

Quietude reigned as night began to fall, broken only by the sound of water lapping against the sandy bank. Amber reclined against an aged wooden strut and watched the sun slip below the horizon and eventually collapse into a crimson smear.

Unbidden tears came and went, Amber unable to blink them away. The setting of the sun was akin to the end of the world she'd always known. She didn't have to gaze through the gaps in the beams to know stars had already begun to appear far above, no doubt

the moon soon to follow. A new era was settling in, a strange beast come to devour the carcass of the old one before it had even grown cold.

She'd been a Brewer since birth, her family proud members of the aged Guild for more generations than anyone cared to remember. The only aspiration she'd ever known was to join the ranks of the men and women in the Grand Brewer's inner circle. The day she'd finally been accepted had been the proudest of her entire life.

Now figures like Tapper and Spigot wouldn't even turn their heads in her direction. It hurt like a blade digging into her chest, sharper and more intense than anything she'd ever felt. Try as she might to banish it, Tapper's expression relentlessly haunted her. She couldn't recall ever seeing the Grand Brewer look so weary as he had this afternoon, shoulders rounded and deep lines cut into the skin across his forehead and around his eyes. The latter spoke of torment she couldn't comprehend, echoing from a depth she'd never suspected.

Her mother's eyes had been the same. The older woman had tried to hide her disappointment, but Amber knew better. Her mother had struggled to find her place in the world ever since her husband's passing, all sense of order bolted like horses from a burning stable. Amber's bright future had been the only source of solace for the widow, and now that too had been cruelly stolen.

This morning they'd fought like only family could. By the end they'd run the full gamut, from bitter reproaches and smart retorts through to screaming at each other at the top of their lungs. Amber's exile even ceased to be the subject before too long, replaced instead by the tumult of emotions they'd never let surface since her father's death. Eventually it had all been too much. Amber fled after offering her mother one final, scathing rebuke, her words deliberately spiteful.

In the aftermath she was a true outcast, without hearth or roof over her head, only memories to replace her absent kuttu.

Amber wiped her watery eyes with a dirty cuff. Reliving the past in her head wouldn't solve anything. She didn't belong there. Not anymore. And that was all there was to it.

The skies were already tainted shades of blue-purple. Blessedly, there were no clouds to forecast rain, but Amber knew she couldn't well stay under the bridge. The tide had begun to rise at last, water splashing her boots. Another half hour and it would likely be at her knees.

With a tired sigh she stood up straight, and bid the memory of her first kiss farewell. Like everything else it would have to stay here, left in the shadows. It was time to begin the rest of her life and find her way once more. Dragging one numb foot after another Amber began to climb upwards, returning to the world.

She didn't dare look back.

Without a destination in mind Amber had left her direction to her feet, wandering aimlessly and only mindful each step took her yet further from the Drunken Seamstress. By now she'd found herself on empty streets, solitary footsteps echoing over hard stone cobbles without reply in kind. In the back of her mind she knew she'd have to find somewhere to spend the night soon, even if it was likely a tunnel or dark alcove. None too glamorous for her first night as an exile, but anywhere would do to keep the chill wind off her back.

Ahead, a single lamp post beat back the darkness, a pale oasis set against the inky black surround. A figure waited underneath, little more than a slender silhouette emerging from a pool of shadows at their feet. Thoughts of shelter forgotten, Amber approached. She hadn't realised how much she wanted to speak to someone until now, yearning for some human contact to replace the trauma from earlier.

As her steps brought her closer she saw the figure was a young man, a handful of summers older than her at most. He leaned against the post with casual familiarity, arms folded and sole of one boot crossing his ankle. A shaggy crop of hair crested his head, cut close around the temples and fading to a clean-cut jawline. Balanced between his lips, a thin cigar curled smoke through the air as he exhaled. He offered a

curt nod. The gesture was open and friendly, Amber returning the salute as the voice of caution in her head abated slightly.

For a long moment that was all there was, the lad apparently in no great rush to speak. Amber found herself fighting the urge to pace from one foot to another.

She had just about reached the end of her patience when he at last spoke, eyes turned to regard her. 'I know you. Drunk, right?'

Amber felt her blood turn cold. She hated the name as much as any Brewer did, even knew plenty who would have drawn a blade for less. But, she conceded, this time it was shame and not anger which pulled at the hairs on the back of her neck. She forced evenness into the tone of her reply.

'Once.' Her fingers absentmindedly stroked the space on her tunic where the kutte once sat. 'Not anymore.'

He seemed to mull the information over before speaking again. 'So, what are you now?'

'I... I don't know. Haven't got that far.' Amber hated the moistness she suddenly felt at the corners of her eyes.

A disarming smile broke over his face. 'Doesn't matter. You'll work it out soon enough.'

'No doubt.' Amber didn't believe the words. She wondered if he did.

Mercifully, he changed the subject. 'I like it out here at night. Just me and my thoughts, and the occasional mystery to be solved.'

Amber guessed she was the latter.

‘Smoke?’ He produced a small box from an unseen pocket, and deftly plucked a thin roll from within.

Amber hesitated. She wasn’t a stranger to tobacco. A few months earlier one of Amber’s friends had swiped a box of cigars from somewhere, and they’d spent an afternoon trying to look more grown-up in front of the other girls. Amber hadn’t cared much for the taste at the time, the smoke heavy on her throat.

Still, she didn’t want to show any offence. These rolls looked smaller and less intimidating, besides.

The lad lit the cigar using the spark from his own, before offering it to her. Amber accepted and took a draw, dry smoke immediately flooding her senses and leaving her light headed.

She hurriedly exhaled the bitter taste in a stream, hoping he wouldn’t notice her expression.

The lad was speaking again. ‘So, got a name, mystery?’ His lips were turned upwards impishly. Amber couldn’t decide whether she were the subject of a joke, or he was simply being friendly.

She coughed. ‘Amber.’ Her voice felt tainted and heavy from the smoke.

‘I make that about right. Couldn’t put a name to the face at first. You played Big League Guild Ball last season, right?’

‘Aye, last three games of the season.’ Amber answered cautiously, wondering where this was going. ‘Midfield, paired with Friday.’

‘Put her to shame too, more than once. No mean feat,

that.' His grin grew wider. He had good cheekbones. Smiling definitely suited him, the expression gradually dispelling her remaining concerns.

'Maybe. Won't be happening again, though.'

His brow raised and his lips straightened. 'So, I guess you've been cut loose from the team then?'

'Something like that.' She couldn't quite keep a despondent tone from her voice. The games had been the most exhilarating experience she'd ever known, now reduced to yet another happy memory she had to leave behind.

'Well, I'm sorry to hear it, for whatever the words of a stranger are worth. Their loss, not yours.'

Amber didn't agree, but she bit her tongue. The last thing she wanted now was to get into an argument in the middle of the street.

'Nomad, by the way.' He leant towards her, one hand outstretched, and she shook it. 'Listen, Amber, I might be able to help you. Do you have time to take a walk?'

Once upon a time this place might have been an estate for some lord or another, although judging by its run-down appearance such days were long passed now. They entered through a gap in the wall with bent and rusted hinges set in the stone. The rest of the proud metalwork sadly absent, looted in a bygone age.

The gardens beyond were in an equally sorry

state of disrepair. Weeds choked the flowerbeds and overgrown grass swayed on the wind, even darkness unable to mask where vines encroached over grey statues stained with grime. Nomad didn't talk much as they picked their way towards the sprawling mansion ahead, which suited Amber just fine. Her curiosity had been piqued by this strange location, so alien to what she was used to. Her eyes roamed restlessly, taking in every detail.

The manor house loomed overhead by the time they reached the steps leading to the grand doorway, tall spires lost to the night sky. Closer to the ground candles and torches illuminated the aged building, irregularly set in shallow alcoves and places where crumbling brickwork had created openings. The effect on the imposingly sturdy building was strangely comedic, Amber decided. It put her in mind of a child scribbling their way through a history book with crayon.

'Home, sweet home.' Nomad announced. His pronouncement was met by drunken singing, echoing from somewhere inside.

'Looks like a dosshouse,' Amber muttered.

If Nomad heard her reply he ignored it, climbing up to the towering oak doors and pushing one open. It slowly swung ajar on creaking hinges, revealing gentle candlelight within.

'Coming?' There was the friendly smile once more.

Amber shrugged. It wasn't like she had anywhere else to be. She carefully stepped over broken chunks

of slate, fallen from above and shattered on the steps, before hurrying after him.

The entrance hall inside still held some majesty, despite having shared the same neglect as the exterior. Rows of half lit candelabra banished the shadows to the corners with the cobwebs, revealing a grandly decorated space, with paintings hanging lopsidedly on the walls between the rich wood doors. Underfoot a threadbare carpet had seen better days but had yet to rot, only tarnished by explosions of dust kicked up by their footsteps.

Nomad stopped to listen for but a moment before striding confidently towards the first door, pushing it open without knocking. Amber quietly followed, unsure of what else to do.

They entered a smaller and more intimate study with heavy curtains covering the windows. A soft but flickering light came from several candles placed seemingly at random about the room. It was empty of inhabitants but for the sleeping figure of a young man sprawled on a divan, the broad chair haphazardly pushed against the opposite wall.

Amber studied him intently. Much like Nomad, he couldn't have been much older than her, his features boyish and untouched by the ravages of age. They were framed by a thick head of dirty blonde hair, tangled into matted dreadlocks. The rest of him was skinny, his body drowning in a shirt at least a size too big.

Asleep, he looked entirely at peace in the quiet room.

Nomad broke the silence. 'Hey, Layne. Are the others about?'

The lad's eyes opened a fraction. 'Aw, hey Nomad-lad. Nah, most are out somewhere. Just me, uh, maybe Edge or Champ.' Even thick with sleep, his voice had a beautiful inflection, a soft drawl from which words tumbled like smoke.

Amber stared. Layne's lips curved gently at the edges when he spoke, revealing a strikingly strong jaw in the low light. His gaze, still a little unfocused, flicked in her direction before she came to herself and broke away, blushing.

'Hey there. You're uh, new, lass.' Layne swung his legs around and rose to a sitting position, brushing his mane backwards out of his eyes. 'Here to stay?'

She was about to answer when Nomad spoke for her. 'Not sure. I'm just giving the tour. Thanks for letting me know about the others.' He gently tugged at her sleeve, a sign they should leave Layne to his own devices.

'A'rite. Nice to, uh, meet you.' As Layne lazily waved a hand in their direction and slumped back onto the divan, Amber took one last look, only reluctantly leaving the room behind her.

Once they were outside, Nomad smiled apologetically. 'Sorry about Layne. He's usually a little more... engaged.'

She wondered what he meant, but didn't have time to enquire further. Footsteps heralded the arrival of another figure, this time a young woman, stomping

her way down the central staircase with deliberately heavy feet.

Amber saw the newcomer was quite the picture as she came into view, hair bleached white down one side, contrasting with the dark bangs opposite. She wore heavy trousers tucked into a pair of workman's boots, with a hooded shirt which would have been better suited to a guard somewhere. Unlike Layne, when Amber caught the new arrival's eye, the young woman stared back fiercely.

Amber quickly averted her gaze. She wasn't here to fight.

The young woman hopped over the last two steps. 'Fresh blood huh? Didn't know your sheets had grown cold, Nomad. What happened to the Valentian redhead? Gnaw her leg off and jump the fence, like the last one before her?'

Dry humour laced her voice, and Amber felt an idiotic grin creep across her lips.

'Get fucked, Edge.' Nomad's composure fled, along with his smile.

'Original.' The girl slipped past, headed for the door. At the threshold she leaned back and blew a kiss in their direction, ending it with her outstretched hand in a middle-finger salute. Then, with a nimble sashay she was gone..

Nomad cleared his throat. 'Looks like I owe you another apology. Some of the other inmates don't play nice like I do.'

Amber nodded absentmindedly, looking after Edge

for a brief second, before blinking and forcing herself back to attentiveness. She'd seen enough. 'What is this place? And why have you brought me here? If you think me some easy filly, I swear I'll—'

Her guide raised his hands in a placatory gesture. 'Whoa, don't get the wrong idea from what Edge just said. You're a nice lass and all... but, I, I don't want anything... like that, no. Honest.'

Amber studied him with a tinge of suspicion. 'I wasn't worried.' Her reply was colder than intended, but served well enough. She'd sized Nomad up earlier, contented she could beat him blue if he so much as laid a hand on her.

'Ah. Good. Yes, good, then.' He paused, some of his lost bluster returning. 'Why did I bring you here? Well, tell me... have you ever heard of the Free Cities Draft?'

Amber eventually caught up with Edge atop a raised circle of stone paving, overlooking a field below. Although it was difficult to know, she guessed by the dull ache in her calves her search had taken her halfway around the expansive demesne. The other woman eyed her silently as she approached, face lit by the ruddy ember tip of a rolled-up cigar.

Below, a patch of ground had been inventively turned into a makeshift pitch. Small stones marked the boundaries, near lost to thick grass which thinned as

it led to the centre spot, stomped into dirt by repeated footfall. Here and there, lumps of broken wall provided obstacles and barriers, and upturned soil beds served as slick patches of mud and uneven bogs. There were even goalposts, tatty old scarecrows staked into the ground, sinister shapes in a world without the sun.

The night's silvery moonlight bathed everything in an eerie glow, only adding to the surreal scene. She recalled Nomad's words.

It's not much to look at – but this is where the names of tomorrow will make the first step on the path to greatness. This is...

'...the future.' Amber finished the sentence out loud.

She thought she heard Edge snort beside her.

'So, he gave you the talk then. Wasn't sure he would. Couldn't decide if he had you marked for the draft, or just wanted to bed you.'

Amber offered Edge a withering look. 'Assuming he did, you weren't of any help.'

'None of my business. Most women fall over themselves to climb into his cot.'

The wind had picked up, and Amber swiped away an errant lock of hair before continuing, trying to keep irritation from her tone. 'More fool them.' She gestured at the cigar. 'Does everyone here smoke those things?'

Edge took a long drag, then pursed her lips and blew out a stream of smoke. 'Just Nomad and I, usually. Maybe some of the others around the fire. What's it to you?'

‘It isn’t anything. But all I have to go on so far are the words of two strangers, both with a mouthful of tar.’

Edge’s mood seemed to lighten at that. Amber almost thought she saw a smile.

‘Nomad gets to be too preachy at times, makes listening to him hard work.’ Her voice was husky after the final drag. She dropped the stub onto the stone underfoot and ground it into oblivion.

‘I don’t know about his Guild Ball aspirations, but this place isn’t the worst I’ve known. Better than watching your back in some fleapit lest a knife come to tickle your ribs, or sleeping out rough in the rain.’

Amber waited, wondering if Edge would elaborate further. When no explanation came, she spoke instead. ‘So, you don’t care about the game at all?’

The other woman seemed to mull the question over, returning her eyes to the pitch.

‘I’m good at it, they tell me. Like I should care.’ She paused. ‘But it gives me a roof over my head, most importantly. After that, I don’t mind, no matter how many times someone tells me the scout is sniffing around.’

Amber nodded along, but she doubted the words were entirely true. Edge held her head high, chin pointing defiantly upwards. It was almost as though she were trying to prove something to herself as much as Amber. She chose not to give voice to her suspicions and found herself stifling a yawn instead. It had been a long day.

‘Mm-hmm. You want a place to bed down for the night?’

Amber felt panic chase across her, half embarrassed Edge had interpreted the yawn as a request, half ashamed to admit the truth. At once steely reserve began to fade away, revealing the scared girl from earlier in the day.

'If it's no trouble.' The battle to keep her voice even was far harder than she'd expected.

'Fine with me. No skin off my nose. Haven't shared for a while. Just don't expect to stay up talking like maids all night. If you're looking for that, you can wait for Kami to come back.'

'Er... no, I don't. And thank you.'

Edge shrugged the sentiment off, turning back towards the mansion.

Amber remained for a moment, her eyes looking on at the field below. Clumps of grass swayed against the wind, and ripples of silver shimmered from small puddles.

I've seen you play. You're one of us. There's raw talent in you which the world ill deserves to see wasted - so take charge, and push back against whatever happened to you.

Memories of previous games flooded back. The sun beating down exhaustingly, fatigue creeping into her limbs. Angry shouting all around, but the cheers even louder. The thud of heavy footsteps as the big lads thundered past her, Tapper and Hooper charging into the opposition, weapons raised.

