



SEASON 3  
COLLECTED STORY



Copyright © 2018 Steamforged Games Ltd.

---

# CONTENTS

---

|                               |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Setting Sun . . . . .         | 3   |
| There is Honour in Piervo . . | 16  |
| Proving Grounds . . . . .     | 29  |
| Match Day . . . . .           | 38  |
| Into Darkness . . . . .       | 50  |
| A First Step . . . . .        | 64  |
| Damnation . . . . .           | 77  |
| Reapers Last Dance . . . . .  | 91  |
| Eye of the Storm . . . . .    | 104 |
| Deliverence . . . . .         | 118 |
| The Final . . . . .           | 131 |
| Epilogue . . . . .            | 150 |

---

# SETTING SUN

---

Brisk winds whipped around the nearby tall buildings and across the pitch, lending a bitter chill to the day as the sun struggled to break through the clouds. Here and there, all too brief bursts of golden light bathed the cobblestones before being smothered once more, the cold returning with extra bite. Despite the thin layer of sweat between his skin and the fabric of his tunic, Greyscales pulled his long cloak tighter. The weather was starting to aggravate his joints in a way he'd never noticed in younger years.

As far and wide as he had travelled, Greyscales had always maintained a special loathing for the Castellyian pitches. Most of them were littered with cobbles and flagstones over large sections if not completely covered. The hard stone drastically changed how the ball moved compared to grass and mud, lending pace to kicks which could often mean a missed pass. Not to mention that it hurt a hell of a lot more when you got taken down.

Castellya was also nearly always swelteringly hot, baking in the sun from the start of spring until the end of the summer, a span of time which lasted a bloody eternity in the landlocked state. With no cool sea breeze to keep the heat down, fatigue was merciless, sapping the strength and endurance from a man long before the final kick of the game.

At least this time the gods had seen fit to have mercy

on him and send clouds, no matter how the wind rattled his aged bones.

Further down the pitch, Angel dribbled the ball out cautiously before her, deft flicks of her boot keeping it carefully controlled. The nimble striker was too skilled to allow it to skid away over the uneven ground, but even she had to concentrate. The game against the Brewer's Guild was progressing well enough, despite a thunderous goal by Spigot just moments ago. The Fisherman's Guild had been two up before the Drunks had drawn a goal back, and they were now in possession again, looking to finish out the day. Stuck on the opposite side of the pitch after chasing down Friday, Greyscales knew he was out of position and unable to return in time to assist in the drive. He also knew he wouldn't be needed, with only Stave and Stoker standing between Angel and the goalpost. She was supported on her flank by Sakana and Siren, who both kept up the attack in tight formation. It would be easy pickings for the three Fisherman strikers.

Greyscales' attention was drawn back to his immediate surroundings by an excited roar from the nearby stands as Hooper burst through a crowd of apothecaries and Guild officials. The hulking Brewer loped forward onto the pitch, huge strides eating up the ground between them. His long tartan plaid, all tangled and knotted, trailed behind him like a multi-coloured, bestial tail. Sunlight reflected from the metal bands wrapped around his club, muted by flakes of

dried blood. It was a brutal weapon, enough to make most men shy away at the sight alone.

The Elder Fisherman knew Hooper by reputation alone, all bad intentions and raw, bloody-minded violence. Sakana had sidelined the man early in the game, after Siren had lured the Brewer out of formation, and he'd been sleeping it off until now. Undoubtedly, the single-minded thug was looking for vengeance.

Greyscales dropped into a low fighting stance, all other thoughts pushed to the back of his mind. The tip of his spear trailed downwards in front of him, scraping over the stone, ready to deflect an oncoming blow. Greyscales was sure of his play. Defensive movement and deflection until the larger man paused for breath, then a counterattack and dodge to safety, away from the reach of that long, vicious club.

Hooper bellowed an old Mald shanty at the top of his lungs, spit flying from beneath his moustache. Even at this distance, the sour stench of hops and potent whisky on the Brewer's breath was almost strong enough to taste.

The headlong charge brought Hooper within striking distance of Greyscales, and the Brewer swung his weapon above his head and suddenly downwards. It was a predictable but powerful strike; Greyscales had seen Hooper use it to knock opponents down onto the pitch broken and unconscious. Greyscales barely repositioned in time to avoid the attack, the angle of his spear making it awkward to parry the blow. He

doubted deflecting the swinging club would have been advisable in any case—the brutal bludgeon was likely to snap his spear clean in two.

Hooper's forward momentum drove him past Greyscales, small chips of stone and a fine grey dust exploding where the weapon struck the cobblestones. The large man pivoted with surprising agility and swung his club around again. Greyscales fainted backwards this time, keeping his blade low, poised to drag it upwards to counter. His left leg hopped back first, turning through the air to a sideways position as he raised his closer right leg to push out behind him.

Wrapped in the tight embrace of his cloak, Greyscales' right leg didn't move.

With a flash of dreadful premonition, Greyscales wrenched his eyes from Hooper for a split second before overbalancing and pitching onto his back. The Fisherman hit the ground hard, unable to even scream as the air was driven from his lungs. Beneath him the tangled limb crumpled, and something snapped.

Gritting his teeth, the Fisherman frantically threw his spear up to block the second blow. His reward was a loud cracking sound as Hooper confirmed the Fisherman's earlier fears: the lightweight wooden haft of his spear was no match for the brutal club. The steel bands around the club's tip caught the sun as the weapon swept downwards with murderous intent, shattering the spear haft and smashing into Greyscales' trapped knee.



Greyscales screamed as he never had before, air forced back into his lungs with a ragged, burning intensity. He weakly looked upwards through watery eyes. The Brewer's shadow loomed over him, blocking out the sun but for the glint of light against the sharpened metal in the club. The weapon seemed to hang above Hooper's head for a long, drawn-out moment, poised with terrible finality.

The weapon swept downwards, aimed once again for the crippled knee.

Greyscales closed his eyes and mumbled a simple prayer to the Lords of the Deep, frantic words tumbling from his lips even as the club crushed his leg.

---

The seats of the Shadow Council had always been twelve in number, long before unification—ever since the first days of the Guilds themselves, in fact. The individuals sitting at the table were the most powerful and influential men and women throughout all of the Sovereign States. Their word was the undoing of lives, of kingdoms, of the absolutes that governed life throughout every place that civilised men called home. These were the true rulers of the Empire of the Free Cities, not the puppet monarchs or figureheads that pretended at governance.

Each represented one of the most significant Guilds across the land. Their uneasy clique was entirely

without warmth or compassion for one another; any seat could easily be stripped and given to another Guild, if the incumbent or their patron Guild lost enough favour.

All but one.

The twelfth chair, the grandest of them all, had sat vacant at the head of the table for longer than any individual present had lived. Even when the Council had met during the Century Wars—frantic meetings that would ultimately bring the armistice and the fragile, desperate peace—the seat had remained empty, the master of the twelfth Guild choosing not to attend.

It had not always been this way. The secret records of the Shadow Council stretched back as far as mankind's ability to scrawl written words. They spoke of times past when the Guilds had been fewer and had wielded considerably reduced power, lesser predators surrounded by greater. Some, crumbling and ancient, even spoke of the first pacts of the Hunter's Guild, wherein that brotherhood had been charged to rid the land of the great beasts and allow for mankind to begin to conquer the world.

As was tradition, when the wine was poured at each meeting, a glass was always set at the twelfth seat. In this way those present honoured the absent Guild, although each of them feared the return of its missing master. Not a single soul amongst their number would welcome that. Despite the long respite, the final place



remained a constant threat, a dark cloud cast over each meeting of the Council.

Among the other chairs, there was presently another absence, albeit a transient one. Vincent de Laurentis, Lord Chamberlain of the Fisherman's Guild, was dead, murdered in cold blood some weeks past. Ordinarily, such an event would have been unthinkable; those amongst the assembled masters were considered unassailable except by their peers.

But this absence was the result of no such plotting or conspiracy; a fact those who sat at the table were very much aware of. All of them were discontent with the apparent threat to their persons, to the point of argument and accusation across the table. They all debased themselves with bickering, regardless of their station, trade, or office. The representatives of older Guilds, such as the Butchers and Morticians, argued and made threats just as voraciously as the ones from the younger houses of the Messengers, Engineers, and Astronomers.

Soon enough there would be another Lord Chamberlain from the Fisherman's Guild, of course, but that was beside the point. Without a Lord Chamberlain for these long weeks, the significance of the Fisherman's Guild had diminished dramatically. There was little political capital to be gained from exploiting the weakened Guild, at least presently.

The death of Laurentis was a destabilising act that had shocked the Empire of the Free Cities to its core. It had proven that even the highest authorities were

powerless to prevent the intervention of an assassin's blade. Whoever had struck had chosen their moment well and gained maximum effect for their effort. Across the Empire, across every Guild house, a sense of hostility had descended. Now was a good time to be a mercenary swordsman or an ex-soldier; every Guild was aggressively recruiting new guards and hiring spies.

Violence once more threatened to overtake the Guilds. It would require a strong hand at the helm to guide them into compliance once more.

or once, the Shadow Council was not strong.

---

The mournful sound of the great bells rang across the city. Resonant, dignified, and proud, they were easily distinguishable over the lesser chiming that had accompanied them after the first knell. In the streets below, people rushed from their homes, from places of industry and commerce, from the myriad cathedrals, shrines, and chapels. The bells signified one thing alone.

The Bacchus was dead.

Barely past his fortieth summer, Juliano Galbratii was not an old man when the title of Bacchus passed to him from the aged Alexandria IV. Even so, years of responsibility and the uncertainty of steering the fate of his flock through the Century Wars had not been kind to the gentle priest. He had been shrewd and

knowledgeable yet far less calculating or cold-hearted than his predecessors and had been visited nightly by doubts as to the wisdom of his actions.

On his death bed, his long, grey-peppered beard looked ragged and unkempt, and his fallen mantle revealed a hairline that had receded back to his crown. A sudden illness had wasted his already slight frame to something frail and skeletal, cracked flesh drawn too tightly over bone and showing the veins between.

Galbratii's eyes were the worst to look upon. The skin surrounding them had grown soft and wrinkled, with creases crossing outward from the edges like crumpled parchment. Long nights spent fighting sleep to pore over treaties and ancient script had rendered the lifeless orbs yellow and shot with milky cataracts.

In death, the Bacchus had been laid out upon soft sheets in the lavish Bacchal quarters and was now attended by senior clergymen of the Solthecian faith, their faces saddened by the harrowing end to their leader. Most wrung their hands and offered silent prayer, elderly fingers grasping sacred artefacts or manuscripts.

But not all.

The fate of the pathetic corpse before him did not deter Cardinal Prefectus Giuliano Rodrigo Brunetti. The throne of the Solthecian Cult was open for the taking, and Brunetti had already started to make damn sure that the next election was utterly rigged. In his favour, naturally.

As he saw it, there were just two men standing

between him and his divine ascension who could not be bought. That was fine. He would simply have one or both of them murdered in the night. It was likely that the death of Archbishop Giovanni del Meldici would be sufficient; the fear of similar judgement would be enough to put the younger, less stoic Cardinal Cordorba in his place.

Brunetti stooped to kiss the muted garnet stone set in the Bacchal ring, muttering the necessary words of penitence under his breath. Lips dutifully brushed against the cold jewel in mocking pantomime before the Cardinal Prefectus straightened his back and retreated from the room. He had spent exactly enough time paying his final respects to the incumbent Bacchus to placate his detractors; any longer would be ill advised. Leave the sycophantic fools behind him to pander to their god. The role of the Bacchus was about power, nothing else.

Brunetti hurried to his quarters through the majestic cathedral, the shuffle of his slippers over polished marble floor barely breaking the serene silence. Most of the monks and scribes had already left, their presence forbidden. During the election of a new Bacchus, which would begin in the next few hours, any man, woman, or child found inside the grounds that was not of the Cardinal order would be put to death, without exception.

Cesare de Corella awaited in the Cardinal Prefectus' lavishly decorated study disdainfully eyeing the vibrant

tapestries and finely crafted accoutrements. Holding a glittering golden cross in his left hand and tracing the grain of an exquisitely lavish bench with the other, the tall paladin looked up at Brunetti's approach.

'You dishonour our faith with such extravagant displays of wealth, Cardinal Prefectus. There are riches here alone to pay for restoration of a score of old shrines across the land.'

Brunetti found it wonderfully ironic that the most puritanical and dogmatic knight of the Solthecian Order served a man who was, at the very least, uninterested in quaint notions like 'honour' and 'not killing people in their sleep.' Presently, however, he did not have the time or inclination for this tiresome discussion. The paladin's presence was an unplanned irritation.

'And I shall rectify that soon enough, Michele, once I am Bacchus.' An idea occurred to Brunetti, and he could not help but smile. 'For now, however, I need you to make preparations for an undertaking that will serve to strengthen our faith in other, more discreet ways.'

The paladin stiffened at the familiar use of his forename, icy blue eyes widening in a flash of irritation. The gesture had been intended to remind the knight concisely of his station. Brunetti did not tolerate disobedience or impropriety.

'You are to contact our agents within the Union and arrange for a realignment of that troublesome brotherhood to a state that is more... fitting to my court. I will relay instructions to you shortly, via the



Saint as usual. I do not care what actions might be undertaken to affect this compliance, only that the deed is done.'

De Corolla's frown deepened and the man waited a moment, as though fighting to make a retort against his better judgement. Clearly fearing he would lose the battle, skin flushed with seething anger, Corella simply bowed and departed. The Cardinal Prefectus watched him go with some satisfaction.

It was a most suitable punishment. Brunetti knew the paladin loathed the Union, especially the necessity of dealing with the contemptuous fraternity of Longshanks. In the uncompromising knight's mind, the Solthecian Order's association with the Union was a stain on their grand tradition and very existence. Brunetti, however, appreciated that the Union's connection to the church was a secret known to but a handful of aged individuals. He took the same view as most Bacchus and high-ranking priests of the order—the view that the Union was a useful, if occasionally dangerous, tool.

That said, it would not be permissible to ignore that the Union had grown troublesome and rebellious in the past months. Galbratii had ever been weak when playing his hand with them, and during his illness he had all but ceased to discipline the heathens for their transgressions. That leniency had led to the present sorry state of affairs.

The Union had gone feral, and their newfound

autonomy was entirely unsatisfactory to the Arch Cardinal, amongst others. The Solthecian faith would, of course, never be associated with the Union, but without the alliance the faith would lose a significant and essential sanction for manipulating the Guilds.

It was time to bring the Union back into the fold and institute obedience once more. Brunetti had already begun this process, having broken tradition and contacted the dwarf and his accomplice directly in the past. No matter how repugnant the pair might be, it had served him well to have two agents that were purely his own as long as his coffers assured their loyalty. Brunetti could live with the fact that Avarisse and Greede might know their master was of the faith. Outside of those two individuals, the thugs in the Union had no concept of their true patrons—that secret was known only to select Longshanks.

Brunetti already had plans to place two of his most pious and trustworthy followers amongst the Union, blurring the lines further. Let the impenitent and faithless wonder and then see the might of their masters in due course. Fear would keep them in line. But first, Brunetti had to become Bacchus. Then he would begin his reforms. For too long, the Guilds had been thriving, growing, sickly ripening, without any threat of sanction from the faith and her flock.

That time was coming to an end.

# THERE IS HONOUR IN PIERVO

Bright sunlight shone through the thin wicker shutters covering the window, leaving a dappled series of white squares on the bedsheets, each pleasantly warm to the touch. Motes of dust floated through the light, and the soft smell of incense hung in the air. Up in the tower the dry scent was fainter than at street level, but centuries of worship in Piervo had long since infused the smell into every surface. Far below, the sounds of morning prayers from the throngs of disciples in the Holy City echoed from the stone walls and rose like an assembled choir of angels.

Honour did not reach for the warmth of the sun on her sheet, nor did she raise her voice and join the chorus of the Solthecian cult. She was not of the faith, but she recognised the chant all the same: the holy priests leading their followers in ritual atonement. Such worship took place each day as the sun approached its zenith and dominance of the skies. This particular verse begged for absolution from sin following the first war of the angels in the Solthecian creed—typically melancholic stuff to her ears. The large fresco above her head depicted that very event. Fiery beings of light were interwoven throughout the ranks of their former kin, the sinners that had fallen from the flock of the faithful and into the clutches of darkness. Honour had

examined the images in detail over her first days here and had long since grown tired of the intricate work's careful application of colours.

Her legs felt numb still—the left leg below the knee, the right in its entirety. At first, she had refused the warnings of the Physician's Guild apothecaries. Outwardly, her legs appeared to have been reset, so she had made the attempt to walk. The vivid, humiliating memory of stumbling, then falling, as she discovered that her muscles, sinews, and bones needed time yet to heal, remained a source of embarrassment.

Since those first days, movement had become easier, stronger, and more assured, yet the slow pace of her recovery forced Honour to yield to an insidious and frustrating defeat. Proud and used to having control of her own destiny, she wallowed in self-pity at being caught in this room like a caged bird. This forced confinement was more severe and crippling than imprisonment in any cell she had ever known, despite the comfortable surroundings.

At night the Mason could not sleep. Forgotten faces and voices lurched up from years gone by, turning her dreams into nightmares. Old comrades with their faces covered in blood laughed at her pathetic state, their eyes filled with vicious mirth and their hard words unforgiving and accusatory.

Whenever Honour finally let exhaustion take her, the dreams soon found her again. Every evening without fail, the First Lady would be forced back into

consciousness, covered in a thin veil of sweat, injuries tingling like an insistent, unscratchable itch.

Her morning reverie was broken by the sound of slow footsteps approaching down the corridor outside. The floor in her room was covered with a carpet of rich purple and gold, but the bare wooden floorboards in the corridor creaked with each step. Shifting slightly in her robes, she hugged her ruined legs up closer to her body, unconsciously wrapping her arms protectively around them.

The heavy door to her chamber opened with a loud groan, and the chief apothecary of the Piert Physician's Guild strode in confidently. Behind him, three nurses followed silently, heads covered in the same anonymous white veil worn by all of their order. Even as they passed the windows and their faces were outlined by shadow, Honour could barely make out any features.

The apothecary smiled warmly at her. The First Lady knew he was not an unkind man. Though only middle-aged, he was venerable beyond his years. She sensed in him none of the petty politicking she had grown accustomed to in high-ranking Guild officials. He clasped his hands together, fingers barely visible under the heavy frock he wore, that of a Solthecian priest. In Piervo, religion was openly pervasive even within the Guilds, with nearly all officials allied to the Solthecian cult as either clergy or worshippers.

However unavoidable, Honour knew that



throughout the Empire of the Free Cities, the other Guild houses were uneasy that such a potential conflict of interest could exist. People worshipped Solthecius everywhere halfway civilised, but in the Holy City, it was a part of their identity as much as their loyalty to their Guild was.

‘How are you feeling today, Mistress Honour?’ The Physician’s voice was rich, his accent indicating high birth and education. Honour didn’t reply at first. Her glum expression was the reverse of his cheerful countenance.

‘I grow another day wearier, Father. Another day has passed purposelessly from my life. I am condemned to be useless, a relic from an age now gone by.’ She stared ahead at the windows and the world beyond them, the world she felt so very divorced from.

He nodded sympathetically. ‘I can appreciate your frustrations, child. We have spoken of this before.’ Honour had noted the change in how he addressed her over the weeks, his tone becoming more measured and familiar, almost grandfatherly. ‘Perhaps if you relented and allowed my colleagues to send for your associates, it might at least break the tedium?’

‘No.’ Her resolve was strong here at least, from a reservoir of will and pride both knew could never be depleted. The First Lady would not allow any of her teammates to see their captain so weak, no more now than when she had sent them away after the final of the Frontiers Cup.

‘Very well, as you wish.’ The apothecary nodded as he always did, having heard this same response each time he had asked. It was an old dance, a pleasantry he continued to offer despite knowing the answer.

‘Today your treatment will be longer than usual, as we will be spending more time knitting the tissue of your left knee into place and strengthening it. With luck, you may even regain full movement within the next few days.’ Honour didn’t react. She had heard these words before, too. She’d even believed them, the first time.

‘Of course, you must continue to rest. Even if you gain full extension, you must not try to exert the limb before it is ready for rehabilitation.’ His face took on an expression of concern. ‘I really would not want to see a repeat of your last fall. Such a setback would be lamentable.’



Her eyes found his and saw the pleading question therein. Honour gave the barest nod, accepting yet another defeat.

‘I shall do as you ask, Father.’ The words hurt as much as they always did, burning her throat like bile.

‘Excellent.’ His smile returned as he turned his attention from the Mason to one of the figures standing to his right. ‘Nurses, please prepare Mistress Honour for today’s scheduled treatment. I must go and undertake my morning supplications in the chapel. I shall rejoin you presently.’

Bowing to Honour, he shuffled backwards over the carpet and exited the room, leaving her with the silent nurses. Honour knew better than to try to engage them in conversation, each apparently sworn to an oath of silence. Or, possibly, indoctrinated into an eerie wordless state.

One of them produced a small vial of white powder and sprinkled some into a ceramic cup that sat on the table next to the bed. Another fetched a pitcher of water. As it was poured into the medicinal substance, the Mason watched the water become cloudy, her eyes drawn to the milky depths. Honour knew that when it was offered to her, she would gladly drink the concoction. The medically induced sleep it brought would be mercifully free of dreams, of memories, of failure.