She knew she'd kick herself forever if she didn't take this opportunity. The camaraderie, the rush

of stepping out in front of the crowd, the pursuit of victory. She'd never known how vital that was or how much she needed it until this moment, when everything else was stripped away.

What have you got to lose?

Nomad's voice came to her again, this time his final words before she'd stepped outside. Amber looked at her tunic, at the spot where the kutte had sat, now glaringly absent.

'Nothing,' she thought. 'I've already lost it all.'

A shaky hand cleared eyes threatening to well up again. She would cry no more. She might not be a Brewer anymore, but that didn't mean she had become weak. She had been raised with dignity, and it was time to reclaim some of that pride from the abyss. Amber gave the pitch one last, lingering appraisal.

Shadow games and the world of the old guard are behind us, slowly dying out with the veterans of yesteryear. This is our time, now.

Nomad was right. The path to reclaim her life would begin here.

This was her time.

The road to the Free Cities Draft had begun.

— INSIDE THE CASTLE —

Daylight revealed an unforeseen advantage to the academy's proving grounds which Amber quickly came to appreciate. With no surrounding stands, the open pitch always seemed to hold a welcome breeze driving from the west. Without it, the heat from the unrelenting summer sun would have easily exhausted all of them after mere hours. Whoever had cleared the gardens ahead of their arrival had either done their research or simply been lucky—either way, Amber always found herself thanking the unknown figure, even if the stiff wind did cause her passes to curl. That was an inconvenience she'd happily endure in exchange for blessed cool air.

Today was no exception to their usual regime. They'd been playing since early this morning and were on their third game. The results mattered as little as the changing line-ups; these games were intended to develop stamina and experience. Bragging rights over goals were on no one's minds.

Amber slowed her pace as she crossed over the halfway line, wiping the sweat from her brow. Her own exhausted breath was deafening to her ears. She still hadn't quite gotten used to the lack of ambient noise during these practice sessions, so different from an actual game out in front of the crowds. At any of the major Guilds, even training sessions on the proving grounds attracted a cadre of onlookers, while here

there were only her teammates and their opposition. In the eerie silence, she could hear every sound carry over the bare soil. Footsteps had her looking over her shoulder far more than they should have, and every utterance could be heard from one end of the pitch to the other.

‘Go, damn you—run at them!’ Amber didn’t need to look to know the voice belonged to Champ. None of the other rookies were nearly so forthright, nor did they feel the need to bellow at the top of their lungs.

In Amber’s experience, the woman was deeply infuriating at best and a nightmare just about any other time. Champ was driven like no other individual she’d ever met, on a par with a player in the Big Leagues. Everything was practice for the next game on the horizon, and if it didn’t neatly fit into that, Champ didn’t care for it in the slightest.

Out on the pitch, she rubbed nearly everyone the wrong way with her brash calls. More than once Amber had seen Nomad flash a snarky grin before wholly ignoring the play, just to piss Champ off in retaliation. The others were less overtly rebellious, but they were never shy about grumbling. There was only one player the woman seemed never to upset, a solitary figure who let the abuse roll away like water off a duck’s back.

Edge.

Amber had challenged her roommate why on plenty of occasions, each time only receiving a shrug in return. The topic became a sort of tired, one-sided

game before Amber finally gave up asking. Yet in spite of herself, she too had slowly developed a grudging respect for Champ—the same she suspected each of the rookies secretly held for the young woman.

In Champ's mind, Amber realised, she was seizing the moment with as much passion and zeal as she could; if she didn't make the Big Leagues, it certainly wouldn't be for lack of trying. By all accounts she'd spent the best part of her life honing her prodigious natural ability, and it certainly showed. The way she carried herself and exuded confidence was powerfully reminiscent of a woman at least five years her senior and a seasoned veteran to boot.

More than any of them, Champ was hungry. Hungry to be the first draft and for the success which would follow.

Amber heard the familiar kiss of a leather boot meeting the ball.

'Make it! Make the bloody play!' Champ yelled. Amber rolled her eyes as she pushed herself harder to meet the pass. Understanding she might have, but that didn't mean she had to be sympathetic in the face of obnoxiousness.

The ball dropped at her feet, and with no immediate pressure from other players, Amber smoothly took control. The opposition were still returning from her half of the pitch, the combination of Nomad, Layne and Kami a potent striking side but one which also played far too deep to easily stop a counter-attack.

The moment she saw Knuckles waiting between

her and the goal, Amber's heart sank. The opposition could afford to overextend themselves as much as they wanted; the burly Numasai might as well have been a solid brick wall for all he let players past him.

She feinted a dash out to the left before ducking right, testing his mettle. For a split second she saw his forehead creased in confusion and thought she'd beaten him, but then reality reasserted itself and the wind was knocked from her lungs, the world turning sky blue as his clothesline took her off her feet. She landed awkwardly, a jolt of pain radiating from her hip across her back.

Pale blue became a jumble of stars and for a moment Amber felt the world slip away.

A hand shook her shoulder from somewhere beyond the blur, the kaleidoscope of spinning colours gradually slowing from blinding rainbow to merciful ebb. A large hand seized hers, and with a rush of air, she was standing on unsteady feet, leaning against Knuckles until her balance returned.

'You okay?' His eyes wore a concerned cast, matched by lips drawn in a thin line.

Amber had quickly found Knuckles to be a gentle giant in spite of his appearance or behaviour on the pitch. He didn't go easy on anyone but was always the first to congratulate a goal for either side, grinning widely as his powerful arms slapped the scorer on the back.

No doubt such behaviour sat very ill with Champ.

As her head returned, Amber tried to catch up with

the game. Gaffer had the ball and was cautiously advancing over the line, head moving side to side as he read the lay of the land. Nomad was too far out of position for a pass by far, still deep on the wing. Kami sat in the middle but was fighting off Flea, the young lad nipping at her heels.

That left just Layne, grinning handsomely with one slender arm held aloft. He was barely a handful of paces deeper than Gaffer, but Amber had seen him like this before. His blood was up and his eyes were wild. Even the air around him seemed somehow charged.

With Champ bearing down on him, Gaffer took the bait, a neat pass rolling sideways to Layne. Amber's heart leapt as the wiry lad reacted with enviable smoothness, propelling himself into the ball path. One foot caught the pass on the arch between heel and toe and rolled it ahead.

He made it look easy, every time.

Champ swiftly changed direction to intercept the run, relentlessly pursuing the play, but Layne was more than ready. He punted the ball long and skipped into her path, blocking with his body. A neat heel hobbled one ankle and forced her to stumble before he sprinted away on the tips of his toes, leaving her in his dust to catch up with the ball. The whole interaction had taken barely a second, Amber guessed. It was just as well. She'd been holding her breath the entire time, leaving her giddy and grinning like an idiot.

She couldn't help it when it came to Layne. He made

everything look so effortless that other players seemed clumsy and sluggish by comparison.

The final defender was Flea, a terrified expression plastered to his face. Nimble footwork forgotten, he stared as Layne flicked the ball high into the air to pass over his head and slipped by. It didn't even land on the pitch before Layne struck it with a thunderous volley.

Cutlass had come forward from her line at the goal but had no chance of reaching the shot in time. The ball slammed into the scarecrow goalpost's head, snapping it clean off in a shower of stuffing.

Amber joined Knuckles in a cheer, punching the air. The pair of them had been watching spellbound, witnesses to true footballing greatness. She wondered if this was how a young Spigot or Brisket had been. She didn't know of any player who could match that strike or the way Layne had beaten the others.

Layne jogged back up the pitch with a sappy smile. Champ insisted the expression made him look like a halfwit, but Amber tended to disagree. Somehow it fit him perfectly—and was entirely endearing. She risked one last look, committing the sight to memory as best she could before the blushing got too bad and she had to look away.

Embers swirled around the fire, mesmerising specks of bright orange floating on the wind. Amber caught herself remembering the hearth inside of the Drunken Seamstress and shook the thought clear of her head. With every day it was becoming easier to forget her

past, but the memories couldn't fade anywhere near fast enough for her liking.

Although she typically preferred to socialise, tonight she'd kept close to the fire. Edge had been teasing her in front of Layne again, and Amber had sat down hoping the firelight might hide the colour of her cheeks.

Thankfully, she couldn't see him to test herself. He'd slunk away earlier as he did most evenings; usually he returned some hours later with that lopsided grin on his face. Instead, Amber found herself watching Cutlass and Knuckles in their favourite pastime, dicing over a handful of coins. There wasn't any real value to their game. Regardless of who won, come evening's end the old coppers would be divvied out equally without fail, ready for the next round.

They were a strange pair. Knuckles was broad-shouldered and heavily muscled, with colourful tattoos that appeared to dance and writhe in the flickering light; next to him, Cutlass looked tiny, lithe, and wiry, her untamed hair a shock next to her friend's tight knot.

Amber had quickly come to know most of the other women well enough, but Cutlass remained a mystery, fascinating her as only an enigma could. Rumour had it she already was the target of several Guilds in the Draft, most of whom either wanted a goalkeeper for their roster or planned on denying their rivals one. This information, coupled with her age, lent her a mature sophistication unmatched by any of the other rookies.

It was a sense only aided by her infamous past.

Amber knew the dark rumours surrounding Cutlass' previous life all too well—or, more precisely, at least as many of them as anyone seemed to. Cutlass was far from tight-lipped, after all. But because she always chose to speak about her past in abstract terms or dismissive tones, she only managed to cultivate an even greater an aura of mystery. When listening, Amber could never lose the suspicion that some intangible truth was always bubbling just beneath the surface, merely awaiting the right question to bring it to light.

And then there was Cutlass herself.

She certainly didn't match how Amber imagined a pirate to be. Possessed of a strange aloofness tempered by a contradictory self-deprecating mirth, Cutlass spent most of her time prancing around as though she were dancing. She laughed at just about any joke; occasionally rattling the speaker with a terrifying deadpan expression, as though she'd suffered the greatest offence, only to guffaw a second later.

She did at least drink like a pirate. Always first to open the wineskin, she had proven time and time again she held her rum better than some Brewers Amber had known, necking the dark rum that burned Amber's throat with barely a tremor.

In spite of all this—or, as Amber suspected, because of it—Cutlass was adored by the group.

After first seeing them sit down to dice, Amber had

wondered if Knuckles were sweet on his companion. The game seemed almost intimate, like two lovers dancing around each other, always on the cusp of embrace.

She'd abandoned that idea by now. The tall Numasai was probably the most honest person Amber had ever met, his steely eyes matching an intensely calm demeanour. Watching him with Cutlass had taught Amber theirs was a relationship born of companionship rather than romance. Knowing to keep people at a healthy distance could have been a lesson he'd learned growing up, besides.

Unlike Cutlass, Knuckles' former life was all obvious, etched into his skin by the tattooist's ink and the scars crossing his torso. A particularly jagged slice dominated from his hip to his ribs on one flank, a ridge of painful and angry looking flesh Knuckles called his 'fate line'. All told, it had been the final injury which had forced him to confront his prior existence for what it was and aspire to better himself.

She'd been relieved to hear it. Having grown up around Brewer gangs herself, Amber better understood the life than anyone else here. All too often gangers told stories which ended in silence, the fate of their allies unspoken.

Knuckles deserved far better than such an ending.

A soulful crooning announced the return of Layne, and suddenly Cutlass and Knuckles were quite forgotten, as he flopped down next to Amber at the fire. For a moment she grew concerned, noting a

sort of hollowness which had taken hold, before the warmth of the fire and his easy smile banished such thoughts. He was relaxed and composed, hair flopped over one side of his head.

'Hey, Amber-lass. Saw you land pretty hard today. Everything okay?' His drawl was as charming as ever.

'I'm fine, thanks.' She managed not to squeak the answer, feeling absurdly proud of herself.

Layne seemed to consider this before nodding. 'A'rite. I wanted to see, you know. Make sure.' He pushed himself back to his feet, long arms swaying. 'I'm headed back.'

Amber was about to offer to join him when Cutlass distracted her, the pirate crowing as she won the final coin in the pot. By the time Amber stood and looked around, Layne was gone. She sighed, mostly at herself. She'd likely just have embarrassed herself talking to him anyhow.

Walking back alone, she found herself reflecting upon the experience so far. The other rookies were extremely welcoming, and thanks to the academy she had a safe place to sleep as well as rations to keep her fed and watered. In return, she only needed to attend practice drills each day, honing her skills on the pitch in advance of the Free Cities Draft.

She'd somehow landed on her feet with spectacular fortune, yet the Draft remained a hopelessly daunting prospect.

Amber knew she had some natural aptitude, but

everyone here still felt easily out of her reach, their skill far beyond hers. She doubted she would ever feel as practised or commanding as Gaffer or display a quarter of Edge's flair or Knuckles' robust reliability. And players like Layne and Champ existed on another level entirely. They were true legends in the making.

She'd not spoken to the others about her fears, keeping the secret even from Edge. Most nights it kept her awake in fits of restlessness while doubts ran wild through her mind. What if none of the Guilds wanted her? If she didn't make the Draft?

She'd be out on the streets again, adrift once more.

Amber felt a shudder of dread pass through her and turned her head towards the academy, pretending its tall walls and spires were part of a castle in which she could hide from her doubts. In better times she might have laughed at the childish conceit, but in her heart she didn't feel strong enough.

Not yet.

There was always another day, she continually told herself, a far-off time when she could grow up and stop being frightened. Until then? Until then the only option was to throw herself into practice as hard as she could, just like Champ.

Rumour had it the scouts were coming to observe them tomorrow, the first time since Amber arrived. She knew she'd feel like an imposter on the field, a mummer playing a role. But mime her way through the games she would. There could be no falling at the

first hurdle, even if the trial did terrify her.

Step after step she drew closer to her castle. It would keep her safe until morning, at least.

— FOOTBALL LEGEND —

Daylight crept into the room through the pale glass pane, highlighting motes of dust that drifted through the air. Bedsheets kicked to the floor, Amber lolled contentedly on her cot, savouring the summer sun's warmth on her bare legs. She didn't need to look in Edge's direction to know her roommate was asleep still. This early she'd doubtless be the only soul awake throughout the entire academy, a fact which lent the air a rather romantic feeling.

Amber smile. She loved it up here. An old attic converted into a dormitory room, it both shielded them from the noise on the lower floors and afforded the greatest view. She knew the vista behind the window all too well, having spent hours staring across the peaceful scene. Immediately below, the grounds would be bathed in the sun, the drab colours brought to life by an overlay of gold. Beyond that stood the sprawling forest, an impenetrable curtain of trees painted brilliant hues of green. Finally, the tallest city towers shimmered in the distance, barely visible even in the light.

It broke her heart in equal measure as it did catch it. More than anything, she wished to see the scene in the grip of a winter's day, the colours become pristine white, jagged ice trailing from the boughs of each tree. That, of course, was impossible. By the time the first snows fell she would be long gone. Amber sighed,

softly breaking the stillness.

What a difference a week made.

She had finally calmed from the emotional turmoil of the last few days, hard work and the praise of the taciturn Guild Ball scouts providing her with plenty else to focus on. Her memories of Tapper and arguing with her mother continued to fade, dragging her insecurity with them. Before, she'd been terrified she wouldn't be good enough to qualify for the Draft; now, she almost didn't want to be, so she could stay here forever.

She'd confessed this to Edge, after a skinful of wine on an empty stomach. The older girl had offered a knowing smile in return.

'Going to live like a dainty princess with Prince Charming, are you?' Edge made soft eyes in Layne's direction. '*You're so dreamy, my liege, and my bed is so lone—*' Half laughing, half furious, Amber pounced on her friend before she could finish.

Amber smiled to remember it now. Although she suspected just about everyone knew how infatuated she had become with Layne, she still had no idea how he felt about her. He was always so distant, laid back and relaxed no matter who he was with. Amber had seen at least three Guild officials make the time to speak to him after practice; a Butcher and a Farmer, both easily recognisable from their clothes, as well as a woman she suspected was a Mortician. Their presence never seemed to faze him.

He wasn't alone. They were all getting more

attention now. The weeks were flying by, the Free Cities Draft drawing closer with each passing day, and not a single rookie hadn't been courted by at least one of the Guilds. Gaffer had offered her a knowing look and suggested both the Farmers and the Brewers were interested in her, although the latter she dismissed as completely absurd. How he might have known was beyond her. He and the Guild Ball scouts had known each other in previous times, which might have been it—or he might have just been trying to make her feel better when news broke out Knuckles had gained the favour of no less than seven different teams.

Gaffer was the unofficial father of the group. Far older than the others, he'd been a pundit for years, his knowledge of the game staggering. He'd even put in time as an assistant coach in the past. Amber had been surprised to learn that even with so much involvement in Guild Ball, Gaffer had only two professional matches under his belt as a player, both ten years prior in his youth. Regardless, it didn't stop him from talking like a seasoned pro – at least, how he imagined one would talk. He always made a point of being first with advice or a knowing nod when someone complained, and either begun or ended every other sentence with 'kid'.

For a short while, Nomad had them all laughing with impressions of Gaffer when the older man wasn't around, his accent and voice near perfect. He typically replaced a word with something lewd for comedic effect. Amber laughed with the rest, but couldn't resist

pangs of guilt at the same time. Gaffer really was a nice man; he just tried so hard he became an easy target. Fortunately, Edge was having none of it. One evening she dragged Nomad away for a scolding vicious enough to redden the ears of anyone in earshot. The Gaffer impersonations were never heard again after that.

Edge stirred opposite, doubtless disturbed by Amber's chuckling. She decided to get up and begin the day proper. Laying around in bed with the early morning sun felt like bliss, but wasn't going to achieve much, after all.

Much to her surprise, the sound of voices drifted from below as she descended the staircase. Her curiosity piqued, Amber trod lightly so as to not disturb their owners. She wasn't above shamelessly eavesdropping. The lighter, female voice she immediately picked out as belonging to Kami, the excitable Numasai girl. The other she didn't recognise at all. Undoubtedly male, the tone betrayed an older veteran seasoned by years on the pitch.

The conversation was too muffled to understand, taking place behind a door barely left ajar in the main hallway, and Amber hissed in conflicted frustration. On the one hand, she wanted to respect Kami's privacy. On the other, her mind was racing as to the identity of the mysterious figure. Eventually the former impulse

won out, and she sat on a step halfway down the grand staircase, legs folded underneath her.

She didn't have long to wait. With a creak the door opened fully and Mallet unexpectedly strode into the hall. Unable to hide herself quickly enough, Amber suddenly found herself staring him in the eye, the Mason's face split by a wide smile.

Amber didn't consider herself easily starstruck. She'd grown up a favourite daughter of the Brewer's Guild, spending many an afternoon perched on a stool in the Drunken Seamstress. She'd even stepped out onto the pitch against some of the greats in her all too brief stint on the Brewers side. Unlike the other rookies, she had actual experience.

Even so, she was lost for words. She'd never looked twice at the Mason's Guild, but Mallet's appearance was so unexpected it took her completely by surprise. Eyes wide and set into a fool's stare, she could only murmur as he excused himself with an amused wave and continued towards the main entrance.

Mallet, here? That was one step beyond anything she'd seen yet—and a world apart from the daydreaming she'd been guilty of upstairs! The second the oak door slammed shut behind the venerable Mason, Amber rushed to Kami, head full of questions.

They sat down in the kitchens, excitedly chattering like girls half their age. Neither could stomach breakfast; the thrill of the veteran's appearance had been far too great. Now a football legend had been amongst

them the Free Cities Draft had suddenly become even more real, elevated from vague promise to something unbelievably tangible. Amber found butterflies in her belly as she listened to Kami recall every last detail of the meeting, from Mallet's unexpected arrival to their final parting words.

Of all the women in the academy, Kami was probably the one Amber liked talking to the most. Amber adored Edge, but she was ever careful with her words and emotions, showing little of the enthusiasm which typically gripped her peers. By comparison, Kami was unwaveringly upbeat and never lost for words, wearing her passions quite openly. She reminded Amber of her friends from before, and having someone she could listen to without second-guessing every word was a huge relief.

That said, she wasn't completely without her quirks.

Amber had never known anyone who loved clothes as much as Kami. Unlike the others, who typically wiled away the evening hours drinking or playing games, the young woman laboured over hand-me-downs until her fingers bled. Come morning she'd nearly always emerge in a garish explosion of colours and styles, an image entirely out of place with the deadly seriousness cast by the pistols at her belt.

Today Kami wore a pair of frayed and oversized dungarees, bright patches covering threadbare stitching, coupled with a collarless shirt she'd dyed orange and painted with delicate flowers. The

dungaree bottoms swung around her ankles, spare threads tickling bare flesh. In the early days Amber might have asked Kami about her strange choices. Now, she barely raised an eyebrow. The girl wasn't hurting anyone, and every so often she'd even manage to come up with something which looked incredible.

Today, sadly, was not one of those days.

But it didn't matter. Kami didn't just have the interest of the Mason's Guild—they had sent one of their veteran players to meet with her. Amber would have been lying if she'd pretended not to be jealous, and she felt a hint of doubt and despair beginning to rise. This morning she'd awoken feeling positive that her recent efforts had caught her up, and now she found the goal had leapt away once more.

Her banished her concern with typical enthusiasm. 'Don't worry, Amber! Your turn will come, soon enough. You just haven't been here as long as the rest of us, that's all!'

Amber offered a grin back. Kami was right. She was being hopelessly self-centred if she expected to walk in and be the most popular player at the academy, especially when compared to the likes of Kami, a player who possessed something entirely unique to each of the others.

Their conversation stopped as floorboards creaked overhead, the others beginning to stir. 'Come on, let's go tell everyone!' Kami grabbed Amber's hand and dragged her along before she could voice the

slightest opposition.

Several days later Amber found herself back in her room, unable to sleep and ruminating in the moonlight. The last few days had passed in just as much of a blur as the previous weeks had. Each day the rookies emerged closer to the break of dawn than the day before and begin an increasingly punishing regime, Champ and Gaffer urging them on whenever they looked to falter. No matter the sides, their games became quicker and more practised, nearly always affording them enough time to fit in extra drills to finish out the day.

The scouts were ever present now, eyes constantly roving from player to player from the side of the pitch. Other Guild officials had begun to join them. Huddled together like conversing birds on a rooftop, their fingers pointed and heads nodded sagely whenever a goal was scored or a takeout left someone dazed. Even though their commentary was inaudible from the pitch, their presence was a constant reminder of what was at stake, pushing each rookie harder than ever.

However heightened the tension in the air, the companionship they all shared flourished. Come evening they gathered without fail at the fire, singing or telling stories over shared wineskins until sleep threatened to claim them. Amber had even struck a

firm friendship with Champ, embracing a camaraderie she wasn't sure she'd ever known—not even amongst her kin in the Brewers.

Of late that particular worry had been a constant voice in her head, a tiny sliver of doubt which usually stole her thoughts in quiet moments like this.

Amber realised she'd always been far too nervous around the other Brewers. Ever hesitant and afraid to embarrass herself, most days she'd wasted waiting for some event or another, looking to the more experienced members of the crew for activity. Here, though, the rookies seized the moment and ran with it, no matter what they did. It was exhilarating—but more enthralling because she belonged as an equal.

It hadn't been an easy conclusion to reach. Seeing the truth had meant turning a critical eye on her previous life, even breaking with her convictions in some ways. But since accepting it she had stopped scratching absentmindedly at where the kutte had sat.

Amber wondered if Friday ever shared the same feeling. The Brewer's Guild were a crew built around the Grand Brewer, doubtless why Amber had never fit in—too many barriers. Age, inexperience, a lack of shared struggles. Was it possible her one-time mentor had found a way to bridge that gap? Amber wished Friday well, but had by now learned her own truth. Sometimes, you had to be part of your own crew and not someone else's.

She was broken from her thoughts by a quiet

knock at the door. Amber glanced over at Edge, who remained unmoving in the silvery light, then slid from her cot and padded across the room.

Layne awaited in the corridor, a messy flop of hair hiding most of his face in shadow. He smiled as she opened the door, a gesture she felt herself returning. Inwardly, her mind raced, partially terrified. She likely looked a mess from her bed, and found one hand patting down the side of her head, flattening her hair.

‘Hey, Amber-lass. I was, uh, wondering if you’d like to take a walk with me. You know, maybe around the pitch.’ His voice had never sounded so otherworldly or musical to her ears. ‘Its, uh, a pretty nice night, you know.’

Amber’s heart leapt. Nodding in as composed a manner as she could, she squeaked a reply, then dashed back into her room. Her hurried efforts to dress for the occasion apparently disturbed Edge, who launched a boot in her direction.

‘What’s wrong with you? Is the bloody building on fire?’

‘Layne’s here!’ Amber hissed, afraid he might hear through the door.

‘Whatever. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.’

Amber felt her cheeks redden. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

Edge sat up, leaning on one elbow. ‘I mean it, Amber. He leaves me worried about him, every time we speak. I don’t think he’ll do anything to you... just be careful what you’re getting yourself into, girl. There are some things best left as bittersweet dreams of what might

have been.'

Amber nodded through her excitement, heart beating fast enough to burst. She'd worry about Edge's words later—not now.

She rushed across the floor, kicking up dust with her boots. Layne waited beyond the threshold, where she'd left him. His grin grew wider, and he offered a slender hand in her direction.

'Shall we go?'

— ABANDONMENT —

The world had turned to pale white under the moonlight, all but the brightest colours muted by the heavens. Amber marvelled as she quietly strolled along. Since her arrival, she had only seen the evening grounds illuminated by firelight; under tonight's spell they had become something quite different. It was almost like the scenes depicted in a child's faerietale book come to life.

Layne hummed softly as they walked, the soft and honeyed notes tumbling through the air with a golden glow. Amber knew she'd fallen hard for him, but for the moment at least, she didn't care to think about it. With her heart wildly fluttering and her fingers entwined with his, she wanted nothing more than to remember this scene forever.

Feeling as though the rest of the world had simply faded from existence, she paced alongside Layne through the enchanted land and towards the proving grounds. The field seemed lonely without players, an empty vessel lacking its essence. Amber knew the soil beneath her feet as intimately as any pitch she'd stepped on, yet she felt strangely detached from it without the accompanying thunder of footsteps as the match raged around her.

'I love it here, like this.' Layne's voice was a reverent whisper. 'Too many people during the day, too much noise. Their voices drown out the calm.'

Amber noticed his voice had become more certain, his words said without the usual pause. She stroked his arm reassuringly. He glanced at her before continuing, his eyes turned sad.

It was the only warning she got before her world came crashing down around her.

‘I don’t know I can do this anymore, Amber-girl. Everyone wants me to be someone I don’t think I’m supposed to be. I try to keep up, but I’m so strung out from running.’ He paused. ‘I’m sorry. You, uh, probably don’t need to hear this. But I wanted to try and explain it... because it’s you. You know the feeling, right?’

She didn’t know what to say. Her heart had given up fluttering and started hammering instead. Somehow, she managed a nod.

‘It’s lonely, especially out on the field. Everything is a painful reminder of this burden I have, everyone looking at me like I’m a saint.’ Layne shook his head. ‘I’m no angel. I don’t claim the serenity they all think I have.’

He laughed, a bittersweet sound.

‘Well, there’s *one* way I’ve found it—straight down in the hole. Doesn’t matter how small you feel, how badly burned up your soul is. Smoke enough and you’ll fucking fly.’

Amber finally found her voice. ‘Layne, I don’t understand.’

He looked at her, his eyes studying hers with a strange intensity she’d not before seen. Silence settled

around the couple, with only a gentle wind rushing through the grass. She wondered if he could hear the blood rushing in her head as loudly as she could.

‘Heh, doesn’t matter, Amber-girl. Perhaps, I, uh, just... never mind, eh?’

She was failing whatever test this was, she realised. Far from the romantic interlude she’d hoped for, Layne had brought her here to confess to something, to ask for her help in some struggle he was fighting. Amber cupped one side of his face, shocked at how cold his skin felt to the touch. ‘I want to help. Help me to understand.’

Layne offered her a kindly grin, but his eyes couldn’t hide whatever harrowing feeling he harboured inside. He made to turn away, suddenly skittish.

On an impulse she leant forwards, standing on tiptoes, and kissed him. She felt his mouth open slightly as her lips brushed across his, before gently returning her affection.

A pulse swept through her like lightning.

Despite their words and the sorrow in the air, it was finally here. For the briefest of moments, she forgot everything but the sweetness she tasted and the warmth between them.

Wetness grazed her cheek and she withdrew, Layne’s tears a stark reminder of the struggle he was trying to communicate. Before she could ask again he hugged her, pulling himself into her embrace. For a split second she was too surprised to react, then her

body softened and she pulled him closer, one hand resting in his tousled mane as he buried his head in her shoulder.

She closed her eyes and savoured as much happiness as she could wrest from the moment. The rest was concern for him. His body felt gaunt and frail next to hers, not what she had expected at all. A shuddering tremor slowly took root, leaving Amber unsure of whether he was shivering or sobbing, but she knew she couldn't break away. As she stroked his hair, Amber thought she heard him breathe something but didn't dare break the moment.

They spent the rest of their time together that way, standing in the middle of the silent pitch.

'To me, Amber! Let's keep the ball moving!' Champ tackled the ball from Nomad, easily ducking around his outstretched foot and pounding down field in possession.

She was in fine form, roaring commands across the pitch at just about everyone on her team. Word had reached the rookies that the Farmers were here for the first time today, and Champ seemed hell bent on ensuring if that were the case they'd leave with a strong impression.

It didn't make the going any easier on the rest of them. Champ was pushing her teammates to play

as hard as the players in the Big Leagues, and some of them simply couldn't keep up. As Amber saw her teammates bite back bitter retorts, she tried to lead by example, supporting Champ and following the increasingly aggressive plays as best she could.

Truth be told, she knew she wasn't giving it her all.

The previous evening played itself out in Amber's mind no matter how hard she tried to dispel it. Layne's haunting expression and pained voice refused to leave her, overshadowing any intimacy inherent to the memory. It had left her with a troubled conscience she could ill afford so close to the Draft.

Now she knew to look, Amber saw Layne's fragility all too well. He wore a false smile like a mask, and his body language betrayed him at every turn, his head down and hair covering his eyes. His lack of investment in the game was painfully evident. He loped around the pitch looking busy, without pushing himself in the slightest.

Champ was having none of it, of course. She lashed him with acerbic words, trying to drive him onwards, failing to affect even the slightest change in spite of her best efforts. Layne just offered her a distant look to go with his forced grin each time.

Amber's attention was stolen by the ball, Champ's expert pass landing at her feet. Kami chased her down, but Amber pushed the taller girl away with one arm before spinning on her heel and dodging past. As she jinked left and right to frustrate Kami's aim, she heard a loud report. The first bullet struck the ground nearby

in an explosion of grit, followed by a second gunshot and similar dust cloud a moment later.

Amber knew her friends aim was far better than those shots indicated. She suspected Kami hadn't exactly tried her best to stop her.

Cutlass offered more of a challenge, advancing forward away from the goal to pressure a shot. Amber didn't try anything clever in retaliation. Nomad jogged on the opposite side, sweeping forward into position, and Amber's pass was already in the air before Champ's urgent call reached her. Doubtless looking to impress the gathered officials, the lithe winger chose not to take a shot on the volley. He caught the ball on his chest and dropped it down to his feet, dribbling closer for a flashy tap in.

Amber saw the foul up before it happened and shook her head incredulously at his lack of judgement. Cutlass had reacted swiftly to the ball's new position, switching her target to Nomad with the pass. She was bearing down on him at an alarming speed, long legs propelling her forward. A second later she slammed Nomad to the ground with a solid shoulder tackle. Before he could rise again the ball was already moving back downfield. As he irritably spat the dirt out of his mouth, Amber saw Cutlass offer him a smirk, the message clear.

Better luck next time.

Turning her head back to the game, she saw Flea deftly moving past a distracted Champ, the ace

midfielder beaten by a clever piece of footwork. The lad didn't push his luck, booting it on to Edge in time for Champ's sliding tackle to only find blades of grass.

This fluidity of play was typical of their games now. After spending so much time together, they'd fallen into a style of play which favoured a faster pace and quick changes of possession. It was great conditioning.