A hand, with delicate fingers that looked soft and gentle, offered her the pale white water. With shaking hands that betrayed more than a hint of eagerness, the

First Lady took the proffered cup and drank deep of the liquid, fighting the urge to spit out the bitter fluid.

The cool sensation filled her mouth and travelled down her throat. Honour felt the potent effect almost immediately. Her eyes grew heavy, and she began to slip away, unable to keep her head raised. Her body relaxed from her closed, protective posture. Faintly, she felt a nurse support her body as she began to fall backwards onto the soft bed, the soft material cushioning her with its embrace.

Finally, Honour's eyes closed, resistance futile, her vision turned a cold and artificial white.

---

She awoke again in her chambers, eyelids slowly opening a fraction. As her vision adjusted to the light, Honour realised the hour was much later, the room coloured a deep amber from the setting sun. The overt business of the day now over, it seemed all had returned to their quarters. The streets below were silent.

Honour looked around her, head moving sluggishly as her body burned away the effects of the drug. As ever, she had to fight her instinct to immediately flex her damaged limbs, to see how much movement might have been restored to them. Carefully she reached down, pulled back the thin cotton sheet, and examined herself.

Large areas of skin were still a dark shade of bruised

purple, with thin lines of ragged vermillion where her veins ran close to the surface. Further away from her injuries, the flesh had begun to grow a sickly yellow. Honour knew that was a good sign, at least. Both legs remained considerably swollen, restricting her movement. Neither looked ready to support her weight in the slightest.

Not for the first time, she wondered at the extent of her injuries that they might require such a long recovery time. She also wondered, with a spike of apprehension, whether she would ever be able to play the game again. That dreadful potential crushed her, leaving her frightened in a manner she could not easily admit.

The First Lady dared not let such thoughts defeat her. She took a deep breath into her lungs, held it for long moment, and then exhaled through her nose just as slowly, closing her eyes.

A gentle cough warned her she was not alone.

The chief apothecary sat in one darkened corner, watching her curiously. Questions and angry retorts came to mind immediately, but Honour forced herself to react as calmly as she could. She reached, slowly, for the bottle the nurses had left for her and took a mouthful of water. The cool sensation blessedly wet her parched throat, washing away the gathered mucus and spit.

‘That’s good, Mistress Honour. One can only hope your appetite improves as well. You leave most of the food the nurses bring you.’



'If you brought me something better than gruel, perhaps I might offer more of an effort.'

'You shall have to forgive us. I am afraid a lifetime of eating our rations has me somewhat accustomed to our porridge.' The priest chuckled. 'However, I believe I do vaguely recall being disappointed with it, as a novitiate.'

In the deep orange cast of the setting sun, the chief apothecary's smile seemed altogether more sinister than during the daylight. His teeth were now daggers, and the shadows gave him elongated lips that stretched all the way to his ears.

'I'm afraid your legs continue to frustrate our best efforts.' He gestured at her naked legs, free of their covering. 'It will take time. Sometimes, only the will of our August Lord Solthecius can be the best medicine.'

Honour glared at him. He could keep this bullshit to himself.

The apothecary stood up from his chair, the aged wood groaning as his weight left it, and slowly approached her bed. Honour eyed him warily. His visit and appearance at this time of day, without nurses or Guild officials, was a new development, and his intent was unknown. She didn't know whether she could trust a man who had watched her sleep in silence, the way a lover might. His intrusion was unwelcome.

But then, Honour knew, she was hardly in a condition to put up any fight if the need arose. She watched him closely, looking for any sudden movements or the telltale signs of a concealed weapon. If he came at her,

she would sell her life as dearly as she could, even in this pathetic state.

‘Please forgive the clandestine nature of this visit, Mistress Honour. I am afraid my associates would not quite appreciate the nature of our discussion.’ Honour nodded slightly, waiting for the apothecary to continue.

‘But do understand, I have earnest faith that our Divine Lord does indeed have a greater destiny in mind for you. I come now at the behest of my faith to speak with you about it.’

Honour would have liked nothing better than to grab the man and shake the information out of him. Her frayed temper had little time for pedants.

‘And what would that be?’ She gave him the words only grudgingly.

‘What do you know of the Farmer’s Guild?’

The unexpected direction of the conversation caused Honour to falter for a moment.

The Farmer’s Guild were largely poor and uninfluential, despite owning large tracts of land across the Empire of the Free Cities. The majority of their labour force remained feudal, with indentured labour performing most tasks. Specialists like those seen in other Guilds were rare among their number. Honour had often seen the workers in the fields during her days as a mercenary. They were miserable, downtrodden figures, to be pitied more than anything. Amongst the skilled trades of the Empire of the Free Cities, the Farmer’s Guild were seen as backwards and

parochial, the subject of much mirth.

‘Those of my faith have decided we are to sponsor the Farmer’s Guild in the coming months.’

Honour couldn’t help herself from snorting. The chief apothecary offered her a forgiving look.

‘Yes, I can appreciate that they are perhaps... challenged, in many regards. To begin with, the infrastructure of the Guild requires a significant overhaul. But you need not concern yourself with that.’

Honour remained confused as to exactly how this involved her. The apothecary apparently picked up on the feeling.

‘I imagine you would like to know why I am asking you? It’s actually rather simple. We have a proposal.’ His gaze strayed to her legs. ‘It is no secret that your condition is not improving as quickly as you’d like and that this is a great source of consternation to you. I think we can help to, shall we say, reintegrate you into the game sooner rather than later.’

His eyes came back to hers. ‘What we want from you is simple. We want you to train and coach the Farmer’s Guild team. To bring them out of the forsaken darkness they are wallowing in and bring them back to the light, to the glories that yet await them.’

Honour imagined her eyes must be bulging from her skull. The Farmer’s Guild did not have a well-regarded team. They barely had a team. Most Guild Ball fans probably didn’t even know it existed. The Farmer’s Guild had never seen enough sponsorship to bring

them out of the lower leagues. With no money, they had little hope of ever reaching higher or achieving anything other than disappointment.

Incredulous, she looked at the old man in the half-light. The expression that had seemed sinister only moments ago now revealed only a face worn by one of the fools in the Entertainer's Guild. What the apothecary was asking was impossible. A task that probably couldn't be achieved in a hundred lifetimes.

Honour looked at her legs. They were pitiful, swollen, and aching, as they had been ever since her injury. She thought about her own Guild and the team she had built. Thanks to her efforts, through punishing practice and drills, the Mason's Guild had been fashioned into a finely honed blade. Honour considered her replacement, the man who had stolen that blade, and the success he would already be enjoying at the head of the squad.

Ever since the Frontiers Cup, she had known it was likely her past accolades would stay exactly that—in her past, never to be joined by new glories. She didn't even know what punishment the Mason's Guild might inflict upon her for this kind of betrayal, as they would see it. She thought of the careful words used by the man sitting before her.

Those of my faith.

It was just as likely this came not from the always-neutral Physician's Guild but instead from the Solthecian church itself. The possibility in itself was

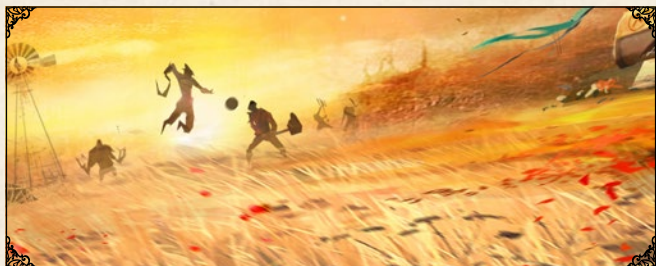
curious. Honour wondered what the church might have invested in an agenda to involve itself in the world of Guild Ball. She had never heard of such a thing before.

Honour looked at the chief apothecary, whose expression remained patient as he awaited her response. As though sensing her question, he nodded.

‘We will, of course, continue your rehabilitation and offer you a generous stipend. I imagine you will not be popular with your fellows for this. We are sympathetic of that and will reimburse and protect you accordingly.’ He smiled, and a genuine kindness poured outwards into the room. ‘But I know you will embrace this calling irrespective of those things. We need you precisely because you cannot be bought with coin. Solthecius has a greater purpose for you, and this is it.’

The First Lady of Guild Ball smiled for the first time in weeks. A new challenge, a new chapter in her life was upon her.

‘I accept.’





## — PROVING GROUNDS —

The streets in the business district were as busy as Greyscales had ever known them to be. People jostled past each other, impersonal and rude as they rushed to whatever destination awaited them. There were no quiet places; a hundred voices created a din that echoed from the walls and cobblestone streets, and another hundred raised to answer. Merchants bellowed sales pitches and prices, each striving to outdo the others. Intermittently, carriages pulled by whinnying horses barrelled down the packed streets, forcing those standing in their path to hurry to one side for fear of being run down.

Greyscales loathed the inner city districts for this exact reason. He had spent most of his life either on the pitch, shared with only a handful of others, or on a ship, surrounded by nothing but the empty ocean. His den was situated a short walk from the Fisherman's Guild training grounds precisely so he could avoid having to cross these walkways each day.

Still unable to place any weight on his injured knee, he leaned on a tired-looking stick he had appropriated as a walking aid. The wood was faded and worn, lousy with woodworm. In many ways, it reminded the Elder Fisherman of how he felt presently—worn, haggard, and aged past his prime.

Twice Greyscales had almost been tripped on his journey, both times by unapologetic younger men who

had rushed by without even a second glance. Choking down tears from the searing pain shooting through his leg, Greyscales had been left with no choice but to catch his breath and continue, trying to keep to the outer walls where there were marginally fewer people.

Depending on the Guild, nowadays it was either frowned upon or strictly prohibited for players to visit another Guild's training grounds. Greyscales never worried about these restrictions; he'd spent so many years visiting that no guard stopped him. He belonged to the older generation, from when such a thing had been more commonplace, before meddlesome Guild officials had begun to outlaw the practice.

Some Guilds were unwelcoming in the extreme regardless. Greyscales had no friends amongst the Butcher's Guild or the freaks in the Mortician's Guild. But others were accommodating enough—he could always be assured of a warm welcome at the Navigator's Guild and the Brewer's Guild, amongst others.

The veteran Fisherman was no stranger to the Mason's Guild in particular, having spent so much time here with the previous generations of players. He remembered every face fondly, all comrades in arms with their own stories to share over a flagon of mead. He even knew some of the guards and officials by name.

Spotting Greyscales standing at the side of the pitch, Mallet waved cheerfully and jogged over. The

Mason had put on extra weight across his shoulders and through the chest but carried the additional bulk of muscle well, standing a little bit taller and holding his head a little higher. Almost as old as the Elder Fisherman to the year, the wiry Mason looked every bit the opposite of Greyscales, match fit and rugged.