Edge hadn't been able to keep moving this time, though. Knuckles barred her progress ahead, and Gaffer approached behind. A quick punt forward and a burst of speed kept the older man away for a few precious seconds, but Edge's space was soon eaten up as she tried to move past Knuckles and failed. She managed to duck the same clothesline which nearly always floored Amber, but lost possession as Gaffer's outstretched boot caught the ball and sent it scattering away crazily.

Rolling at speed over the baked dirt, the ball quickly travelled to Layne, who until now hadn't shown much inclination to join the scrum. He wasn't even facing upfield, Amber realised.

Champ was already shouting. 'Open goal! Don't just stand there, run—you silly bastard!'

He nodded half-heartedly and clumsily turned on the spot, almost losing the ball there and then. Amber couldn't quite make out what the struggle was, and a sense of unease crept into her bones. Layne's sluggish motions were a world apart from the genius she was used to seeing on the pitch, more akin to a drunk

floundering in a gutter. Three more stumbling steps and his shoulders sagged as though in defeat. His feet let the ball roll forward a couple of paces so he could strike it.

The moment his boot connected it was obvious he wouldn't score. The ball didn't even leave the ground, bouncing uncertainly over tufts of grass in a spray of dry soil. Well wide of the goal, it sped off over the backline and off the pitch.

A shocked silence descended.

'What the hell was that?!' Champ caught up to Layne, grabbing him by the collar and shaking his slender frame violently.

No answer came.

'Well?!' Champ wasn't giving up. Amber raced towards them, hearing another set of footsteps behind her as she ran.

By the time she reached the confrontation, Champ had finished berating Layne, and let go of his shirt. The furious look on her face, filled with seething condemnation, was probably worse than her words. Layne's eyes held no emotion at all. They were glazed, pupils shrunk to tiny discs, lost in a bloodshot sea of pink ivory. He sullenly waved one frail hand at her and made to walk away, feet unsteadily turning him towards the setting sun that dipped down behind the academy.

'Don't turn your back on me!'

Champ raised one hand, primed to lash out with

a vicious blow. Amber caught the strike in mid-air, earning the other woman's ire.

'Let go!' Champ spat her fury. 'You think this is some playground game? With all these people watching, you're playing at couples with your drug-addled boyfriend? Pah!' Champ snatched her hand free.

Amber stared, stunned into wordlessness. By the time she found a retort Gaffer's voice sounded across the pitch, loudly announcing the end of practice for the day. Champ offered a venomous last glare before stomping away towards the sidelines.

'What's her problem?' Amber asked out loud to herself.

'Didn't you know?' Kami's voice sounded behind her. 'The Butcher's Guild were here to watch her today. Rumour has it, you too.'

Amber's mind raced. How could she have missed that? One glance at Layne's retreating back told her how. Just a few days ago she'd have been elated to discover that a Guild had taken this much interest in her. She still should be. But instead, her mind was preoccupied with the young man staggering uncertainly out of sight. More than anything she wanted to chase after him.

She was torn, a ship rocking in a storm-tossed sea.

For the first time she thought she appreciated something of what Tapper must have felt the day he exiled her. She looked towards the Guild officials awaiting her on the sidelines. Her heart dragged her head in the other direction, urging her to follow

Layne. She stared from left to right, tension building inside until she wanted to break and run from both.

'Amber!' Kami shook her, hissing insistently. 'Go and speak with them before it's too late! Guild scouts won't wait around! This is your future!'

My future walked away in the other direction.

Digging fingers painfully into exposed flesh, Kami hauled Amber around on the spot and dragged her towards Champ.

Away from Layne.

Suddenly Amber saw several of the other rookies facing her in a semi-circle, concern written on their faces. Their eyes pleaded with her to see reason. Amber nodded glumly, allowing Kami to lead her away. She only hoped the troubled figure behind her would forgive the betrayal. In truth, his was the only opinion which truly mattered.

The boat drifted on a calm sea of deep blue and purple, reflecting the aurora in the skies above. Knees pulled up to her chest, Amber sat quietly at one end. Layne rested opposite her, one emaciated arm lazily trailing in the water.

Her mind raced, trying to find the right words to apologise. After agonising minutes of difficult silence, she eventually found them and raised her head to speak. Layne's visage stopped her dead in her tracks, voice drying

up to a whimper.

'Hey Amber-girl, why you lookin' at me so strange?'

His eyes were entirely white, corpse-like and bereft of anything but a milky sheen. She held her body in terrified shock as they began to retreat into his skull, shrinking until only tiny beads remained.

'Everything, uh, okay, Amber-girl?' As he spoke, skin sloughed away from his jaw, rotting and falling away to reveal bone underneath. Soon, the whole of his lower face had become a skeletal rictus, bare bone and teeth.

This wasn't Layne. Couldn't be.

She tried to turned away in horror, but her body remained frozen in place. Her spent energy seemed to channel into the water surrounding the tiny craft, turning it angry shades of red and causing large bubbles to rise to the surface. Above, the skies slowly darkened to a crimson storm.

'I needed you, Amber-girl.' Layne's voice echoed in her skull against the rising panic, drowning out her thoughts. 'Where were you?'

His arms reached across the gap between them. Thin and emaciated, they were spotted with gangrene and hideous blue veins. His fingers were charred black stumps, flaking away to nothingness.

She screamed and closed her eyes, the only thing she could do in her paralysed state.

'Don't go!' Layne's voice was strained, its music now turned to a shriek. 'Please!'

His voice was barely audible over the turmoil above

and below. The air grew hotter with each passing second, and fire raged around Amber, flames licking at her flesh. Something grasped at her through the inferno before shrivelling to nothingness and crumbling to ashes. Still she kept her eyes clamped shut.

'Please... Amber. I needed you.' Fainter now, a lost sigh on the wind.

She didn't dare look. Her heart was breaking, enough to send her on a downwards spiral she might never return from.

'Amber.'

'Amber.'

'...'

'Amber!' This voice was different. Louder. Insistent.

'Amber! Wake up!'

Edge frantically shook her from her nightmare, dragging her up and out of the dream. 'Amber!'

Amber blinked her eyes open, pulse beginning to calm only once she realised the darkened room beyond was completely still and without flames. With a trembling hand, she wiped away a mixture of tears and sleep from the edge of her eyes, trying to focus.

'Edge? Thank the gods. I was lost in the worst—'

The other woman didn't let her finish.

'Amber, come quick! It's Layne. They've found him... he...'

For once, Edge was lost for words.

The dread from her nightmare embedded itself in Amber's chest, cold and unforgiving. She found her feet despite her light-headedness and dashed through

the door without even asking where to go.

Her mind was a blur, the afterimages of her hellish dream blending into the memory of Layne walking away from the pitch—the last time she'd seen him before turning away to chase an altogether different dream.

One which had left her with the heaviest of hearts.

'I needed you, Amber-girl.'

He'd seen this coming. Tried to warn her, tried to reach out and ask for her help. And she'd turned her back on him, just like had been done to her.

And now it was too late.

A DEVIL WALKS BEHIND YOU

Amber didn't know what to do after they found him. Her heart was in turmoil, ruling her head entirely. The urge to be with Layne in his time of need was impossibly desperate. He occupied her every waking thought, and cold dread ran down her spine at the possibility of losing him.

Yet, a far more powerful fright had taken root.

She'd seen his true form, past the glamour she'd unknowingly fallen into. The achingly handsome lad with the unassuming drawl and bewitching eyes had faded away, replaced... replaced by a broken shell, a ghoulish wearing human skin and a matted clump of hair. She fought back fresh tears remembering him as he had been. Layne was no longer the man she'd fallen in love with, not anymore.

He might never be again.

The others in the room went silent as Amber entered, all eyes on her. She had tried to brace herself, but despite her resolve she paled at the sight of him sprawled out on the divan. She stared, her mind unable to accept that he was gone. He was ashen and gaunt, eyes sunken back into his skull and his limbs lay limp and lifeless. Worst of all was the scent which surrounded him, death's foreboding presence hanging heavy in the air.

Then, she saw his chest rise and fall, witness to shallow and barely perceptible breaths through lips turned blue. He wasn't going to die. Letting out a strangled cry, she turned and bolted from the room. She wasn't brave enough to face this Layne. It was far easier to flee.

Edge followed her back to their room and sat next to her when Amber crawled into her cot and turned away, burying her face in the blanket. The older girl rubbed her shoulders, her voice soft and as reassuring as could be. Amber's muscles twitched at the contact, but she closed her eyes and willed herself to calm enough that she might escape in sleep.

Slumber provided no respite, though. What sleep eventually came was restless and fitful, and finally, in the last moments before dawn, she came to a resolution. She had to leave. She'd already seen so much of her life slip away, all beyond her control. Choosing to turn her back on the Draft was drastic, she knew, but it at least afforded her some slim measure of control. If she left now, she'd never have to confront the trauma of it all falling apart.

And so Amber stole out of the academy at the break of dawn, careful not to disturb Edge, who had fallen asleep fully clothed in the straight-back chair in the corner. Looking at her roommate from the doorway, Amber hesitated, filled with an odd sense of doubt and regret. No. She didn't have nearly enough strength to argue. It was better to make a clean break of it. She

softly pulled the door closed and left.

Hours later, Amber found herself alone in the city once again, dazed and with a hollow feeling taken root in her stomach. She felt panic rising with each step. What if someone recognised her? Flooded with shame at the thought, she quickly pulled her hood up to hide her face. She had no recollection of deciding to come here. Why had she? The comfort of the familiar maybe. All day she numbly walked through the dirty city, letting the chaos of sounds and motion wash over her until the world turned to umber under a setting sun.

Eventually night fell. Amber barely noticed until she nearly tripped over a Lamplighter's long pole, end trailing in her path. She glared after the girl and then stopped where she was, taking note of her surroundings for the first time. She immediately saw her feet had led her to the Brewer's quarter—the uneven buildings with their crumbling brickwork were as distinctive as the stacks of empty barrels outside.

The Lamplighter moved away in her duties, leaving Amber alone with only a lonely wind for company. Strange. Brewers were a social breed. Even with industry done for the day she'd have expected the streets to be busy with her kin, tripping over each other as they told raucous stories or shared an early evening brew. Instead her footsteps echoed over the stone pavement unanswered.

In the distance she could see the silhouette of the Drunken Seamstress. It seemed haunting and crooked,

unadorned by the lights she'd expected to see blazing out from behind the windows. Amber felt a chill move down her spine. Something was wrong. She couldn't imagine how the Brewer's quarter had come to be so devoid of life. Ignoring an inner voice screaming for her to leave the eerie scene, she took a step closer, followed by another and another. Her movement lent motion to the shadows, and the echo of her footsteps in the empty streets turned into the sound of pursuers in her mind. Head turning like a corkscrew and skin breaking out in a nervous sweat, Amber felt like kicking herself for acting like a scared child.

She forced herself onwards.

Hidden safely from sight in an alley, Amber stared at the Drunken Seamstress in morbid fascination. The proud building had become a burnt-out ruin, gutted and turned charcoal black by flames. Seeing it dashed any hope of restitution she'd secretly harboured. Reduced to a skeleton of splintered wood, this place had ceased to be a home, not only for Amber, but now all of the Brewers. It was symbolic of a spectacular fall from grace.

The blaze had taken place recently, judging by the layer of ash still coating the surrounding buildings, yet to be cast away by the wind. Suddenly Amber's fear returned. Clearly the Brewer's Guild no longer ruled

these streets. She didn't see a single one of her old teammates standing vigil over the hallowed ground. They could all have been inside, charred victims of a gang war which had escalated far beyond anything she'd ever known before.

Amber quickly turned back. Even as the thought occurred to her, she refused to believe it. It couldn't be true.

It just couldn't.

In hurried steps more like a run, she took the cobblestone path down to the old waterway road that ran parallel to the river. The bright lights and gurgling water were a balm for the horror she'd just contemplated, banishing the grim thoughts her mind had conjured up.

As she calmed herself, that sentiment was replaced by something hideously fatalistic, one she'd been fighting for the last few weeks even as it hid behind a thin veneer of companionship with her peers.

She didn't mean anything to them.

Not to the Brewers—not anymore—but not to the rookies either. They all pretended to be allies, but in truth they were rivals, competing for the same places on the teams. Kami was desperate to join the Masons by now, but so was Champ, and Edge was no less keen. All of them were out to impress, to be the star. Her leaving had just reduced the pool by one, giving them one less threat to deal with. None of them would shed a tear.

She was broken from her thoughts by the stumble of uncertain footsteps, boots scraping over the hard stone. A muttered voice, slurring and indistinct, convinced Amber it wasn't just her imagination. A moment later Shank rounded a corner up ahead, his stagger as telling a sign of his drunkenness as the bottle in his hand. He didn't see her for a moment and Amber held her breath, hoping to sneak away and avoid confrontation. Then, his head swung in her direction.

'Who's that? Don't hide in the shadows from me.' Any threat in his words was broken by a loud hiccup which followed them. He walked closer to her with a pronounced swagger. 'Oh... it's a pretty lass. What's a young slip like you doing out this late?'

Amber didn't answer, too busy measuring him up instead. She knew Shank was a dangerous fighter, but he was also drunk as hell. If he made a move for her, she could very likely outrun him at least.

The Butcher came closer. 'Wait, I know your face. You're one of the runts from the Draft. Yeah, that's right. Amberley or something.' He smirked at her. 'I'd heard you were a Drunk, makes sense you'd come home. I remember the others talking about you. You didn't make much of an impression with us.'

Although the news of a Guild passing her by in the Draft should have been crushing, Amber almost breathed a sigh of relief. She couldn't imagine a worse fate than being forced to sign up with the Butcher's Guild.

‘...course, I’m one to talk. Don’t think I’m making any friends now either. If I had, the bastards wouldn’t have lumbered me in with the Cooks and packed me off to this shithole. If I have to listen to that loudmouthed arse spout off one more time, I’ll cut him a new spleen, you see if I won’t.’

Shank reached for a knife tucked into his belt, about to pull it free. Amber stepped back in alarm, her pulse quickening until the blade slipped through his clumsy fingers and fell to the ground with a clatter.

He offered her a sheepish grin. ‘Another drink first though, eh? With my new friend, Amberley.’

‘I think you’ve had enough.’ This close she could see how red his cheeks had turned, and smell the stale beer on his breath. Her words were an understatement.

‘Maybe, girl, maybe. You want me to tell you something?’

Amber didn’t, but doubted there was any way she could stop him regardless.

‘Back when me and the Master Butcher were on good terms, he told me that every man has a devil walking behind him. Don’t matter what you do, you’ll never shake it off either. You can live like a saint, and the blasted thing will still be there, whispering in your ear. Best you can do is try not to listen.’

Shank held up his bottle proudly. ‘But I beat mine. Get pissed with him, don’t I? There’s the secret, girl. A devil is only a devil if you let it be one. It can’t win if you’re best friends.’

It was all she could do not to roll her eyes. Drunk men seldom made much sense. She realised her disinterest must have snuck onto her face regardless, as she saw Shank's grin slip away.

'Oho, too high and mighty to listen to me, are you? Pah! You shouldn't be, girl. Take a long hard look at yourself. From where I'm standing, I don't see anything special. Where are all the other runts, eh? You're just a lost little girl, wandering the streets all alone.' The Butcher emptied his bottle with one last swig, before lobbing it high into the air and sending it sailing into the river.

'You can listen to the people around you all you want, but here's the truth. Promises don't mean anything. I was promised I'd be a Butcher. You were promised you'd be a Brewer. Look at us both now.' He spat his disgust onto the ground. 'The devil is the only one worth listening to.'

Without further ceremony he resumed his passage along the riverfront, doubtless in search of another bottle.

Alone once more, Amber considered Shank's words. Her eyes caught her distorted reflection in the water below. She nearly didn't recognise the young woman staring back. All of her life she'd grown up knowing what she would be, and that wasn't someone who abandoned her friends or ran away from her problems. Yet the truth was inescapable. In her moment of weakness, she'd betrayed herself.

Let alone the others who had been so welcoming.
Or Layne.

She had no idea where he fit into all this, beyond the knowledge she'd allowed her heart to rule her head. Layne might be a weakness she could ill afford, but she owed him her friendship and loyalty at very least, no matter how hard it might be to offer.