‘Oho, there! You look hale, for an old veteran!’ Greyscales might have spoken in jest, but he couldn’t quite keep envy from his voice at seeing his friend in such peak physical condition.

Mallet offered an exhausted grin beneath the thick bristles of his moustache and beard. ‘Knackered, I think you mean. The bastard is working us like horses in a field.’

Greyscales could certainly see that. The Elder Fisherman had felt the change in the air as soon as he set foot on the grounds. He had never known this place to feel so cold or militaristic. There was none of the easy camaraderie he’d known before, not a word out of line. In the bright, early morning sun, players drilled ruthlessly, no motion wasted. The only other voice belonged to Hammer, who barked commands at his teammates, interspersed with curses belittling their efforts.

The Elder Fisherman had known plenty of men who chose to lead that way, mostly among the brutal navy taskmasters he’d encountered during his service. Mean-spirited, uncompromising officers, always quick to the lash, they were universally despised. Rarely did

such individuals care to make friends, only concerned with results.

The Fisherman doubted that attitude sat well with Mallet. Reading Greyscales' mind, the Mason continued.

'Oh, we're getting tougher and leaner all right, not an ounce o' fat on us anymore. But things are changing around here, and not for the better, if you want my opinion. We might be defending champions, but I've never known it like this. Not under the Old Man, not under the First Lady.' Mallet leaned in, conspiratorially close. 'We can't sustain this, I don't think. Things are already beginning to fray. I had to pull Brick and Tower apart yesterday, before someone got hurt.'

Greyscales grunted his agreement. Brawling between shipmates was severe; it only pointed to rougher seas ahead.

'It hasn't been made any better by the stories that Honour has found herself a new crew.'

The Fisherman gaped. 'What?! By the Lords o' the Deep, how is that even possible?' This news was unbelievable—even unthinkable.

'No idea. You can bet that the bastard in the big chair is spitting blood, though. We've been told not to repeat it.' Mallet offered his friend a smirk. 'Because obviously, on the first day o' the season, no one will notice her standing there on the pitch with them. She's only the most famous woman across the whole Empire o' the Free Cities, after all.'

Out on the pitch, Hammer bellowed an instruction,

and the players nearby hastened to action.

‘Anyhow, I need to return to this damned practice, or it’ll be my hide. I’ll speak to you soon, y’old seadog.’ Mallet saluted and jogged off, leaving the Fisherman alone with his thoughts.

In truth, Greyscales was still stunned speechless. He didn’t know how a defection could even have been worked through the system. The Mason’s Guild would certainly be buying for blood, that much was sure. A player didn’t just up and leave of their own accord, no matter who they were. He wondered for a moment whether it had been the result of the Shadow Games but dismissed the idea out of hand. Honour was no rookie, and besides, something that big would have involved all the Guilds, not just two.

He wondered which Guild had poached her. It had to be one of the big ones, but none seemed an obvious fit. Alchemists, maybe? Right now, they were certainly looking for any way they could to strengthen their position amongst the other Guilds.

Greyscales knew he had to find out, if it was the death of him.

While Greyscales always came to the Mason’s Guild to visit Mallet, of late he had also fallen into the trap of indulging his softer side. Each time cursing himself for being an old fool embarrassing himself over a young slip of a lass, the Elder Fisherman always made a point of speaking to the girl that had fast become his favourite.

Greyscales had kept an eye on Chisel for some time,



even before her graduation from rookie to the full team. He could see her now, sparring in the cages.

Granted, she had never played much of a ball game, but it didn't seem she spent any time practicing with the ball now. As he watched, Chisel relentlessly hammered her pick into an armoured dummy, accompanying her potent combination strikes with swift dodges and sidesteps.

The sheer ferocity of her assault was astonishing, a massive departure from the mischievous pixie Greyscales had watched make the team originally. Long gone were the old-school touches he'd once recognised in her style, the little flicks of the blade like the Old Man or the tidy back-step that matched Honour.

Mouth open, Greyscales watched as she screamed at the top of her lungs and launched herself at her silent sparring partner. Her first blow savagely dashed a heavy pauldron from the dented armour with a hollow clang. The second punctured the breastplate with enough force to knock the fortified dummy over. The pauldron landed some four paces behind the dummy, stuck downwards in the dirt.

The change in the girl was astonishing.

'Morning, lass.' Greyscales called over to her, as Chisel hauled the dummy back up again, arm muscles taut.

Once Chisel had worn an impish grin the Elder Fisherman had smiled to see, one that stirred up his memories of summers long gone by. He'd blushed to realise how obvious he was being when Mallet began

making jests at his expense.

That time had definitely passed into memory, just like his youth. The scowl the young woman wore now confirmed that, taking the wind out of his sails.

‘What business do you have here, old one?’ Chisel’s voice was full of irritation at the interruption, and her eyes flashed with hostility.

‘You’ve got a wasted step on your left foot when you backswing, lass, after you strike upwards.’ Greyscales couldn’t exactly tell her he just wanted to talk, instead falling back on what seemed natural. ‘You’ll need to be careful of that. I remember when Bric—’

‘Forget your old war stories, Fishy. Since when have any of your kind known the first thing about fighting?’ The abrupt words were accompanied by a pointed glare. ‘Have you ever taken down a player? Ever looked into their eyes as you twisted your spear deeper in their gullet and known victory?’

She had never spoken to him like this before, and the Fisherman could only stare in surprise. Chisel took Greyscales’ silence as confirmation.

‘I thought not. Your kind just run away, don’t you? Keep your advice, and forget calling me trash like young blood, or lass. Save that for your own, old man. Maybe they’ll have more patience’

Chisel shook her head in disgust and turned her back on him, resuming her training regime. The Elder Fisherman was left astonished and grasping for words at her response.

He didn't get a chance to reply before heavy footsteps from behind alerted him to the approach of another player. With a sinking feeling, Greyscales knew who it would be, even before a strong arm pulled him round by his shoulder. The unexpected movement caused him to yelp in agony. He nearly dropped his walking stick, and his swollen knee protested and buckled underneath him as he fumbled for support.

'I don't appreciate interlopers on my pitch, old man. You'd better tell us why you're here, before I forget my good manners and kick you onto the streets.'

Up close, Hammer was one of the most intimidating individuals Greyscales had ever seen, rivalling even the Boar for sheer physicality. His crossed arms were immense and muscular, and his bulging chest would look more at home carved on a heroic statue. Looking down with a snub-nosed sneer, Hammer towered over the veteran Fisherman.

It was no wonder he'd made such an impact on the game. Hammer was perhaps the most perfect specimen of mankind Greyscales had ever set eyes on. 'Listen, I don't mean to cause trouble. I—'

'No, I doubt an old relic like you ever does, or even could.' Hammer simmered with barely suppressed violence, distracting Greyscales from the insult directed at him. 'Yet here you are. Why have you brought your stories to my yard? You're not even a player any more. Did the bitch send you!?' Huge hands grabbed Greyscales by the shirt and lifted him easily

onto tiptoes, anger taking hold over the Mason.

Greyscales found himself staring into unflinching dark eyes that bled raw, unforgiving hatred into the world.

‘What shit is she even trying to pull!?’ Spittle rained over Greyscales as Hammer screamed into his face. ‘This team is mine now! Mine! You want to see what we’ll do to her and that piss-poor excuse for a team?’ Wide-eyed and trembling, Greyscales was terrified beyond words.

As suddenly as the anger came, it dissipated into deep, rumbling mirth. Hammer let go of Greyscales, smirking as the veteran fell on his arse, unable to put any weight on his crippled knee. ‘Perhaps you don’t know anything. Perhaps you’re just lost at sea, old Fisherman.’

Hammer strode away with one last warning.

‘Leave now. Never return. You don’t want to know what I’ll do if I find you here again.’ His tone brooked no argument. His words were final.



---

# MATCH DAY

---

The First Lady had stood out on the pitch countless times before and knew all too well the difference between the relative calm of the training grounds and an actual match day. Scores of people had packed into the rickety stands surrounding her team, more than the dirty and poorly maintained grounds had likely ever seen before. Some were longstanding Farmer's Guild supporters, a handful of familiar faces that the team might have recognised, but Honour knew most were here for the spectacle. The mob was curious at what the First Lady had gotten herself into. Word had spread quickly, and there was no hiding her defection anymore.

In truth, Honour still wondered about that as much as they did. She was too stubborn and intractable, too wilful to quit... but, gods, she had been tested. Today was no different, just like every day since she took up her new position as coach. There was always, inevitably, something the players of the Farmer's Guild could do to frustrate her or to demonstrate their lack of experience. Match day, the first game of the season, and Honour knew that her team wasn't ready—not even close.

Of the Farmers, Thresher was the only one who looked like he belonged on the pitch. He clearly wasn't intimidated by the roar of the crowds, the endless chanting and noisy fanfare. The rest of the team were standing stock-still like frightened lambs, utterly terrified, nervous mouths hanging open catching flies.



And there were plenty of those, too. Honour could barely hear herself think over the sound of the bloody chickens scuttling around behind her, not to mention the damned donkey's discordant bray. The Farmer's Guild dugout stank to the point of making her retch, dirty straw shoved into every corner and scattered over the floor, mixed with mouldy, rotting vegetables. Trying to gulp in fresh air to clear her head, Honour doubted she would ever wash out the pungent farmyard stench from her clothes.

The late summer heat didn't help. Honour could feel sweat dripping from her back, soaking through the thin cotton of her shirt, and wished desperately for the cold winds that would have reached even Castellya by this time of year. Piervo was always one of the last regions to relinquish the sun with the arrival of autumn proper; the unpleasantly humid air was utterly bereft of a breeze.

The ground on which she stood had suffered in the sun. The once-proud pitch was reduced to hard, baked mud with only broken patches of grass and barely distinguishable chalk markings for the halfway line and perimeters. She had put her best efforts into cajoling Farmer's Guild officials to apply fresh chalk or sow seeds for new grass, but it seemed to take the Guild an eternity to do anything. Their laid-back attitude spoke volumes on how important the future of their Guild Ball team was to them.

Ruefully scuffing one of the remaining markings with her toe, Honour wondered how long before the church

abandoned their sponsorship of the Farmer's Guild and moved on to greener pastures.

A single, weak, strangled note blew from an ancient horn that Honour knew to be cracked in several places, signifying the beginning of the game.

Thresher moved up, easily dribbling the ball between his feet, and softly kicked it towards the opposition, the kick barely taking it across the line. Kickoff made, he swung his long scythe around him protectively, dropping into a defensive, ready stance. Led by Scalpel rather than the Ferryman, the Spooks at the other end of the pitch weren't shy about leaving their marks, moving up aggressively. Cosset dashed forward to retrieve the ball and smoothly passed it back to Bonesaw, who sprinted forward, followed by a Dirge.

Honour envied the easy, practiced play of the Mortician's Guild. Their players were relaxed and calm. It was a world apart from what she could expect from her own squad. The Spooks were a good team and would coast to an easy win against the Farmers. Honour didn't actually expect victory anytime soon, looking instead to give her team the vital match experience they so sorely lacked.

Sure enough, as the slower Farmer side fanned out uncertainly, it quickly became obvious that they were clearly outmatched. The Morticians team was confident, well trained and drilled, able to easily outpace Honour's players. Windle especially had barely reacted at all, only sleepily trundling a couple of steps forward.

Bonesaw began his run, sprinting full pelt towards Tater. The Dirge came with him and reached the handsome Farmer first, pecking and screeching as it easily dove back and forth between frustrated swipes of his pitchfork.

The priest reached the pair just as Tater finally connected on a backhand swing, and the Dirge dropped out of the sky in an explosion of black feathers. The home crowd guffawed their approval, the faint strains of drunken singing that reached Honour only serving to add to her dismal view of the fans. The First Lady's experienced eye knew what would happen, having seen it a dozen times before, but she was helpless to stop it happening once again.

The laughter died as Bonesaw easily skipped around the reach of the pitchfork and hit Tater with a vicious three-strike combination to the ribs, knuckle blades punching through to draw blood. Before the bleeding Farmer could react, Bonesaw followed up and delivered a solid kick to the chest. Tater staggered backwards, bleeding and cursing.

Having made space, the former priest dodged away once again and passed the ball back to Cosset. The slender woman sprinted through the gap in the Farmer line and, without breaking stride, punted the ball into the Farmer goal. The play was nearly textbook, a precise set-piece executed perfectly.

The Morticians' stands erupted into catcalls and cheering, easily overwhelming the handful of half-

hearted jeers from the Farmer supporters. All across the pitch, Honour saw her team's shoulders slump despondently.

'Get back into it! No time to waste, wake up and start playing!' Leaning heavily on her crutches, she bellowed instructions at the top of her voice, trying to rouse them to action. It was one goal, only a handful of minutes in, and the Morticians were a player down—at least until Silence summoned another of his Dirges. The situation was far from hopeless, if the team could rally. 'If' being the key word, of course.

At least Thresher had kept a level head. The older veteran advanced slowly on Casket, ordering Grange to follow. The younger man had drawn one of his sawblades eagerly, and the serrated blade glinted in the sun as he held it ready to strike. Two on one was likely overkill, but it would draw the Farmer's Guild level, and Honour knew that another takeout was exactly what her team needed to get their heads back in the game.

After an embarrassingly long delay, an official from the Farmer's Guild booted the ball back into play towards Bushel, who was waving her hands eagerly and hopping up and down. Her innocence was frank and honest, but it was likely to get her put into the dirt, Honour knew. At least the girl appeared to have shaken off the jitters. That was as much as Honour could hope for right now.

The ball came up short, and before the young Farmer could collect, Bonesaw drove forward. The agile Mortician leapt over Bushel with an athleticism

unmatched by any other player Honour had known.

She bellowed at the only defender left between the Spook and the goal. 'Windle! Pick up your feet and tackle the bastard!'

The First Lady wasn't sure that Windle was the right fit for the team in the slightest. For all his obvious strength, he couldn't hold a candle to any of the other big guys in the game. Particularly, he was painfully far from a dominant, skilled, well-trained player like Brick.

The towering farmhand didn't exactly hasten to action, lazily interposing himself between Bonesaw and the goal, disinterest writ plain across his face. Honour could only howl in frustration as Bonesaw made it two for the Morticians with an easy kick, but her voice was quickly drowned out as the opposition stands raucously answered the strike.





As he jogged away smirking, the ex-priest sent a firm boot at one of the many chickens that had spilled onto the pitch from the sidelines, afraid of the noise surrounding them. The bird offered a shrill cluck and hopped away, shedding a handful of tawny brown feathers.

From out of nowhere, Windle smashed into the Mortician, all his weight behind the tackle. Bonesaw cried out in pain as curved punch spikes raked over his exposed back and left enormous gashes. The hulking Farmer followed up with a powerful shove that left Bonesaw sprawling face down in the dirt. Windle let loose a savage cry as he launched himself at the prone Mortician, kicking and punching like a man possessed. By the time the Farmer regained his senses and loped off again, Bonesaw was unmoving, the apothecaries rushing across the pitch to tend to him.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Honour wondered where that berserker fury had come from. For a short moment, Windle had been more akin to the Beast than anything else.

It was exactly this inconsistency which caused the First Lady such frustration. If Windle could replicate that rage in every game, he'd make her team in an instant.

Her attention was drawn away by a brawl further up the pitch, as Thresher and Grange faced down Casket. Thresher fought defensively, having marked out his position, guarding it as though it were a precious harvest. Wide, sweeping strokes of his long scythe kept the embattled Mortician at arm's length, whilst Grange

struck out at any exposed areas on Casket's body. Already the eerie, zombie-like Mortician was covered in red slashes and bleeding heavily from their combined attacks. He looked even more disorientated than usual.

Without apparent concern for his own safety, Casket lunged for Thresher, who neatly dodged back and swung his scythe around to trip the larger man. His balance lost, Casket stumbled headlong into Grange, who finished the job with a savage downwards strike to the back of the neck.

Honour smiled to see her captain turn his head and assess the stage of the game now that the Mortician sprawled unconscious on the ground. Thresher had been a Guild Ball player for as long as Mallet or Greyscales; he was another older father figure in the sport. It was a status she had happily encouraged to direct the efforts of the inexperienced team members.

A strange quiet seemed to grasp the stands and players alike as they realised the Farmer's Guild were actually making a game of this.

Honour could tell the weather conditions were on her side at the very least. The Farmers, used to the sticky heat from working long, hard days in the fields, were holding up well. Their opponents, some of whom were clad in thick full-length robes, were not so fortunate. The game hadn't been running for long, but already Silence looked exasperated by the heat, as did Cosset. Only Scalpel, Bonesaw, and Casket seemed unaffected, although of course the latter two's current

unconsciousness was probably a factor.

Bushel ran forward with possession, the ball rolling out in front of her, approaching Grange. He moved forward with her but advanced cautiously in a staggered defensive line, careful to mark out areas of the pitch to his teammates. Intrigued, Honour looked on thoughtfully, already working through how best to incorporate the idea into training. Perhaps creating set positions or markers could help make up for their shortfalls in other areas. It was certainly different.

Closer to where Honour stood, Tater jogged forwards, a man out wide for an unexpected pass if needed. It was a play that had served the First Lady well over the years, and Tater was as good a choice as any. Further down the line Bushel would most likely be better by far, but presently the girl lacked Tater's confidence.

Cosset pranced towards him, limbs moving to a strange jig only she could hear. Although she had been focused earlier, she had returned to her usual deranged state, Honour saw. The girl's head twitched from side to side, and her jaw hung open in a lecherous grin.

Tater pulled up short, only paces away from Honour's position. Through a bloodstained tear in his shirt, Honour could see signs of the wound dealt to him by Bonesaw. The handsome Farmer protected that flank, facing it away from the oncoming Mortician.

Cosset chuckled, the laugh menacing and somehow childlike at the same time. 'Are you my Prince Charming?'

Tater looked completely taken aback.

'Come dance with me, Prince Charming. We can go to the ball together!' Cosset jeered. She covered her mouth with one delicate hand before suddenly sinking sharp teeth into flesh, breaking her fragile porcelain skin. She tore away a mouthful of meat in a spray of rich red and grinned at her prince, yellow teeth now bloody pink.

Honour knew that this was when the girl was most dangerous, although also the most vulnerable.

'Now! Don't give her chance to attack first!'

The First Lady need not have shouted; Tater was already charging headlong towards the troubled woman. He ducked under a swing from the Mortician's staff and swung for her legs, the heavy pitchfork piercing her robes and cutting deeply into Cosset. She shrieked as she was tripped by the momentum of his attack and found herself unable to dodge his backswing, which slashed scarlet across her midriff and tore open her belly. Hands slick red with gore as she held her stomach, Cosset offered a laugh that emerged as a sickening stream of bloody bubbles before folding over and wailing in agony.

As the overworked apothecaries ran to drag Cosset from the pitch, Tater didn't need instruction from Honour to keep moving. His eyes were already back on the game.

It was obvious that now would be the best chance for Honour's team to finish ahead. As much as the tide had turned after a slow Farmer start, the Mortician's Guild

were going to get a second wind soon, Honour knew. She could see Bonesaw already limping back into play with Casket following, the odd, corpse-like Mortician having regained his feet surprisingly quickly.

The Farmer's Guild had to exploit the numerical superiority whilst they could. Honour balanced on her crutches precariously as she leant forward once again and shouted instructions to Thresher, who raised a hand in acknowledgement. Heart racing, Honour realised the game had taken over, excitement on her face for the first time since her injury.

Bushel continued at pace, now moving out from behind the blocking wall of Thresher and Grange. The slim girl shucked from side to side, keeping the ball rolling safely between her feet. She looked uncertain, and Honour frowned. They were wasting too much time. They needed to be much, much faster.

Scalpel advanced towards the group, knives held before her, head down, eyes up. Beside her, Silence followed, looking less competent but advancing nonetheless.

The attack came unexpectedly, against Grange rather than Bushel. Scalpel changed direction at the last moment to strike at the tough vice-captain. Her knives ricocheted from his sawblade loudly enough for Honour to hear at the other side of the pitch, and the crowd cheered the spectacle. The momentum of the attack forced Grange a step back, Scalpel slipping under his guard to tickle his ribs with a wicked skinning knife.

Thresher repositioned, scythe whirring, ready to drive



the Mortician away.

'No!' Honour's screamed warning came too late.

A vial of oil thrown by Silence exploded over Thresher and engulfed him in a shower of liquid flames. Age and experience had taught Thresher how to survive, and he immediately dropped to the ground and rolled., but Honour covered her eyes in supreme annoyance as a concerned Bushel dashed to the Old Father's support instead of scoring.

Scalpel dodged Bushel's sickle and counterattacked, knocking the girl flat on her back and sending the ball skidding away from the melee. It rolled neatly to a stop in front of Bonesaw, who snapped it up and sprinted free, away from any of the Farmers and straight towards the open goal.

Honour could only sigh. Despite the team showing promise she'd barely known they had, her pre-match prediction had come true. The Farmer's Guild still had a long way to go.

From the dugout behind her, the damned donkey brayed angrily, and for once, Honour was inclined to agree with the creature.