'Promises aren't worth anything.' She repeated the sentiment from earlier, and knew what had to follow. Despite appearances and her fondest hopes, she was in competition and each of her friends was a rival. If she wanted to succeed, she'd have to make that happen through her own efforts.

It was a daunting realisation. At once, she realised the terrible sense of isolation pervading Layne had somehow grown inside of her, too. Insidious and unnoticeable she hadn't seen it until now, but the moment she had, it became shackles around her ankles and a burden which might never be thrown off, the same as Shank's devil.

But, at least she knew where to start.

Doing her best to straighten her back and hold her head high, Amber began the long journey back to the academy.

The sun was rising from behind the treeline, birdsong breaking out from within the foliage by

the time Amber walked back through the academy gates. Gaffer waited, leaning nonchalantly against the stained grey stone.

‘Glad you decided to come back, kid. Another hour and even I’d have given up on you.’

Amber offered him a weary smile. He looked every bit as tired as she was, with pronounced wrinkles running from the edges of his eyes like hairline fractures in his skin.

‘Listen... I needed—’ He broke her off with a raised hand before she could continue, kindly expression on his face.

‘Nah, nah, you don’t have to worry about all that. With Layne out, we were down one anyways.’ His eyes found hers. ‘He’s going to pull through, don’t worry. The worst of it passed last night. Went through hell puking it all out, but at least by then his heart was beating stronger.’

She shifted uneasily, and he abruptly changed subject. ‘Anyways, you not being here did the rest of us a favour, kid. Otherwise we’d have had to draw straws.’ He leaned forward, voice turned conspiratorial. ‘Can you imagine the fall out if Champ had been left on the bench?’

She managed the barest hint of a chuckle. ‘Did any of them say anything?’

‘Not that my ears heard. Your absence was noted, but we’re all far too busy with our own bull nowadays. Besides, I think everyone understands that sometimes people need time out to work through things.’

‘Thank you, Gaffer. I mean it.’

He brushed her gratitude off. 'No need. If any of the others give you any shit, you come tell me and I'll soon put them straight.'

'Even Edge?'

He laughed. 'Even Edge, although I doubt you'll have a problem there. She puts up a front, but she's fiercely loyal, especially to you.'

'I know. She's not all bite.' Amber had a thought. 'You've been here longer than I, Gaffer. Has anyone ever dared ask her about her past, or worked out why she's so secretive?'

Gaffer made a show of scratching his chin. 'Never. In my experience, women around her age like the excitement of some big mystery or drama though. Perhaps one day she'll tell us. But that time hasn't come yet.'

Amber felt a flash of ire and raised an eyebrow at his comment. He caught it and grinned. 'I know what you're thinking, kid, but you're a fine one to talk.'

She opened her mouth to bite back before remembering how her flight must have seemed, especially coupled with the unabashed infatuation she'd once held for Layne. Her exasperation broke upon the rocks of his sympathetic smile. He really did mean well, even if he had no idea of her inner turmoil over the last weeks.

There was a pause, and then Gaffer gestured to the world beyond the gates. 'Left all that baggage somewhere out there?' He offered her a pointed

stare. 'There isn't space for it here, not anymore. You walk back in and I need to know you're completely committed. You have doubts they stay here, or you can turn back around.'

Amber looked away, sifting through the events of the past day. She thought about the Drunken Seamstress, now a monument to a life forever denied her—and what its destruction might mean for the kin she was now even more isolated from. She recalled Shank, standing under the light, pissed as a skunk and as far removed from the aspirational figure she'd once believed every player in the Big Leagues to be.

She thought about how she'd run out on Layne and the rest like a coward.

She didn't want to be a drunk, or a coward. She wanted to be the woman she felt growing inside, nurtured by the game and friendship among equals. She wouldn't achieve that by running or dwelling on her doubts. The only way was forward.

She nodded. 'I'm all in. Just you try and stop me.'

'Good. Can't tell you how relieved I am to hear that, kid.'

A gong sounded in the distance.

'Ah, that's breakfast. Come on, let's go. After hours spent waiting around these bloody gates, I'm famished.' His brow creased. 'I need to get in there before Flea gives half of the food away to some stinking mutt he's found.'

Amber laughed and, linking arms with him, started the final walk back towards the academy. Somewhere inside was Layne, but that could wait. She had a future

to wrest back under control first. The meeting she was dreading could be put off for another day; before she confronted that weakness, she needed to sure she could defeat it once and for all.

HONOUR

The crowd exploded raucously, bellowing their approval as Bushel's strike hammered into the opposition post. Hands held tightly to her ears and face split by a huge grin, Kami turned to face Amber. 'It's sooo much louder than I thought!

A veteran of more games than she could remember, Amber merely nodded. In truth she was more interested in the stadium than the game out on the pitch.

Once upon a time Rue Paltine had been home to a magnificent cathedral, its dizzying spires and towers rivalling even those found in the holy city. Well known as the world's tallest building, it had been a proud landmark for several hundred years prior to the Century Wars.

At the outbreak of the conflict it, along with most of the other buildings in the coastal city, had been pulverised to dust by the Raedland navy and their cannons. Reduced to rubble and choked through by weeds, the ruins had been left to their ignoble fate until the emergence of Guild Ball, when interest in building new stadiums swept through the newly-unified empire. Where the grand hall of the ruined cathedral had been a grey-stoned pitch was constructed, with its old pillars smashed to provide cover and obstacles, and its emptied crypts converted to entrance stiles. Ancient sandstone sat uncomfortably with slowly aging granite, their colours a stark contrast.

This was a unique and prestigious venue, one of the most famous pitches in the world and the annual home of the first semi-final playoff in the Sovereign States Championship. Interestingly, Amber detected more than a shade of religious reverence running through the crowd too. Perhaps this was because the rookies stood in the Farmer stands—those supporters nearly all devout Solthecians—but Amber suspected the inscribed stone and iconography still present had more than a little to do with it.

Kami's attention returned to the game along with that of the rest of the rookies, and Amber took the opportunity to slip away. Their presence at the semi-final was a rare and welcome break in their punishing regime, but she cared little for the match itself. Being so uncertain as to which team might claim her in the Draft left Amber feeling uncomfortably mercenary. She couldn't bring herself to cheer on either team, in case she found herself lacing up her boots for their rivals in a few weeks' time.

She was far more interested in exploring the remarkable surroundings. Moving quickly, she elbowed her way through the crowd until she could drop down through the rows and into the catacombs.

The air was far cooler down here than in the direct sunlight above, where the press of bodies made the heat even more unbearable. It was quieter too, the thick sandstone muffling the stamping feet and cheering overhead as Amber crept deeper into the

lonely darkness.

Most of the chambers she saw had either been sealed off or their walls had been knocked down to expand the passage. Amber passed these with sorrow in her heart to see history so defaced. She glided quietly along, one hand pressing into the cool stone and tracing ancient letters carved into the surface. She didn't recognise any of the language, but that wasn't surprising. Neither the Solthecian Faith nor the Scholar's Guild could say for sure when the cathedral had been constructed, let alone the crypts and antechambers below ground. These glyphs could even have existed before even the Sovereign States came into existence. The idea both fascinated and awed her.

The decision to rebuild these ruins as a stadium instead of returning it to a place of worship had seemed bizarre to her at first—but then, perhaps not upon reflection. The times were changing. Once people had streamed to the cathedral to hear the word of the August Lord. Now the trail led to the same place just as devoutly, the only change the religion. It was a sign of the times that the Supreme Order of Solthecius had been established by the church, so concerned were they of losing influence throughout the Empire of the Free Cities.

A polite cough startled her from her reverie.

Amber span on her heel in alarm, only for her pulse to slacken when she saw Champ back the way she'd come. The other woman leant on a pillar, watching her

curiously. Her body language betrayed only her usual tension, one of her habitually folded arms hanging loose by her side.

‘Saw you slip away. You don’t care for the game?’

Amber shook her head but remained silent. She and Champ hadn’t spoken since their last game together, when she’d abandoned Layne. She didn’t harbour any resentment towards Champ after what had happened but was unsure how to bridge the awkwardness.

Champ did it for her with typical directness, though her tone held an uncertainty Amber had never before heard. ‘So... listen, just so you know. I feel pretty bad about your man. I mean, it wasn’t my fault. I didn’t give him the pipe that smoked his life away.’ She stopped, her cheeks colouring slightly.

Amber looked away.

‘But I also didn’t help much. I spend so much time pushing everyone, sometimes people’s feelings get lost in the scrum.’ Champ’s voice sounded increasingly pained. ‘Guess I just don’t understand that. For me, there’s always fire left in my belly. I want to be the best, Amber. And I want the same for all of you, too.’

Amber regarded her. Clearly, this wasn’t easy. She respected Champ for coming forward and wasn’t about to make reconciliation difficult.

‘I know that. We all do, even with all the spitting and cursing.’

Champ grimaced. ‘You think so? I’ve learnt more choice words than I care to remember since signing

up for the Draft.'

'Definitely. And nobody blames you for... what happened to Layne.' Just saying his name was hard. 'He made his own decisions. Aye, we should have been there to help him. I should have been there.' Tears threatened to form, but Amber pushed past them. 'That burden will sit with all of us I think, for a very long time. But we can't wallow in self-pity. That won't achieve anything or help him now.'

She crossed the gap between the two women and gave Champ a friendly, if awkward hug. Much to her relief, her friend embraced her back. The tears deepened at the edges of her eyes.

'Damn, when did you get so strong?'

Amber laughed as she relinquished the hold. 'My wet eyes say otherwise.'

'Even so, you're not the same girl I used to know. She ran away from everything.'

Amber considered the words. For the first time she saw that she had grown. She'd become far more pragmatic and resilient than she'd ever thought she'd need to be. The realisation had a bittersweet undertone: she'd likely never have found this side of herself if she hadn't been cut loose from the Brewer's Guild. Still, for all that, she could only imagine how proud Tapper would be of her.

'I think we're all there now. Each and every one of us. We came together for the Draft and found ourselves, built this strength alongside each other.'

‘Almost all of us.’

A sigh. ‘Aye. Layne couldn’t keep up. There was so much pressure on him.’

Champ nodded. ‘So, what do we do?’

A sustained roar from above echoed through the tunnels. Amber guessed the game had been won. Her gaze turned upwards, as if she could see through the stone to the field above. Layne’s plight was no different than playing Guild Ball, she realised. When you were down, you dug in deeper and kept going. Gave it your all.

‘We don’t give up. No one gets left behind.’

‘Hey, Flea! Flea! Over here!’ Amber heard the call as plain as day, the female voice echoing around a rapidly emptying stadium following the Farmer victory. If it reached Flea’s ears he chose to ignore it. Turning his head in the opposite direction, the young lad attempted to walk away nonchalantly, ineffectually trying to push his way past a bemused Knuckles.

Amber couldn’t get her head around that boy, even after all these weeks.

Impossibly timid and unassuming, he never seemed to quite fit in with the rest. At first, she’d thought it was his age. Two years younger than the next youngest rookie, Flea seemed far more of a child than the others. The more of an effort she made to know him though, the more Amber came to realise how wrong

that conclusion was. Flea was voraciously intelligent, intuitive, and witty—but he was crippled by shyness.

Without fail he joined them around the campfire, but never did more than cross his legs and listen intently. The only way to get a word out of him was to ask directly, and even then, he sheepishly shrugged most queries off. His past was a mystery as a result. Gaffer had suggested he was born a Farmer from the way he spoke, but Amber wasn't so sure. His accent was jarring with any colloquialisms she heard.

The only time Flea seemed to be truly animated was when he had some stray or other with him. The lad was never shy about taking in homeless mongrels, and he found them everywhere. When all of the other rookies edged away, afraid of lice and ticks, Flea would snuggle up to his new friend, petting and stroking its fur lovingly. It wasn't just the portions of his rations he fed them which got their attention, either. Animals of all sorts genuinely seemed to gravitate towards Flea and his humble demeanour.

After several attempts to get anything out of him during the first few weeks, Amber had finally given up. She hated to see one of their number on the outside looking in, but Flea seemed content. Happy, even. She always gave his mutts a wide berth, though. She suspected they had more than a little to do with his nickname.

'Flea! Don't you dare run away again, y'hear me?' The owner of the voice was laughing despite her recrimination.

Suddenly, Bushel burst through a crowd of people, her plaid shirt trailing behind her. The young woman waved a raised hand frantically, trying to get Flea's attention.

Amber wasn't the only one wearing a stunned expression, although Flea instead looked terrified.

The Farmer reached them at last, all smiles for the group. She was much taller and thinner up close, Amber thought. No doubt drills on the proving ground had toned her until she had the taut energy of an Engineer's spring. Her fingers seized Flea by the collar and dragged him into a reluctant embrace.

'Don't think you'll get away from me that easily!' She set him down and ruffled his hair, then looked around. 'Won't you introduce me to your friends?'

Flea mumbled something in the direction of the other rookies. Grinning, Bushel immediately took charge of the situation. She spat on her hand and wiped it on her overalls before offering it outstretched.

'Hey y'all, I'm Bushel. Nice to meet you.'

None of them seemed to know quite how to react to that. This woman was a world champion, yet here she was as plain as day and twice as friendly, talking to them like they were equals. And the fact that she seemed to be a close friend of Flea's was mind-boggling. Apparently, Gaffer had been right all along.

Nomad was the first to break the silence, taking the handshake for the group. 'Bushel, I... that is, I'm a big fan. We all are. It's an honour to make your acquaintance.'

‘Aw, shucks. You don’t have to worry about airs ‘round me. Nothin’ so special to see here.’ Her jaw split in a wide grin. ‘I should be sayin’ the same about you anyways. The rookies for the Draft, come to see us, huh? I’ve heard all about you—all of us have been gossipin’ in the dugouts.’

Amber blinked away disbelief. They had?

Bushel looked at her and winked. ‘Especially you. I think me you’re the chosen one.’ Before Amber could react, Bushel gently tugged at Flea’s sleeve. ‘And you, mister, are comin’ with me! Fancy runnin’ out on us all like that. Everyone’s missed you!’

There was another doubletake from the group. Suddenly, not only did poor, quiet Flea know Bushel, but he also knew the rest of the Farmer’s Guild side—on a name basis! They were the most celebrated team in the world, no less, and overwhelming favourites to take the title again this year. It almost didn’t make sense.

Another figure approached behind Bushel.

‘So, you found him. Did the rascal try to get away again?’

If Bushel had left the group lost for words, most looked like they were ready to fall to one knee for Honour.

The First Lady looked far less stern than Amber had always imagined her. Grown out to cascade down her back and turned gold from long days in the sun, her thick hair leant her a comely aura. The lines on her face were lost to a deepening tan, granting her a youthful glow. But it was her eyes, kindly and maternal, which spoke volumes.

Apparently, she was getting stronger too. Even after the exhausting game she'd just played, she barely leant on the stick by her side. A shaggy sheepdog snuffled around her heels, ears flopping side to side as she bent down to scratch his neck.

Amber felt like she had stepped into a dream. Yesterday she'd woken miserable, her mind still reeling from the tragedy which had befallen Layne. During practice she'd tried not to drag her heels, doing her best to ignore the ache in her legs. At the end of the day she'd puked her guts up, and had to force herself to remember why she was pushing herself so hard.

Today she stood in one of the most prestigious stadiums in the world, talking on name terms with the world champions, who'd said they'd been following her progress. It didn't get much better than this. She'd never dreamed this could happen, even with the support of the Brewer's Guild behind her in the years past.

But Honour took all of that and made it feel irrelevant.

The First Lady of Guild Ball had likely done more for promoting the game and fair play than any other individual in the history of the sport. She stood as the aspirational symbol of a generation. A championship was transient, a fixed accolade from a single point in time.

A legend transcended the ages.

Honour caught most of the rookies staring, but her eyes seemed to settle on Amber. 'I know you. I was sorry to hear you'd been exiled. I'd been told you had good potential.'

Amber's ears burned as she felt the envious glares of just about every other rookie. Honour's steady voice was the polar opposite of her own pounding heart, which seemed ready to explode in the chest.

The First Lady looked away from Amber and addressed the rest of the group. 'So, at last we meet. I'd hoped to see you all before the Draft, and wish you my best. You're at the forefront of an exciting new era for Guild Ball.' She offered them a friendly smile. 'I'm almost jealous.'

Next to her Bushel matched the grin with one of her own, but most of the rookies were still too shocked to return the gesture, much less reply. Undeterred, Honour continued. 'I'm no scout, able to tell you the best way to get a Guild's attention, but here's the best advice I'll ever give a player—especially one starting out.'

Most of the rookies managed to overcome their nerves and lean closer, eager to hear her words.

'Don't let yourself think you're not good enough. You may not be a Flint, or a Brisket, or whoever else you look up to, but chances are you're damned well showing the potential they did at your age. The natural instinct in all of us is to elevate the men and women in the Big Leagues to myths—but if you ever catch yourself doing that, you deserve a slap across the face.'

'We're just like you. We eat. We sleep. We bleed. We sweat. We make mistakes out there on the pitch, and sometimes we pay for them. Just like you.' Honour surveyed the rookies, looking at each in turn. 'You ten

represent the future of this game. Not even half of the players on my squad can say the same. Even less on the other teams.

‘You’re starting out on this journey, and you have no idea yet just how vital you are. And if you let yourselves think we’re better than you? You’ve already lost.’

She looked at Bushel. ‘That’s what I struggled for so long to get into your head, lass. You remember?’

Bushel nodded, cheeks stained by a touch of bashful red.

The First Lady turned back to the rookies. ‘If you’re here now, you’re ready. That’s all. The Guilds wouldn’t give you a second glance if they didn’t think you could keep up.’ She looked at Amber again. ‘So, go out and claim your place. There isn’t time for wallowing in self-doubt, not anymore.’

Amber felt like applauding.

Her piece said, Honour nodded and slowly made to leave. Just before she’d completely turned away, she smiled at Flea. ‘Come on, lad. You can come back to see the others and catch us up on your ma and da. I’ll make sure you find your way back to the academy later.’

Lips parted in a rare grin, Flea followed after her, stroking the fur of her sheepdog as it loped along beside him. The rest watched in amazed silence.

FAREWELL

The campfire crackled to itself, bright flames leaping into the air to claw at the night sky. Unlike previous evenings, each of the rookies huddled around the fire in absolute silence, their minds preoccupied with the week ahead. Before, they had been able to kid themselves the Draft was awhile away yet.

Now it was most certainly upon them.

Irrefutable and inescapable, the truth bore down upon their shoulders like stone. Every passing moment was suddenly fleeting, all the more precious. There wouldn't be another lazy weekend spent in the academy halls, and these easygoing gatherings would soon be past. After the coming days there wasn't even a guarantee their paths would cross again, or they'd be able to stay in touch—and worse yet, if they did, it would most likely be as adversaries.

And so, they remained unspeaking, each locked in personal vigil.

At the start they had been strangers, surrounded by untrusted rivals. Over time that had changed. Their shared experience and ordeals had drawn them together in a way more powerful than any would forget for the rest of their years. This place had forged enmities and friendships, had broken and mended hearts. Divided they had begun, but they had grown united.

But everything so far had led to this, a painful dissolution none was ready to acknowledge. A final

trial to overcome.

Amber sensed a mixture of suppressed emotions in each of them. Nervous anxiety warred with anticipation, elation contained veins of sadness. They had finally arrived at the end, and it was far more agonising than they'd expected. With a soft smile, Amber realised this would be the last time they'd all gather together around the fire. The evenings ahead would be busy with Guild envoys, officials, packing and travel arrangements. To bid farewell now would almost seem appropriate. The air in this moment was genuine, with no hint of the forced joviality which might follow in later days. She'd much rather not see the memories tainted with something disingenuous.

Layne sat on the opposite side of the fire to her. The flames were a physical manifestation of the great barrier which had stood between them since his return, built as much by him as it was by her. Whenever circumstance threatened to have them alone together he would turn skittish and make his excuses, much to Amber's relief. She suspected probably his too, when she never followed.

Shrunken inside his clothes, Layne cut a strange figure next to the others. Tanned skin pulled taut over muscles solid from long days in the field, the rookies were all in prime condition. Their hale appearance only made the lad with the explosion of messy dreadlocks and gaunt stare seem even more out of place.

Unexpectedly, he caught her eye and grinned. The

expression held a fragile reminder of the smile she remembered from before, rousing a flutter in her chest.

She somehow knew what would follow.

Breaking the quietude to softly clear his throat, Layne parted his lips and began to sing gently. As the low notes tumbled over each other, rich and warm as the summer sun, it was impossible not to remember the bright core which burned within him. The song was one they all knew, an otherworldly lament for weary soldiers returning from a war, yet he made it sound more like a celebration of all they had been and would be forevermore.

He was soon joined by Nomad. The Raed's fingers plucked at the strings of an old guitar he'd found, and his voice quickly picked up the tune, the clean tone lending a beautiful contrast to Layne's gravel. By the chorus all of the rookies were humming or singing the words, smiles beginning to break through. Amber felt fingers entwine with hers, and shared a grin with Edge as the older girl sang along with surprising elegance.

At once, they were united again. Even if just for the evening.

Cutlass took a hearty swig from a flask of grog before passing it around, and Knuckles fished out the bag of coins for one last game of dice. Kami ruffled Flea's hair as the lad excitedly told her about the animals back home, and his talks with the world champions. Champ and Gaffer went back and forth on game plans and tactics, Champ drawing lines in the dirt with a stick

while Gaffer stroked his chin thoughtfully. Arms around each other's shoulders, Layne and Nomad launched into another song as soon as the lament ended, this one far more upbeat and with a soaring chorus.

Amber's mind went back to the old bridge. The misery she'd previously felt had entirely abated, replaced by contentment. Her past had not been ideal, but it had brought her here, a place she'd grown into a woman far exceeding the understanding of the girl she had been.

What have you got to lose? Nomad's words from that fateful evening floated up to the surface. She'd known the first part of the answer for weeks, but now realised she had the rest too.

Nothing.

I won't ever lose this.

She felt tears making trails over her cheeks, but didn't bother wipe them away. They could run for all she cared, saluting the happiness she'd resolutely carry to the grave.

When eventually he caught up with her the fire had burned down to all but embers, its glow ebbing away as dawn threatened to break behind the distant treeline. The others had either retired or fallen asleep by now, a handful of slumbering forms cradled by blankets around the site. Amber raised an eyebrow at Knuckles

and Edge snuggled together under a sheet, her friend's hand clasping a tattooed arm draped protectively over her. She wondered if the romance had been a long time coming, or was just for the evening.

Layne followed her eyes and shrugged. He was right, she realised. It didn't matter.

Amber had made a point of speaking with each of the other rookies during the evening. She wanted to fix as many memories of them into her mind as possible, while they were together and happy. Only a couple of them could claim to know which team they'd be heading to at this stage. The others faced anxious days ahead, awaiting contracts and decisions yet to come.

Of all of them, Gaffer seemed the most content by far. Rumour had it he was highly sought after by the Blacksmith's Guild, where his extensive knowledge would be put to use training a new generation of apprentices for their fledgling team. Over the last weeks he'd spent hours with their scouts, impressing them with a wide variety of strategies and formation changes.

Amber was pleased for him. Assuming another team didn't poach him away, it would be a natural home for his skillset.

Nomad wasn't far off the same cool headedness, still riding the high of being an Alchemist darling since the early days of the Draft. Word had reached the academy in the last few days that he'd been replaced by Kami, but if the news had affected him, Nomad didn't show it. When Amber pressed the subject he merely

shrugged. He'd already known the road in his life; it didn't matter where he might roam, where he laid his head was home.

Champ tried to carry herself with the same indifference, but Amber wasn't the only one who saw straight through the proud turn of her head. She was unsurprisingly the target of several Guilds, the Butchers, Masons, and Fishermen among them. Her destiny, along with that of Kami, Edge, and Layne, was all tied up in a complex struggle of political intrigue and financial wrangling. The situation left their eventual Draft order far too close to call.

Amber didn't know about Layne, but Edge seemed more excited than nervous, her eyes lit with a unfamiliar fire. Kami by comparison seemed petrified, quickly changing the subject the moment the Draft came up. No doubt at least one of her potential teams terrified her, although Amber wouldn't have liked to say which. They'd spent so long immersed in the Shadow Games that none among their number could be sure of anything anymore.

As with Gaffer, Cutlass' downtime had been dominated by visits from one Guild alone. With her nautical background it was no surprise the Fishermen had gravitated towards her, although Amber wondered what might happen if the Guild decided to Draft Kami instead. The former pirate had seemed far too much of a maverick for most other Guild's tastes, seldom catching their scouts' attention.

Strangely, Flea was probably the calmest of all. He'd been the talk of the academy after his friendship with the world champions had been discovered, and enjoyed a surge of popularity among the scouts. It had done wonders for his confidence.

That just left Knuckles. Face set in in an amused grin, the burly Numasai had only chuckled when Amber danced around the subject of the Draft. He knew he wasn't anyone's first choice, but didn't care. Strikers and forward players always drew the most attention, and it would be his pleasure to prove the folly of such short-sightedness next season.

Amber herself was one of the lucky few with interest serious enough to scare off any rivals. The excitement of being fought over had been enough to leave her giddy, but it was nothing compared to the day she'd received the envoy from the Farmer's Guild. Bushel's words had been true—the world champions did want her. The idea was beyond anything she'd ever dreamed.

Even so, her nerves remained frayed. Until the Draft itself, anything could happen. Ink had yet to stain paper with her name. All she or any of the other rookies could do was play the hardest they ever had in the final week. The rest was up to the Guilds themselves.

First, though, there was unfinished business with Layne.

In no great rush, they walked back towards the academy, hand in hand. This time Amber led, no longer the scared bundle of nerves she had been the first time.

‘Amber-girl.’ She stopped and silenced him with a kiss, just an affectionate peck, though she deliberately missed his cheek to brush against his lips.

Confusion reigned over his face until she opened her arms to him. At once relieved, he stepped towards her and rested his head on her shoulder, and she held his frail form close. For the longest time they remained that way, just like before, her shirt stained by his tears, his narrow shoulders wracked by the shudders as he cried.

It was only now as he let out his grief that she appreciated the supreme effort of will he’d demonstrated all evening. Layne would bear the scars of his struggle for the rest of his life, forever fighting the whisper of his devil. For him, the evening had been a goodbye to more than simply their rookie days; it had been a farewell to a level of companionship he could not look forward to in his forlorn future. Separated from the other rookies, he would need to demonstrate strength and determination which had fled him previously.

Her heart broke—not because she was losing him, but because he was losing her.

Amber held him tighter as the sun finally broke over the horizon, her fingers stroking his neck. Shank’s words floated back through her mind, the drunken slurring as painful to her as it had been then.

A person didn’t give up because they grew older or became jaded. They gave up because they allowed darkness to creep in, let every passing moment mean a

little less, until there was nothing left of who they had been or aspired to become. The temptation to drown out the voice of that darkness would always be there. The bottle or worse always waited, especially during the quiet times when a person was alone.

Layne had fallen victim to the pressure, and the darkness had nearly consumed him. But if he were going to survive, he'd need to learn how to fight back by himself. She couldn't help him with that, no matter how much she loved him. It was just another reason now was the wrong time for them both.

She drew away and looked into his eyes. They were steely grey, more vivid for the pink skin surrounding them, as though his soul were visible behind the vulnerable wall of pained and swollen flesh. Amber saw understanding there. He knew the task ahead, was aware of the challenge. His eyes spoke of bravery and resolve.

As the sun began its long climb into the sky, Amber nodded solemnly and gave him one last kiss. Her lips firmly pressed into his, parted slightly, one hand stroking his hair while the other held his waist. More than anything she wanted to lead him inside with her. They both knew it could never happen.

Eventually they parted, and he offered her his handsome smile one final time, as brilliant as the rising sun. And then he walked away, head held high at last. She watched him until she could bear it no longer, knowing she'd never forget. A smile fought back any

hint of bittersweet sorrow. He was going to survive, she was sure.

For now, she had to concentrate on her own future. And claim first place in the Draft.

— A NEW FAMILY —

The day was in full bloom by the time the caravan drew close to Piervo, the sun steadily climbing through the sky. Amber had woken early, and with too much nervous energy for her to lay her head down again, she'd instead found herself atop the lead wagon with its driver. They'd made idle chatter as the miles passed, but the man appeared to have run out of words by now, which suited Amber just fine. There was plenty to see in the countryside sprawling either side of the dusty road, especially for a city girl.

It hadn't taken long for the Holy City's tallest spires to appear on the horizon, soon followed by a forest of brilliant white obelisks and grey towers, and finally the domes of magnificent cathedrals. The skyline had Amber blinking away disbelief at first, before completely stealing her breath altogether. She'd never known such towering edifices could possibly exist without collapsing under their own weight, much less thought she'd encounter them in her lifetime.

Her companion kept his council, long used to a merchant trail he travelled more than he slept in his own bed. As he wolfed down his breakfast his only reaction was to break the occasional smile at the open-mouthed rookie.

Throughout her awestruck vigil, Amber's fingers absentmindedly stroked the bolt of cloth in her lap. The kutte had turned gold in the soft light, shot

through with dark veins of red and green. Having it with her was comforting in some small way, even if it did belong to a time she'd left firmly behind her.

She'd said as much to Friday when the older woman had unexpectedly arrived at the Academy. It was the evening before Amber set off, after most of the others had already left, leaving the two women plenty of space for a quiet reunion. Friday had looked tired, shadowy hollows around her eyes which could have been bruising. One arm was tightly bound in a sling held close to her chest, and pink skin betrayed where a cut had recently healed on her cheek.

They hadn't talked for long. After learning to move on from the Brewers, Amber found herself profoundly awkward around her former mentor. Not because she'd let go of their shared time together, but because she'd realised they weren't so different at all. The only difference beyond their years was that Amber had gotten out. She'd felt both guilty and relieved, looking at Friday and remembering the skeletal remains of the Drunken Seamstress.

Whatever fate had befallen the Brewers was clearly a harsh one.

Before she'd departed, Friday had insisted on handing over a section of the kutte, eyes determined, unwilling to accept no as an answer. While Amber had stammered over her words and tried to politely refuse, the older woman had simply shaken her head and walked away without another word.

Eventually, Amber understood the importance of the message.

You'll always be one of us.

The thought left her strangely proud, as if she'd somehow earned her place. It changed nothing, of course—not that she expected the Brewers had intended otherwise. Her kin were a traditional breed. The gift had been a token of goodwill, a final gesture to a sister starting out on a long journey. A salute to Amber's fortitude and dedication, making her worthier of the kutte than any circumstance of birth.

Another mile and she had reached her destination. As the horses pulling the wagon slowed alongside the proving grounds, Amber carefully stowed the cloth and tied her kitbag closed again. In time she'd reach a place where displaying the kutte felt natural, of that she was sure. But for now, that couldn't be further from her mind.

Grange and Honour waited for her. Grange wore a stern expression, his arms crossed and his body closed. Sweat sat on his brow and stained his shirt, indicating his time already spent on the field today. The First Lady was a stark contrast, her bearing as comfortable and friendly as when Amber had seen her during the Draft. Spying Amber's arrival, she waved and called out a greeting.

Amber returned it with a grin, before excitedly climbing down from her perch.

She'd found a new family.

Her future was as a proud member of the Farmer's Guild.

— FOR THE LIONS —

A heavy kitbag slung over one shoulder, Champ strolled onto the proving grounds with purpose. She was an hour early, but didn't care. She'd been waiting her entire life for this moment. Another hour was nothing by comparison. In truth, she was more disappointed to see that she was alone. Part of her had hoped to see the Big Leaguers up early and already training, working towards their next victory. This wasn't the playground anymore.

As time wore on the other initiates arrived, most in twos or threes, only a couple of stragglers arriving on their own. Champ kept to herself and offered only a curt nod if any acknowledged her. Her face was now familiar to many after the Draft, but she didn't care for fawning sycophants or false pleasantries. None of these people were important in the grand scheme of things.

Her new fraternity was a motley crew. Some were tall, others short; lanky and wiry thin stood alongside hulking musclebound brutes. There was an even mix of male and female, from any number of different backgrounds. It was obvious some had crawled out of the gutter, little more than thugs covered in tattoos and vicious scars. Others seemed higher born, their bearing and clothes prouder. Regardless of their appearance, Champ's discerning eye caught one thing uniting them.