## — INTO DARKNESS —

In the shadows of the tavern where the candlelight didn't quite reach, it was as if the darkness swallowed up the light, the night bleeding slowly into the building from outside. All the windows were barred or shuttered at this early hour and most of the lamps in the streets were burnt out for the evening, those still alive flickering at the bottom of their wick. The Drunken Seamstress was empty but for Tapper, Hooper, and Friday, although Tapper supposed Scum was lurking in the gloom somewhere. The three of them waited in silence, each alone with their thoughts.

Tapper nursed a shot glass, carefully inspecting the ruby liquid inside, musing at the colour and vintage. He didn't pay any attention to his vice-captain or Friday. The Grand Brewer knew the former would be standing with his arms crossed, a scowl fixed upon his features; the latter would be wearing her usual disinterested expression. Tapper knew his loyal people all too well.

He ignored the creaking sound of old hinges as the heavy door at the far end of the room opened a sliver to permit access. The darkness beyond absorbed the faint light from inside without challenge to its dominance, seeming to drag yet more colour from the room. A figure appeared in the doorway, slender and feminine, even wrapped in a heavy woollen cloak.

Tapper nodded to himself. It was about time.

Footsteps quiet over dusty floorboards, the woman slowly padded her way towards the Brewers, stopping a few feet in front of them. She slid back her hood with little ceremony, revealing her face in the low light. Although she was cast in the pleasant glow of the bare flames, whatever warmth might have been added by the light was muted by the fierce determination of her stare.

'Brisket.' Tapper broke the silence first. A man of his standing needed little of the showy pretence of the younger and less-seasoned lads, and his patience was already worn thin.

The Butcher woman was late for the meeting she had requested. The thought had already crossed the Grand Brewer's mind that he should have refused her for the implied disrespect. Most likely Hooper and Friday would have agreed. But Tapper's curiosity was piqued, as much as he would never admit it. The Butcher's Guild did not send envoys to other Guilds beyond official business between magisters, and this was certainly not such an audience.

Brisket looked at the Grand Brewer, her piercing eyes devoid of any kindness or humour that had once existed there. If she was attempting to intimidate him, she was out of luck, although Tapper doubted she would be so naive.

'Grand Brewer.' Brisket's voice was as cold and dispassionate as her stare, words sharp and pointed. 'I am here to request a favour.'

Beside Tapper, Hooper snorted loudly. Irritation

flared clearly across Brisket's eyes, and she shot the intimidating Brewer a foul look before returning to Tapper and continuing. 'This season will not be an easy one for my Guild. Since the loss of the Master Butcher, we have lost some of our... direction.'

Tapper had to acknowledge that this much was certainly true. The proud reputation of the Butcher's Guild fit poorly with the team he had seen at the Frontiers. It had been painfully obvious that they nursed a fractured and ineffective leadership, dropping out in the early stages. They were a wounded and dangerous animal, lashing out violently at all around them, but worse still, at themselves.

'We would appreciate any efforts you could make for your Guild to show your support, if a change of leadership is required to return that focus once again.' 'We?' Tapper fixed her with a steady look. This did not sound much like a Brewer concern. Guild affairs such as this were always handled internally, and the Grand Brewer doubted Brisket's words as being anything but the surface of the truth. His curiosity grew.

Brisket shrugged her narrow shoulders. 'Yes, we. The heirs to Ox's throne. His family.'

Tapper's eyes narrowed, mind racing. Rumours were rife that the Butcher's Guild now leveraged a diminished control over their Guild Ball team, ever since the disappearance of the Master Butcher. Tapper had originally dismissed the idea as absurd, but hearing this, he considered that perhaps there was some truth

to the hearsay after all.

He knew this was not the first instance of Brisket reaching out to the Brewer's Guild, although the Grand Brewer had prohibited any of the kutte joining her clandestine meetings previously.

Tapper could see why Brisket might be here if the Guild itself didn't support her cause. Whoever she represented would need as much support from elsewhere as they could gather. Muscle, for a play to seize power.

A rebellion, though? That would be a game changer.

'I see.' His tone was enough to convey understanding to Brisket, who nodded.

'Consider it a service to the community. Perhaps we all could benefit from wiping the slab clean on occasion and sweeping away the offcuts.' Brisket apparently knew something of the challenge to Tapper's own leadership from Esters, if the Grand Brewer read her the intention correctly.

'We're all about service.' Friday interjected unexpectedly, dark merriment to her voice. Hooper chuckled.

'And if we were to provide you with your service, what would it be worth to us, exactly?' Tapper's left hand tugged at his beard thoughtfully. 'I'm all ears as to that part.'

'It would be worth an appreciative team captain next season. The rightful heir..' Brisket stared back evenly.

'Fillet?! What does that haughty little bitch have to offer us? Guv, this meathead must be deep in her



cups to come to you with this. I say we cut her tongue out.' Hooper paced forward, intimidatingly flexing his broad shoulders.

It was at times like this that Tapper remembered why Hooper would never lead. He wondered if the hard-headed fool had been listening to the conversation at all. He silenced his lieutenant with a raised hand and steadily returned Brisket's gaze for a long moment, leaning towards the Butcher from his seated position. 'Boar?' The Grand Brewer's voice was barely more than a whisper, as if saying the words might summon the man himself.

Brisket slowly shook her head side to side. 'No one would follow the Beast, even if he were the last to stand alongside the Master Butcher.'

Brisket herself, then. That was bold, giving her own face to the traitors. Tapper respected her stones.

He frowned even so. It was still bad business. What happened within a family needed to stay that way, for good reason. Despite the obvious and immediate attraction of a Butcher civil war—and the destabilising repercussions that would follow—Tapper couldn't see any real gain in it for the Brewer's Guild. Despite their apparent enmity, there were old ties between the two Guilds from long before his days. And even then there was tradition and respect to consider. Soldiers couldn't just step up through the ranks to depose their chiefs however and whenever they wanted to. As a chief surrounded by soldiers, he was uneasy at the

very concept. Each Guild normally had their own way of handling this sort of struggle, cleanly.

This didn't sound like it was clean. It reeked of dirty money, bloody intimidation, and murder.

'When?' Tapper's voice betrayed some of his uncertainty.

'Soon.' This time, the cold tone to Brisket's voice succeeded in sending a shiver of apprehension down the Grand Brewer's spine.

An hour later, Brisket stepped out of the darkness and into the crisp, cool air. On the horizon, the first telltale glimmer of sunrise cast a steady red glow against the clouds, making them appear bloodshot. Pulling the hood of her robes up over her head to hide her face, she quickly turned on her heel, then crossed the empty street and into a side alley that led away from the Drunken Seamstress.

Brisket didn't think she'd managed to convince Tapper to support her cause, but it had been a dangerous game to play in any case, trying to court both sides of the Brewer's own internal strife. She knew she could call upon Esters. That would have to do.

It was still too early an hour for any of the market traders or Guild runners to be about their business, and Brisket went her way in silence, unknown to the slumbering city around her. She swiftly passed through alleys and deserted streets, avoiding the large open squares. The soft leather of her shoes left little sound as they shuffled over the cobblestones. With

the morning came a biting, chill wind that rattled the loose metal frames of empty market stalls and swept her cloak up behind her as she hurried on.

Brisket had almost reached her destination when she found the man waiting for her. He languished against the brick wall of the covered alley she had just dropped into, one of the many entrances to the undercity. Although his posture suggested lazy carelessness, Brisket knew well enough otherwise. She stopped in her tracks, watching him coldly.

‘You’re in a hurry for such an early hour, Butcher.’ The man pushed himself away from the wall, the muscles of his wiry limbs visible through the loose shirt he wore in spite of the cold air.

Brisket didn’t offer an answer. Behind her back, she reached for the razorblade tucked into the hidden rear pocket of her cloak.

The man was walking towards her now, five paces away. ‘You could at least ask me how I found you, play the game a little. They always do when I come for them.’

Brisket didn’t break eye contact, already fully aware of how this would have to end. In her head, she counted the steps, watching his hands out of the corner of her eye. ‘We’ve been looking for you, Brisket. Time to come back home, to the hearth.’ His hands were empty, and he was three paces closer now.

‘No final, defiant words? Not going to struggle? Pity.’ The man flashed her a dangerous grin. From two paces, she could smell the sickly stench of chewing

tobacco on his breath, the scent of the thick, noxious tar utterly repulsive.. 'I prefer it when they struggle.' His bare hands reached towards her.

Brisket sprang forward, kicking at his knee, free hand raking at his face. Instinctively, the man threw a hand up to block her nails scratching at his eyes, the other clumsily lunging towards where she had been standing a moment before.

The agile Butcher had already dodged right, away from his grasp, and the razor swiped out, silently cutting the air between them. As it made contact with the man's throat, there was a soft, almost gentle sigh as the sharp blade sank into his flesh, parting it with alarming ease. Bright, arterial red blossomed against the metallic shine of the sharpened edge, stemmed only slightly by the pressure of the weapon cutting deeply into the man's skin. Brisket stepped behind her assailant, pressing her body to his and wrapping her free hand around his chest, embracing him. She stepped up onto tiptoes, and spoke softly into the man's ear. His head tipped, trembling, and his eyes rolled back to stare at her.

'It will take more than scum like you to stop me or my family.' She paused, savouring the raw panic in the man's eyes, as his life bled away onto the dirty stone below. 'You're not even worth sending back with a message.'

Brisket pulled the blade savagely backwards until she hit the resistance of bone, tearing the man's throat

open. Blood soaked the front of his shirt, and there was a sickening wet, rasping sound, like air releasing from a soaked skin of mead. Brisket held him the entire time, glaring at him with her darkest stare as she stole his life.

Finally, he stopped moving, and she gently lowered him, watching him slide backwards against the alley wall. She leaned down and wiped the smear from the razorblade on his shirt in two deft movements.

A man's voice spoke quietly from the shadows behind.

'Yes, I can see why you were chosen. Good, very good.' The words were accompanied by soft clapping, the muted sound of leather gloves coming together.

Brisket whirled to face the new threat as he stepped out of darkness towards her.

She recognised the elderly man as a Longshanks immediately, just from the way he carried himself. He wore that same pompous arrogance and air of ceremony they all shared, even if he looked more like a priest than anything else.

She could clearly see his rich clothing in the light of the breaking dawn: a spotless cream smock, gilded in livery stitched in rich red and gold thread, patterns ebbing and flowing like the tide. It matched the ornate skullcap perched on his head, a sign of his order. His hairless chin matched the directness of a patrician jawline and nose, both features hard and angular despite his advanced age. His eyes reminded Brisket of a predatory bird about to tear into its prey.



It was obvious from his thin smile and relaxed posture that this was a man used to giving orders rather than receiving them. He did not feel under threat here, even though he had just watched her murder a man in cold blood.

‘Brisket.’ The inclination of his head was so slight as to almost not be seen at all. ‘You shall have to forgive the crudeness of my associate in his last moments. Alas, good men are hard to find, especially for this type of work. All is not lost, however; he did at least provide you ample opportunity to demonstrate your suitability for our plans.’ The man continued to smile, utterly without warmth. ‘Yes, you are truly most agreeable to our purpose.’