None of them were winners. Not like her.

Finally, the Masons came out to greet them. Hammer led, Granite flanking him. Neither wore a friendly face. As they approached the initiates formed up in rows, evenly spaced apart like soldiers on a parade ground. They all knew of the legendary discipline demanded by this unforgiving man.

If their efforts pleased their new captain, it didn't show. A hostile expression cast over his face, he silently stalked up and down the lines, eyeing them each in turn. Champ felt a cold shiver pass through when it was her turn.

'You doubtless know me by name, just as you should know me by deed.' Hammer didn't have to raise his voice. His natural tone was commanding and authoritative. 'For those poorly educated among you, I am Hammer. I am your new master. Cross me, and I will break you. Are we understood?'

There was a faint murmur from the assembled initiates, most too afraid to speak up.

Hammer set to walking the front row again, lashing out at the individuals who displeased him. 'Stand to damned attention when you see me! Raise your chin! Chest out and suck that gut in! Don't you dare grin—keep your face mean!' Although she didn't look around, Champ knew the other rookies would be doing the same as her, mimicking the actions their captain was demanding.

Quite suddenly, it was her turn.

Hammer towered above her, but his height wasn't the source of his fearsome appearance as much as his

powerfully built frame. He looked like a bull, ready to stampede right through her. His gaze didn't flinch as it bored into Champ. 'I have higher expectations for you. Can you use a weapon, initiate?'

'I've never had to.'

'No excuse. Learn.' Hammer reached down to a leather strap hanging from his belt, and detached a vicious-looking knuckleduster before thrusting it into Champ's hands. 'Consider it a gift. But learn quickly, because all those hungry eyes on you now will try and take it from you.'

He turned away and addressed the group again. 'Most of you won't make out the day. Those that do will earn a place under our roof, for as long as you can cut it.' One finger pointed to the heavy cages behind them, foreboding dark iron grids over dirty stained ground.

'There is no respite here, and no lazy days like you're used to. Those times you're not drilling stamina into your bodies, you will spend sparring until you fight like lions. If any of you survive the coming months, you will grow into the next generation of Masons. Failure then will not be an option. Is that understood?'

'Yes, captain!' The initiates found their voices this time.

Hammer nodded and then strode away, leaving Granite to organise the first round of exercises. As he departed Champ risked a look around her. The others all seemed nervous, frightened even.

But not Champ.

She was home.

THE RETURN

Edge stopped to catch her breath just as the sun dipped low enough to touch the treetops. A brisk wind snapped around her sparse surroundings, stealing most of the lingering warmth and leading her to pull the heavy coat tighter to her body. This was nothing, she knew. The great forests would be a far harsher climate to endure. Better she enjoyed the last vestiges of autumn now, before the foreboding wilderness hid it beneath a dense canvas of leaves and snow.

A thin roll up protruded from her lips, little more than the blackened stump of the remains of her tobacco after a long day spent walking the old trail. She took a long drag and burned through the rest, before grinding the exhausted remains beneath her toe. She might have to accept the loss of warm afternoons and bright evenings, but she'd fight the bastards to the last breath if they asked her to quit smoking.

Noting the crimson painted across the sky, Edge heaved her kitbag back over her shoulder and set off again. Her eyes scoured the horizon for any hint of a place she might spend the night. The last few evenings she'd climbed into the boughs of old trees by the side of the road, a bed which kept her safe from beasts but set a crook to her back. She'd have happily given up the coins in her purse for an evening spent in an old barn. It wasn't like they'd be any use amongst her nomadic kin in any case.

The possibility of returning to the frozen north had plagued her throughout the Draft. An unsettled feeling had grown in her stomach as the weeks went on and it became obvious she'd attracted the attention of the Hunter's Guild. She had no affiliation to the Guild personally, other than her clan had paid fealty to them since a time before memory or song could recall. However, it wasn't the Hunter's Guild which had caused her to steal away one night, fleeing into the darkness with only a bedroll to her name.

That decision had been forced upon her by the fate of her sister.

Edge would never forget the heartache which followed Skatha's ascension to avatar of the Winter Queen. The shy and retiring younger sister she once knew had disappeared overnight, along with any trace of warmth and compassion. Into that void had rushed bitter, icy cold winds, the manifest essence of the Moon Goddess.

The realisation Skatha, the only member of her community she much liked, had likely been destroyed by the essence of the Winter Queen had sent Edge reeling. Running away was the first and easiest solution when compared to facing the stranger her sister had become. Pain and fear kept her feet moving until she'd arrived in the crowded, dirty southern cities.

It had been her friendship with Amber that gave her the resolve to return. After falling into the role of a protective sibling once more, Edge's heart had

thawed, forcing her to confront the guilt she felt for abandoning Skatha. It was that sentiment she clung to now. Without it, she doubted she'd have accepted the contract from the Hunter's Guild at all.

Autumn was a solemn and lonely affair this far north. Her boots crunched through fallen leaves, the sound echoing ominously until it was swallowed by the wind. Small bushes rustled as the stiff air disturbed them, dead branches scratching over the ground, green tones turned muted yellow and brown.

She could feel the ancient gods presiding over her already, judgemental and stern. Bottom lip turned contemptuously, she offered them a middle finger. Like most people from the fringes of civilised society she'd grown up knowing their hard tyranny, but after seeing the world outside of this realm was entirely convinced of their impotence.

The southerners had entirely forgotten the old ways. They treated those that persevered in such beliefs as hermits at best, and persecuted them at worst. As she'd travelled among the rural Erskirii in particular, she had seen more than one pyre with a blackened corpse lashed to the centre pole, the scent of their charred flesh floating on the air.

The gods did nothing, and brought no divine vengeance. It was justification enough for Edge's decision to abandon them. She might now be returning to her homeland, but she'd never again waste her time with worship or blind devotion.

The silhouette of an old building came into view between the trees, solid and square against the natural landscape. One weary foot after another, Edge changed direction to head towards it.

Hidden among the foliage, Skatha watched silently. The Champion of the Moon Goddess looked dramatically different to when Edge had last seen her. Her shock of white hair had grown brittle and frayed, her skin now coloured by deathly pallor. Lines had taken root around her eyes, aging her far beyond her years. Mortal weariness hung off her like a deathly shroud.

‘Sister.’ When she spoke, her voice was but a whisper, cracked and weakened by the absence of the Goddess for so many months. At her flank she felt a lance of pain from where the Scion’s blade had pierced her flesh. ‘The omens spoke true. You have returned, sister.’

Ahead, Edge turned her eyes back for a moment, but by the time she did, Skatha had gone.

— FORESHADOWING —

A soft wind swept gently through the park, tickling the trees and making the lanterns hanging from their branches sway back and forth. It wasn't a cold evening, but the man habitually pulled his collar closer on instinct alone, a gesture earned from long weeks with only the road for company.

Unlike the other rookies, Gaffer hadn't been met by an official from his new patrons after the Draft. The only thing awaiting him was a single missive, the script almost painfully cursive and archaic. The language had been so convoluted it had taken him days to decipher, and even now he wasn't sure if he'd read it correctly.

For all Gaffer knew, he was entirely lost, blundering through Gacildra like a bloody fool.

Not for the first time, his mind ran through where it had all gone wrong. Over the preceding weeks he'd watched with fascination as the scouts wrangled for influence and pecking order among themselves. Their actions and infighting echoed that of the Guilds they represented, bickering like birds over crumbs. He almost suspected position in the Draft was a matter of principle for most, the importance of the player secondary.

Even so, he'd been so sure of a place with the Blacksmith's Guild. Their envoys had seemed delighted with him, the contract all but signed. Being told the Mortician's Guild had drafted him instead was reality slapping him across the face, sharp and hard. He had

no idea why they'd chosen him.

He hoped it wasn't just to spite their rivals.

The memory left him sighing, and staring up into the trees. A least some of the rookies had gone to the teams they'd wanted.

He'd been as proud as could be that Amber had been the first pick of the Draft. She deserved it, as hard a worker as any of them and with a sensible head on her shoulders to match. Champ and Edge both had more talent, but their attitudes stank to high heaven. The scouts weren't stupid. They'd seen through the raw skill and looked at the suitability of the player as much as anything. Players with egos or quick tempers didn't mix well with their teammates, especially not established Big Leaguers.

Thinking back to the time he'd waited for her at the gates, he couldn't help but smile. She'd seemed so alone, heartbroken and completely at odds with the world, her head down and shoulders narrow.

We sorted you out just fine in the end, kid.

The wind picked up and sent the lantern overhead swinging wildly, mottled bursts of light painting the bark and leaves like a flickering fire. It felt ominous as much as anything, a foreboding sign of uncertain times ahead.

A figure appeared on the path ahead, shuffling out of the gloom. 'Who goes there?' An elderly voice echoed across the park, aged and weary, cracking under the weight of long years passed.

‘Ho, friend!’ Gaffer held his hands aloft. ‘I mean no harm—I might be lost.’ He offered his best smile to go with the words, hoping it would be disarming.

‘Less of that soft soap! You’re no friend of mine!’ The owner of the voice was an elderly man who looked like he’d been pulled through a hedge backwards, his clothes spotted by a motley collection of grimy patches. As he approached, the stench of rotten vegetables and soured wine assaulted Gaffer’s nostrils. The rheumy film over the man’s eyes couldn’t hide demented anger as he waved a walking stick in Gaffer’s direction. ‘Bugger off! This is my path. There’s only room for me here, and certainly not for the likes of a ghoulish creature like you!’

Gaffer sighed. Clearly, the man had lost his mind. It was a sad sight. ‘I’m just looking for the Mortician’s Guild. If you can tell me where they are, I’ll be on my way.’

‘The Spooks? Pah! A pox on their bloody house, I tell you. Interfering with the dead, that’s no business of the living, you mark my words. No good will ever come of it.’

Gaffer had heard enough. Making his excuses, he pushed past the elderly vagrant. He saw the old man waving a white knuckled fist from the corner of his eye. ‘Curses on both of you!’

Both of you?

Gaffer shook his head. Poor old bastard was seeing double, likely addled from whatever spirits he’d downed over the course of the evening. It was likely

best if he slept it off.

As the rookie walked away, he unconsciously pulled his collar close again against a sudden chill. Behind him, around him, within him, a spirit whispered and bared yellowed needle teeth as it chuckled in the night.

Ghast was far from done with the Mortician's Guild.

APPRENTICE

Warm orange spilled out from the hearth, colouring every surface it came into contact with. To Nomad's mind it was almost romantic, the industrious workshop turned into an intimate firelit escape from the chill wind outside. Eyes wide, he looked around in wonderment, taking in the strange juxtaposition and committing it to memory.

There was plenty to see. Every surface had years of ingrained memories ground into it, dust and charcoal run into the gaps in the wood, dents and scratches where tools had been used to craft wonderous things. A variety of instruments and tools hung from hooks set on the walls, some familiar and others intended for uses he couldn't fathom at all. Measures and steel rulers lay haphazardly on large paper sheets, and white chalk covered walls painted the colour of blackened ash.

The scene represented his future. He was Nomad no longer, neither it nor the other names he'd once been given now seemed suitable. He had found a home and become an Engineer.

Ballista faced away from Nomad as he worked, exacting eye poring over an unfurled plan, only halting to scribble in the margins with a piece of charcoal. Nomad found himself standing up on tiptoes, trying to make out the drawing. From what he could see, it looked like a heavy prosthetic arm, rough shapes and pistons formed together like crude approximations of musculature.

Nomad's new patrons intrigued him. He knew very little about the human members of their Guild Ball team, but even less regarding the mechanica automatons. Most were vaguely human in appearance, but their bodies were nearly always exaggerated or augmented by extra limbs and heavy armour plating. They seemed like another race, alien and unreadable.

Ballista let out a long sigh, leaning back on his stool and wearily rubbing fingertips against his temples. Nomad coughed politely, not wanting to take the older man by surprise.

'Hmm? Why are you here, lad? I didn't ask for anyone to be sent to me.'

'Apologies, Lord Artificer. I wasn't sure where to go when I arrived. I assumed you'd be the best person to speak to.' It was a lie. Nomad had heard plenty of rumours about Pin Vice, certainly enough to make him delay or avoid meeting her altogether if he could. Ballista was said not to be in favour presently, but at least held a reputation of being honourable and fair.

The Engineer grunted irritably. 'There was a time that might have been true, lad. But no longer. You'll need to travel to the College of Artificers.' He dismissed Nomad with a wave of his hand, and turned back to his work.

The rumoured fate of Pin Vice's last apprentice in mind, Nomad decided to cut to the chase. 'Please... wait. I can help you here, my lord. I would rather not attend the Artificer Queen and her troupe of

monsters.' He cringed inwardly, all too aware of how desperate he sounded.

The older man's attention returned to him. Ballista's eyes had softened. 'I admire your candour, lad. But how would you be of use to me? Do you have even the slightest experience in arithmetic or fabrication?'

When Nomad didn't reply, the Lord Artificer rose from his perch and walked over to the closest wall, sharply pulling the sheet covering it and revealing a chalked schematic of a female mechanica. 'Your choice of words has interested me, however. This is the first true mechanica ever constructed, created in this workshop. Does this look like a monster to you?'

Nomad examined the sketch. Similar to a mannikin in a dressmaker's shopfront, this mechanica was less complicated than the others he'd seen, elegant and sleek compared to their more functional appearance.

But it still looked somehow wrong to his eye.

Brow furrowed, he tilted his head thoughtfully, trying to understand where the sentiment came from. 'Well... marvellous though it may be, it still looks odd. Why try so hard to make the mechanica appear human, when clearly they're not?'

Ballista raised an eyebrow. Undeterred, Nomad spoke again as a sudden thought occurred. 'And why make it out of such detailed parts? If one of these creations suffers damage, it must take weeks to repair. In the gutter, a shiv made from an old nail does the same job as a noble's knife. Why is this any different?'

The Lord Artificer didn't speak immediately, and for a long moment Nomad feared he'd spoken too plainly. Then, the older man's face broke out in a grin. 'Lad, I believe I may have misjudged you. It has been far too long since I had an apprentice with a mind sharp enough to match the knowledge I have to teach.' His eyes lit up. 'But you, lad? You may be exactly that.'

Nomad nodded excitedly, the older man's sudden enthusiasm infectious.

'A long road awaits ahead, lad. Do you think it is one you can walk?'

Nomad smiled at the choice of words. Perhaps he wasn't done with his name after all.

FATHER

Steel weapons met inside the cage with a high-pitched shriek, a sharp, spiteful screech in Layne's ears. The aspirants staggered back from the impact, their arms shaking from exhaustion as much as shock. Their weapons were little more than barbaric lumps of metal. Heavy blades with wide edges, he wouldn't have been surprised to discover the Butchers chose such weapons for building strength and endurance as much as anything else.

Layne felt a cold tickle across his neck and wondered if his ears were bleeding from the assault, or it was just the wind. He didn't dare reach up to find out.

Truthfully, he hadn't really cared which Guild picked him in the Draft, his own troubles making the event seem a trivial distraction. He'd never struggled to fit in anywhere before, and had assumed finding a place on a new team would be much the same.

But then he'd been selected by the Butcher's Guild, and suddenly he'd come to realise how foolish that notion had been.

The Guild's training camps were legendary for both their gruelling regimes and unforgiving culture. Stories abounded of the hardships endured by aspiring rookies, and how those who collapsed to the dirt were left to die if they couldn't get back up again. Once, he might have laughed off such preposterous rumours, but standing in the yard, surrounded by ominous

bloodstains, Layne felt his stomach turning. The other initiates were no use. Each wore a harder expression than the last, several wearing scars or missing teeth like badges of pride.

'You've gone pale, boy.' The Master Butcher's tone was hard, but not without sympathy. Layne had no idea why Ox had chosen to mentor him personally. He'd taken barely three steps into the compound before being pulled to one side by the much larger man. Over the last week he'd drilled relentlessly under his new tutor's watchful eye, being worked until he felt like his muscles might tear and never heal again, dull aches his constant companions.

Some feet away, Fillet bellowed a fresh command. 'Again! Fight until one of you is blooded!' Her tone was as sharp as the knives at her belt.

Wearily, the figures in the cage lowered themselves into fighting stances once more and began circling. Layne felt as nauseous as the smoke had ever made him. He flinched when the blades eventually struck.