‘My Lord Longshanks.’ Brisket didn’t offer him any respect, despite using the appropriate honorific, and kept her chin proudly aloft. If he thought she would bend the knee, he was sorely mistaken.

His grin spread grew larger in the face of her defiance. ‘No doubt you’re wondering why it is I am meeting you here?’ He cocked an eyebrow in her direction.

In truth, she wasn’t. The affairs of Guilds, especially with regards to the Union, were typically convoluted and rarely comprehensible to those unfortunate enough to be caught up in them. Brisket was as sure as she had ever been that someone, somewhere was playing a game with her as a pawn, but she would never waste time trying to understand the rules.

Life had taught her that by now, all too well.

‘A piece of advice then, to begin with. You should immediately cease your attempts to try and unseat your Guild’s wishes. Even now they move against you, their agents fully aware of your subterfuge. It will not be long before they step in to restore balance—all too viscerally, I fear.’

‘You think to threaten me? I will happily slit your throat and leave you in the shadows with your henchman.’ Brisket hadn’t yet sheathed her blade, which glinted threateningly in the first rays of the sun.

‘Quite the opposite. I come to you to offer a far greater solution to your current predicament. You are such a pretty young thing; I would hate to see such a remarkable individual strung up by her barbaric fellows.’ As the sun rose further, cresting the rooftops, the Longshanks seemed to become less frail, strength radiating from him.

‘What can the Union offer us? Your mercenary loyalty is as fickle and worthless as that of a fool, clad in motley for his master. If I wanted you, I would pay the coin and be done with it.’

The man’s composure slipped for a moment, and he hissed, ‘I do not speak for the Union, but rather for a higher power. Do mistake me for a lowly member of my order. I am no novitiate amongst the fraternity of Longshanks.’

Brisket allowed herself a smirk at his response, making sure it did not go unseen.

Catching his temper, the man cleared his throat

abruptly and swallowed. When he spoke again, his polite tone had become much curter, the words quiet but their meaning powerful.

'I can offer you the resurrection of the Master Butcher.' Brisket's heart beat faster.

'Bullshit! The Master Butcher is dead and gone.' Brisket barked the words, furious at the disrespect. She could not dare to believe him, as much as she sorely wanted to.

'Ears and words may deceive the soul, my dear, but your heart would not lie. I do not entertain the thought that you believe in his death at all. I can arrange for your master to return to you, as surely as the light now returns to the world.' The man smiled as he, regained control over the conversation, his eyes piercing straight through her.

Cursing herself for the fool, suddenly a victim once again in spite of all reason, Brisket knew she didn't doubt the bastard. She had never let go of the hope that Ox still lived, even in her darkest moments of self-doubt. The mystery surrounding his death, and the lack of a body, was a lifeline she desperately clung to. It was a secret she had never dared to share, not even with Boiler.

That simple belief had brought the Butcher's Guild to the brink of self-destruction.

The Longshanks gave her a stern look. 'But there must, of course, be payment. A sacrifice. Sometimes only by embracing our own sins, rather than renouncing them, can we ever truly find redemption for another.'

He closed his eyes, finally some warmth seeming to reach his features as the glow of dawn spread. The city around them was beginning to stir, the sounds of footsteps and creaking doors beginning to echo over the stone pavement.

Ensnared in whatever game this was, Brisket could only wait for the priest to continue. If there were any hope that the Master Butcher was not cold in the ground, she knew she would follow this despicable man along whatever path he led her.

He obviously did, too.

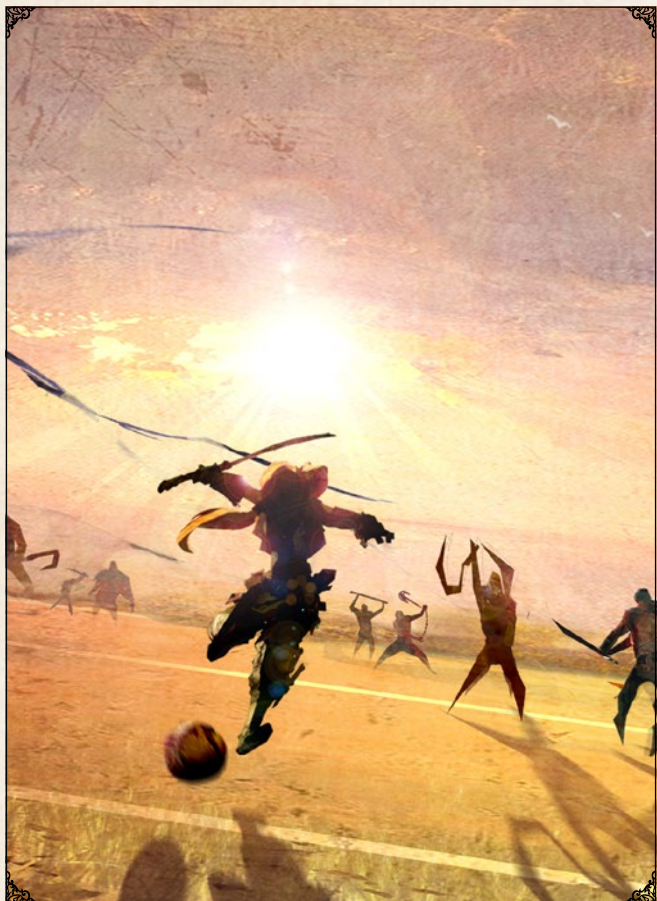
His eyes opened suddenly, skewering her in place, his stare like a spear thrust. A moment of silence passed between them, and then a wide grin stretched across his lips.

‘Are you willing to draw blood for him? To abandon all you hold dear and follow me into darkness in order to offer the Master Butcher salvation?’ He spoke as though he were delivering a sermon to the masses, his words awaiting a roared response.

Brisket felt her heart soar, as though she could deliver that reply all by herself. It was obvious what the man was asking, testing her loyalty to the Guild and the Master Butcher. There was no question. Her passion would see her through any sacrifice, any test he demanded of her. Her loyalty was resolute, even if it must seem like she had abandoned it.

She nodded, committing herself to whatever damnation awaited. The weight of her decision settled

on her like a smothering cloud. She would do whatever it took to save the Master Butcher and the Butcher's Guild. She would walk alone, unafraid and proud, into the dark.





---

## A FIRST STEP

---

Chaska's habitual expressionless frown turned a hair downwards at the sides, as the sharp blade of his bayonet bit into the groove between the teeth of Grange's saw instead of the Farmer's exposed neck. Grange stepped backwards out of range of the wickedly sharp blade and used his greater reach to rake the freed sawblade into the side of the Hunter's face. Although the blow didn't have much power behind it, the weapon was still deadly. Chaska's head whipped backwards with the impact, bloody red mist bursting into the air and over both players.

Not allowing the Hunter time to recover, Grange swung in again with his weapon, the jagged teeth equally as potent biting into flesh as wood. The blade severed the dark leather of Chaska's thick sleeve and ripped down, sinking deep into his arm as the Hunter bellowed and collapsed to the ground, blood spurting freely.

Grange could be a mean bastard when his blood was up, and Honour knew it didn't take long for him to get there. He was wilful and cocksure and could be found chasing women after every game rather than spending time with his teammates. Honour didn't doubt that he bedded most of them, too. But the man was tough and loved to brawl, bringing a rough edge to his team that complemented the others. She could forgive his indiscretions for the time being.

Honour had no doubt he would one day make a fine

captain, given time to mature, with all the qualities that typically made a leader others would follow. The man was full of himself for the moment, but that confidence could easily translate into an enviable commanding presence. With a little help to set him on the right heading, Grange might even become one of the true greats.

One day perhaps, but not now. As much as Grange wanted the captaincy, he competed against a long-standing legend from within his own Guild.

Honour knew Thresher was an extremely capable captain, despite his age. A veteran player with long days on the pitch under his belt, the younger members of the team called him 'Old Father,' matching his stern paternal approach to the team. Just as Grange gave her team necessary physicality, Thresher brought them a wealth of essential experience. Over the years, the Farmer's Guild had become so indebted to him that it was difficult to imagine a team would have existed at all without his presence to guide them.

Further up the pitch, the Old Father duelled with Theron, supported by Tater. The agile Hunter was a wily and cunning opponent but was more used to the animal ferocity of the creatures of the forest than the calculating skill of man.

Both Farmer players forced Theron to defend himself, keeping him on the backfoot. Thresher aimed long, dangerous swipes of his scythe at the Hunter, accompanied by thrusts from Tater's pitchfork from Theron's blind side. Pieces of the Hunter's furs had

been cut clean away by the sharp blade, and his brigandine was already torn open in places from blows which had come closer still.

Theron tried a desperate roll under Thresher's blade, attempting to dodge close enough to Thresher to use the scythe's reach against the older man. Predicting the movement, the experienced Farmer captain reversed his momentum and delivered a backwards sweep of his weapon. Reflecting the overhead sun, it cut through the air in a magnificent arc and struck the Hunter on the back of the head with the flat of the blade, cleanly knocking him out.

Cheering erupted all around, and Honour, unable to keep a wry smile from her face, almost felt like joining in. The numbers in the stands had risen dramatically since their first defeat, far more than the initial handful of locals and curious pundits. It was still early in the season, but the team had improved significantly, and her players were finally beginning to step into the roles she had earmarked for them. What she could see today proved they were capable of listening and performing—and they were now on to take home their first victory as a result.

Bushel advanced, keeping the ball close to her, with Harrow jogging alongside. Honour frowned. The love-struck young Farmer was out of position again, following Bushel up and down the pitch rather than taking up the defensive positioning that Honour had attempted to drill into him.

Granted, the game could end with this play, but the First Lady knew all too well that a turnaround drive from the opposition was a constant danger. With all her other players on the offensive, the Farmer's Guild goal was presently wide open. Harrow already faced stiff competition on the team from Millstone, and Honour knew that mistakes like this would cost him his place in the next game at least, and probably others besides.

The Hunter's Guild were lethal at scalpeling away the opposition, but the First Lady had seen that inexperience with the game itself frequently left the Hunters exposed and vulnerable to careful movement. In the run-up to the game, she had repeatedly stressed to her team that to win, they would have to outplay the Hunter's Guild by exploiting their lack of technical experience.

It was an approach that had rewarded the Farmer's Guild splendidly. With Theron and Chaska down, the Farmers were two players up. Zarola and her feral pet were both caught out of position, isolated at the Farmer end of the pitch. Jaecar was duelling Millstone, one knife licking out to find gaps in her thick armour while the other fended off precise, economic swipes of her hatchets.

Now only Hearne stood between Bushel and her target—and victory.