'Hmm. You'll need to grow a sterner stomach before long, boy. This is your life now.'

'But I, uh, I don't know I can survive out there. I'm no fighter. I'll meet death in the cages.'

'You'll do no such thing. You are a Butcher. We don't give up, or balk at adversity. You may not be able to fight now, but you will in time—of that you can rest assured.' The Master Butcher paused, appraising the rookies crowded around the black iron cage. His

bottom lip turned up disapprovingly. 'And better than any of those miserable wretches, to boot.'

Layne shook his head. It didn't seem possible.

Ox saw his reluctance. 'A Butcher breaks weakness across their knee and discards it for the vermin, boy.'

It was clear the older man wasn't only talking about Layne's fighting prowess, and he felt his cheeks grow warm from shame. He'd been clean for weeks now, but still felt the tug of the smoke as keenly as ever. Around people or when he was kept busy it wasn't so bad, but alone late at night the withdrawal left him tossing and turning, scratching at his skin.

His plight hadn't gone unnoticed. Just as Layne had been unable to conceal his turmoil, his mentor had made no effort to hide his scrutiny. The long drills and the inevitable exhaustion which followed helped. Layne hadn't been able to do anything but collapse into bed the last three nights running, so fatigued his eyes closed without thought of anything, not even Amber.

'I will teach you to defeat your devil. The bastard will perish the same as mine did, the same as I helped Gutter destroy hers.'

A slender hand descended upon Layne's shoulder, strong and calloused from hard labour and fighting. He looked around and recoiled when he saw the Sanguine Blade staring back, her face lit by a vicious grin.

'You'll not be training with the others. Gutter and I will school you with a blade. You'll learn far more than you would with those whelps in the cages.' Layne saw

a hint of a determined smile behind Ox's thick beard.
'It's time for you to be reborn, boy. I won't stand by and
watch the darkness claim you again.'

FRESH INK

Legs dangling over the side of the quay, booted heels kicking the aged stone, Knuckles watched the sun dipping lower in the sky with a bittersweet smile. The academy had been a good time in his life, no matter how short. Probably the best he'd ever known. Until taking part in the Draft, for as long as he could recall, he'd never slept soundly. There had always been the threat of a shank or piece of broken glass making its way to his throat, or sliding between his ribs. Most days he'd laid his head down with one eye open, waking bolt upright at the slightest disturbance, fists clenched and ready to fight.

It had taken weeks at the academy before he'd thrown off the habit, only slowly learning to relent and relax among friends. As the tension flowed out of him so too had the anger and viciousness. Knuckles wasn't on the streets any longer, and he didn't need to flex any muscle to get his own way or put a rival in their place. No longer a figure who felt bitterly estranged from the real world surrounding him, he first found a measure of contentment, and then even happiness.

His fingers traced along the jagged scar tissue under his shirt, an ugly memento painted across his torso. It had been a symbol of the new life he'd created for himself during his time with the other rookies, weakness turned into resolve. If ever he found his dedication wavering, one look at the brutal white line

quickly focussed him.

It wasn't the only marking carved into his skin.

The new ink on his chest still itched as it healed, dark lines risen as a soft scab. It was another new beginning, albeit this time with an entirely new family. A thin black line circled a hook crossed over a leaping fish in the centre, still strangely unfamiliar for the moment. As unlikely as it might have seemed weeks ago, he was going to be a Fisherman.

Knuckles knew barely anything about his new patrons. He'd only watched them play the once. It was obvious they were much more of a football side than anything else, which didn't exactly fit the skillset he brought to the pitch. At least they wouldn't make him fight. Gods knew what he'd have done if he'd been selected by the Butchers or Brewers. He didn't want that life anymore.

A quiet cough disturbed him from his thoughts. Looking around, he saw the Fisherman named Jac standing a few feet away. The older man grunted as Knuckles hurriedly rose to his feet and offered a greeting. His eyes quickly found the fresh tattoo, one brow arching upwards. 'They asked you to have that done?' His voice was incredulous.

Knuckles felt his ears turn red. 'No, I wanted to pledge my allegiance. We always showed our colours like this in the gangs.'

Jac's eyes narrowed. 'A ganger? Typical. Just like the bloody pirate, dragging us down with scum from the

bottom of the barrel.'

Knuckles understood the hostility. Back when he was in the gutter, he'd known his kind weren't liked. There were any number of reasons why. Blackmail, petty theft, and protection rackets were the least of their crimes. But he wasn't one of them anymore, and nor did he like the older man's tone besides.

He stood up slowly, coming up face to face with the burly Big Leaguer. 'I'm not here to fight you. You picked me. I don't need you.' The last part was a bluff, but Knuckles knew enough bravado would see the point made. 'I don't need hassle from some balding, out of shape thug looking to prove who the biggest dog in the yard is.'

He could tell from the way Jac's cheeks flushed red that the spiteful barb had hit home. 'Time you showed some respect and apologised for that, lad, or I'll teach it to you.'

A year ago, Knuckles knew he would have dropped Jac on the spot, or worse, stuck the man with a shiv. Just about every fibre of his being still wanted to. He took a slow breath and exhaled slowly, fists clenched to white at his side.

Opposite, Jac tried to stare him down as aggressively as he could, chest all puffed out. A man of his age fronting up like a juvie from the gutter was an absurd sight, and Knuckles nearly laughed in the Fisherman's face, the suppressed mirth emerging as a wide grin.

'I'm not rising to some bully. I have more important

things to do with my life, like taking your place on the team.' Before Jac could offer a retort, Knuckles turned his back and walked away, head held high.

He wouldn't lower himself to petty violence. Not anymore, and certainly not for a thug like Jac.

Time to grow up, and start being the man he'd always promised himself he'd be.

— ENDLESS HORIZON —

Sleek and nimble, the Osprey was as elegant as her namesake, her hull deftly cutting through the waters below. Proud sails far above were drawn taut by the wind and bulged as the craft was propelled onwards. Experienced hands all, her crew were relaxed. The scattered survivors of the Buccaneer Fleet had begun to flock to the northern states from all over of late, attracted by Windfinder's promise to restore their fortune. This craft was but the first of a new era for the Navigator's Guild, earning them a pretty penny with fast trips around the coast.

Cutlass stood at the Osprey's bow, leaning over the forwardmost part of the ship. The ocean scent of the sea filled her nostrils, invigorating and familiar. As the air washed over her it left an echo in her ears, nearly muting the sound of the rigging snap and creak behind. Ahead, the sky was a beautiful shade of pale blue, light from the warm overhead sun reflected as streaks of silver in the water.

Bliss and freedom.

Cutlass didn't have to wonder what the crew might think if they knew of her shadowed past. They'd all lost friends to the Pirate King's cannons, or worse, his crew's steel sabres. She wasn't foolish enough to think she could convince them her troubled conscience had been why she'd left the life behind her. If the Navigators discovered her past, she'd be beaten bloody

and hanged at the yardarm by sunset.

Another might be afraid of such a fate, but Cutlass didn't waste time on such nonsense. She lived on her wits from moment to moment, never planning much ahead. Life was to be experienced in the now, not lost to some maudlin sense of fright or despair.

'Aye, lass. I'll grant you, that is a beautiful sight. These waters are far too cold for my tastes, but the skies are the same as they've ever been.' The voice belonged to one of the older crewmen, a wiry man named Jackdaw.

Cutlass turned to regard him coolly. 'It most certainly is.' A thin knife appeared between them, pressed against the main's belly. 'But you can drop the silver you just lifted from my pocket back in there, mate.'

Jackdaw's lips, dry and cracked by the sun, parted in a grin. 'You're a sly one. I had you for a poser in that long jacket and frilly shirt.'

Cutlass felt a coin slip back into the long pocket at her side. She returned his smile, pressing her blade tighter against him. 'And the rest.'

His expression soured, but he did as she asked. Satisfied, she lost the knife once more up her sleeve. 'Thanks, mate. Wasn't so hard, was it?' The buccaneer didn't answer, shooting her a filthy look as he scuttled away with his tail between his legs.

She returned to the view. Hopefully that would be the last of her troubles. A cutpurse like Jack was a minor irritation at most, but smoother seas were always preferable to those choppy from a storm.

Her hand found the flagon tied to her belt and uncorked it, before she brought it to her lips for a swig. Cutlass knew from experience the lime wouldn't steal too much of the harshness this early in the day, thoughtfully swilling it around to colour her mouth before swallowing.

Hopefully the men and women in her new team would be more accepting. It would be a shame to have gone through the Draft, only to have to move on again if they didn't respect her enough to keep their hands inside their own pockets.

Shouting sounded from the crow's nest above, breaking the quiet. Free hand held to her brow, Cutlass took another draught before squinting across the ocean. Somewhere out there her destination awaited.

The Blacksmith's Guild.

She had no idea why they'd chosen her. She'd expected to join on with the Fisherman's Guild, truth be told. Nights spent under the stars on deck, out on the open seas, singing shanties as the rum flowed freely. Instead it looked like her destiny was anchored to a furnace, sweating from a heat more sweltering than any day at sea.

Cutlass took another mouthful of rum, the bitter taste at last beginning to become more palatable. Worrying about the future now was pointless. At present, there was only the endless horizon. And that would do until tomorrow dawned.

LITTLE HAWK

Kami found it strange to be home again after so many months away. The familiar corridors and rooms all seemed a little less so, like they had been claimed by someone else. Her own room was far tidier than she'd ever known it to be. The clothes she'd left behind had all been neatly folded and placed inside of cabinets or hung in wardrobes, her bed made, and the marble floor wiped clean. It didn't help the sense of alienation.

Stranger and more uncomfortable still was the way in which the servants greeted her. Growing up she'd never noted their pained faces or creaking joints as they bowed or kneeled. After spending time as a commoner however, Kami found the practice horrible, insisting on helping them back to their feet despite their protests. A day later, she found they all avoided her.

Only the view outside of her window remained unchanged, resisting the taint of her new life.

The pale blue ocean washed along the beach the same as it always had, the tide crashing onto the shore. The peninsula was painted the same brilliant green as ever, basking in the sun's glare. Birds circled around, chasing and calling out to each other. It was freedom, pure and simple.

She couldn't wait to step out there again, and beyond.

But first, she had to observe formality. Her father had requested her presence, and she wasn't so far removed from this world to have refused him. Now

she listened patiently while he further lamented her decision to leave months ago, and the shame she'd brought to her family. Kami knew not to interrupt. He'd likely sat on this tirade for weeks and needed to vent. It wouldn't change anything besides. She was going to be an Alchemist now, and that's all there was to say on the matter.

Eventually Kami was dismissed, shocking the chamber of advisors and retainers by not offering an answer or protest. She didn't need to. Her actions had already set her on a path she couldn't return from. She had a handful of hours to kill here, and then she would board one of the craft she'd watched from her bedroom window, cutting swiftly through the waters to take her away from here.

Yoichiro, the estate's oldest retainer, waited in her room. Kami sighed. It was typical of her father to have sent the venerable figure to try and succeed where he had failed. He knew his daughter, along with just about everyone else, regarded the old man as an honoured ancestor—and that she'd be far more inclined to listen to his words of wisdom.

'You know, Little Hawk, your father would be far happier had you been selected by a more traditional Guild.' Yoichiro's words were kindly and without trace of condemnation. 'He worries at the stability of such an institution, as much he does their dangerous and unproven trade.'

Kami huffed. 'Well, if that's his concern, surely he

needn't worry. When the Guild closes its doors and I come back with my tail between my legs, he'll be able to say he told me so.' She didn't fight her petulance. Listening to her father's lecture for so long had left her fuming. Poor Yoichiro was the only target for her ire.

'Come now, that's not his concern or motivation. He is merely trying to ensure you don't waste years of your life in a fruitless endeavour. Surely you can see that?'

'All I see is an old man worried about his legacy, and how his errant daughter will earn him shame. If he were half as wise as you, Yoichiro, he would have felt more ashamed to have sent you now.'

The elderly retainer shook his head. 'That's not true. I am here of no behest but my own. More than most, I appreciate the young must discover the world for themselves.'

'Then why are you here?'

Yoichiro's face split into a wide grin. 'Because I am coming with you.'

'First you tell me I must fly free, then you tie shackles to my ankles? I won't suffer that, Yoichiro.' Kami offered him an incredulous stare. 'Besides, what could you possibly offer a Guild Ball team?'

The elderly retainer chuckled. 'I think I can make myself useful, Little Hawk.'

He slid his hand into his trouser pocket, the movement ever so innocent, but revealing a dark leather gun belt at his side. For the briefest second Kami saw a familiar triangle and circle motif embossed upon the surface

of a holster, before the hem of his tunic dropped back into place and the firearm disappeared again.

Her eyes grew wide.

Yoichiro's smile grew wider at her dumbfounded expression. 'You do not bring shame to all under this roof, Little Hawk. You will fly, and make us all proud. And I shall be there to see you take wing.'

LAST DAYS OF SUMMER

The long summer was coming to an end at last, warm days finally retreating to be replaced with chill autumnal air. Flea knew it was one of the last days he would see a brilliant sun against a cloudless sky for some time, and had gone outside to watch day fade into night. Sitting on the old steps leading up to the academy entrance, his only companion was an old tabby he'd found sniffing around the grounds some days ago. His fingers idly brushed the cat's soft fur as the sun slowly fell behind the treeline ahead, shadows steadily growing longer over the ground, black tendrils reaching for his boots.

Of all the rookies, he was the very last to leave. Kami had been before him and made a face at leaving him on his own, but in truth it suited him just fine. Flea didn't mind being without other humans, and never had. He usually found another lost soul like his stripy feline friend soon enough. Besides, he liked quiet moments such as this. When he closed his eyes, all he could hear were the birds singing in the trees, and the wind rustling the bushes nearby.

He was of two minds to unpack his paper and chalk from his bag and draw something, but decided against it. After speaking with Honour and the other Farmers, he'd realised the importance of what he was

a part of, and he'd promised them he'd tackle it head on, no messing around. Having to hastily repack a bag in front of his new teammates definitely fell into that category. Pictures could wait. For now, he'd just enjoy the sunset, and say a final farewell to the academy.

The warmth was stolen away as a new shadow fell over him, blocking out the sun behind. Flea opened his eyes, and immediately leapt to his feet, disturbing the cat sitting at his side. With a surprised snarl, the animal bolted back towards the academy, Flea's heart sinking as he watched it go.

The Grand Brewer stood before him, arms crossed and flanked either side by tough-looking thugs. 'So, you're the one?' His voice was as gruff and hard as his expression.

Tackle it head on.

'I— I am, Grand Brewer.' He surprised himself by finding the bravery to look Tapper in the eye.

'Some stones on this runt. Not much meat though. I'll bet I could break his arms like twigs.' One of the thugs spoke, a weaselly-looking individual with fluff painting his chin and upper lip. His eyes sparkled with mischief.

'Shut it, PintPot.' The other Brewer, a taller man with a long moustache, cuffed his teammate on the back of the head. PintPot glared, but did as he was told.

Tapper scratched his chin thoughtfully. 'He has a point though. You aren't much to look at, boy. Not for how we do things, anyhow. What can you do on the pitch to make me leave one of my lads on the bench?'

Flea wasn't sure how to answer that. He opened his

mouth, about to try and find words when he saw the Grand Brewer's eyes flick over his shoulder and back up the steps. The tabby had returned, and was slowly creeping towards them, hiding behind Flea's legs.

A soft and bittersweet smile tugged at the edge of Tapper's lips, his expression turned to that of a man reliving a sad memory. A moment passed, as though he were mulling something over in his head, before he pushed two fingers into his mouth and whistled loudly.

A large dog bounded into view almost immediately, its fur painted hues of gold and amber by the waning light. It ignored the Brewers and came straight at Flea, almost bowling him over with its immense size and weight.

Flea forgot himself immediately and set about brushing the creature's thick coat, laughing as it covered him in slobber from its wide jowls. He'd never seen such a beautiful animal, so strong and healthy.

By the time he remembered himself and returned his eyes shamefully to the Brewers, they were all smiling, even the one named PintPot. For a moment he worried they were laughing at him, until Tapper clasped his shoulder warmly.

'Welcome to the fold, lad. We'll soon see you one of us, I can tell.'