The large Hunter looked at ease, eyes flicking between the two approaching players, following their movements. Instead of backing up, he advanced towards Bushel, aggressively moving to take the initiative away from the Farmer's Guild.

Overcommitted and expecting the Hunter to play defensively, Bushel tried to change direction but found herself frantically trying to maintain control of the ball as she backed away. Hearne followed her movement with a long spear thrust that threatened to skewer Bushel clean through the heart. The fresh-faced girl barely dodged the attack but lost possession.

Hearne was prevented from moving the ball away as Harrow suddenly threw himself into the older man, rake raised pitifully above his head. Hearne planted his feet and shouldered the Farmer away before the punitive strike could make contact, sending Harrow sprawling head over heels. Both stands of supporters burst into guffaws and a round of applause at the comical sight, and Harrow's cheeks blazed beetroot red even at a distance. The distraction was enough for Bushel; the agile striker darted in to steal the ball, then dodged out and away from retaliation.

The Hunter goal was open, only a handful of paces away. Honour took a deep breath as Bushel broke pace to step back and take the shot. The ball flew true, making contact with the Hunter's Guild goal with a dull thud.

Fanfares and cheering erupted from the friendly stands as the Farmer's Guild took their first win of the season. Still unsteady and leaning on a crutch, Honour could only clap clumsily, but she wore a lopsided grin as several of her players whooped and punched the air, celebrating as though they had just won the championship.



Thresher, far too old to indulge in such theatrics, had instead found Theron and politely shook the dazed Hunter's hand. It was an old tradition Thresher insisted on doing with the opposing captain at the start and end of every game. Honour found it sweet, if slightly awkward.

This time, however, Thresher's eyes shone with pride, and he wore as large and genuine a smile as she had ever seen from the Old Father. Even Theron seemed to understand, slapping the Farmer on the back like an old comrade and grinning back.

As the Farmer supporters in the stands began to sing a bawdy tale about a farmhand's daughter and the cowshed, Honour let her team have their moment. She knew they needed it, and honestly, she did too. This was the first true step on their path, but they had a long way to go yet.

---

When he had been playing on the Fisherman's Guild team, Greyscales had been aware of the Farmer's Guild, although he'd never made time to see their matches. There had always been another championship game to catch his interest, drawing his attention away from the lower leagues.

Since his injury, however, Greyscales had been watching each Farmer's Guild match, observing their progression with keen interest. It had been a slow,

faltering struggle against professional teams with much stronger players.

Today they had stepped up their game tremendously. Greyscales could barely recall seeing a more composed and mature performance from any side for some years—undoubtedly the work of the First Lady. Watching from the stands, he was sure he had seen the future of the sport, and he was equally sure he wanted a part in it.

The Elder Fisherman limped down from his perch in the stands as fast as his injured leg would take him, swearing colourfully with every jolt of pain that shot through the joint. It wasn't getting any easier to walk on, that was for sure. Worse still, he had come to suspect that the injury was infected, from how inflamed the tender and discoloured flesh was underneath the bandages.

Greyscales had known Thresher years ago, when they were both but green, eager lads. Now it was time to rekindle that acquaintance and find out the story behind the result.

By the time he finally descended to the pitch, most of the people in the crowds had dispersed, taking their celebration or despair elsewhere. Greyscales knew from past experience that both would end similarly enough: in the bottom of a tankard. And then, for those few young bloods not yet able to handle their ale, spewing their guts in a dark alley.

He was Grudgingly, he handed over most of the

coins in his pockets to bribe the Guild officials and their guards for access, though it galled him to do it. Long gone were the days that a man could walk where he pleased. A lower league team was a world apart from the familiar seas he was used to sailing, where all the stewards knew to let the veteran past without question.

Finding Thresher didn't take long. The Farmer's Guild captain was standing alone, staring contentedly over the muddy, bloodstained pitch. Greyscales remembered doing something similar after his first victory in the big leagues and was content to join his old friend in silence. This wasn't a moment that should be taken from anyone.

Features cast in muted orange from the setting sun, Thresher looked every inch the man Greyscales remembered: tall, thick set, and stern but kindly. Even as the Farmer surveyed the hallowed ground of his team's triumph, Greyscales noted that Thresher looked humble rather than victorious. The Elder Fisherman recalled that same sense of noble modesty from before, too.

'Greyscales, is that you?' Thresher didn't look around, still committing the sight to memory.

'Aye, Thresher, that it is.' Greyscales patted Thresher on the back with his free hand, the other set firmly on top of his stick.

'What brings an old sea dog like you out to my fields?' Thresher spoke in common Piert, his thick Mald

accent not entirely in keeping with the wheatstalk dangling from between his teeth. 'Are you lost?' The stem muddied his words slightly, forcing Greyscales to lean in to hear him better.

'Ha! Well met. No, I'm here to see the Old Father, catch up on past days, that sort of thing. I have a feelin' you're going to start making quite the name for yourself, old man.' Greyscales offered the Farmer his most honest grin. 'You did something very special today, and I hope you know it.'

The Elder Fisherman thought he saw a flash of irritation cross Thresher's face for a moment as the Old Father at last turned his head away from the pitch. If it had been there at all, though, it was quickly replaced by a smile that didn't seem quite genuine.

'Hmm. Maybe we did. Maybe we just got lucky today.' The Farmer shrugged shoulders broad and strong from countless days spent in the fields, his shirt still stained with sweat. 'You should know that you never count your chickens though, a man of your age.'

Although Thresher's eyes were honest, they were not friendly.

'I heard you got laid up. Didn't know how badly, though. Are the Sawbones fixing you up?' Thresher pointed to Greyscales' leg, bent at the knee to keep his weight from it. The white of the bandages was blotched from sweat and grime.

Greyscales shrugged noncommittally, twisting to hide the injured limb in the depths of his cloak. As

he did, he detected a faint odour, akin to spoilt milk. He offered Thresher a toothy grin. 'Don't worry about this—I'll see it off all right. Never had an injury scupper me yet. I don't intend to start now.'

'Forget I asked. Just take it easy on that leg; I can see how badly swollen it is. I doubt it'll get better without rest.' Thresher didn't sound convinced, his expression stern.

Uncomfortable with the topic, Greyscales tried to get the conversation back on track.

'Really, it's fine. But you lads, you need to think ahead now! A ship will go nowhere if you don't dare unfurl the sails. It's time you take the wind and go.' Greyscales leaned in closer. 'But you don't need me to tell you that, my friend. I bet the First Lady has you running drills from morning 'til night, eh?'

Thresher's shoulders dropped as he sighed, head gently shaking. 'Greyscales, I am an honest man. I speak my mind, and if you remember me from years gone by with any respect, then I'd like to think you'll do the same.' Thresher's smile had withered, leaving a stern face to match his stern tone. 'I am tired, elder, and I want to go and see the rest of my kin. I want to tell them how proud I am of them one more time, so let's cut the bull. Why are you here?'

'Why am I here?' Greyscales didn't understand, repeating the question with a furrowed brow.

'Why are you here, aye. I remember we knew each other once, when we were yet boys. You were honest



then, one of the lads. Was it after you went to war that you changed? I doubt it.' Thresher shook his head. 'After the Shadow Games, then. What happened to you, after you hit the big leagues? You left all of us behind you.'

'No, tha—'

Thresher silenced him with a raised hand. 'Yes, you did. You moved on and left us little fish behind. Solthecius above, none of us thought any worse of you for it. You made it, got out of our life, and pulled yourself up to fame and fortune. Made new friends, amongst the stars and nobility, I'm sure. But now you're back and talking to me like we're still old friends, without a day passed. Why? Because you feel bad about leaving us? You shouldn't. Anyone you knew back then either is in the ground and past caring or has long since forgotten the young lad from our childhood, the one who joined the navy and then became a star.'

Thresher pointed to Greyscales' hidden knee.

'Perhaps it's because of that, all bruised, bloody, and broken. Taken you down a rung or two, maybe? I doubt it. Let's just be honest. You're here because of her, the First Lady. You don't care about us. You didn't before, and you don't now. All I am to you now is a way in, a foot in the door.'

Greyscales didn't speak.

'It's insulting. You aren't my friend, any more than those young 'uns you like to lecture at are yours. If you want to come here and talk to Honour, then just say it,

instead of wheedling your way through me. But I doubt she has any remaining fondness for you, any more than the others, since you dropped out of the game.'

Greyscales didn't know how to respond, the tips of his ears burning bright with embarrassment. 'Perhaps... perhaps I made a mistake coming here to see you today.'

'Perhaps you did.' The stern tone remained. 'You made your billet for years from false smiles and words, and I don't envy you for it. It's left you with nothing, and that has to be hard for a man. I may not have glory or fame, but I have my kin, and my word, and that's enough.'

There was awkward silence but for the wind. Thresher had said his piece and Greyscales had no answer. They watched the sun begin to slip from the sky, over the horizon, gazing out over the scene of the Farmer's victory together as they had done only moments before. Strange how a few minutes could make such a difference.

The Elder Fisherman could feel yet another door closing in his life and was afraid to acknowledge it.

Eventually, as though unable to sustain bitterness any longer, the Farmer spoke, the older and stronger of the pair. 'Listen, Greyscales. Best of luck trying to find your course again—if we're anything to go by, then you should know that anything's possible.' He held out a strong hand towards the Elder Fisherman, and at last he smiled once again, the dark words between them all past.

Thresher's tanned, calloused hand was hard to the touch when Greyscales shook it, leaving the Fisherman feeling frail and weak. His face flush red with shame, and he tried unsuccessfully to fight back embarrassed tears from filling his eyes.

The Farmer had one more piece of advice, expression sincere. 'And in Solthecius' name, take that leg back to the Sawbones, for your own good. It stinks worse than a billy goat's arse.'

The shame Greyscales felt at hearing the words hurt more than the physical pain of his injury. Under Thresher's watchful eye, the Elder Fisherman mumbled a response and hobbled off as quickly as he could, a new tear rolling from his eyes at each step of his ruined leg. Underneath his cloak he could feel wet trails of blood running slowly over his ankle from above, the bandages now growing stiff as his wounds opened once more, leaking infected gore and pus.

---

# DAMNATION

---

It was comforting to return to the Butcher's Guild at last, yet something tainted her arrival as dishonest. Brisket felt as though she didn't belong anymore, a great divide now opened up between her past life and her current one. It broke her heart, seeing the familiar walls and tapestries and the faces of the people whom she had grown up around. The entire scene seemed so impossibly distant, the figures removed from her life, her friends turned to strangers.

That was wrong, Brisket realised. She had made herself the stranger.

It hadn't just been at the behest of the Longshanks, either. Long before that clandestine meeting, ever since the failed attempt on her life, Brisket knew she had begun to force the people around her away. At the time, it had been grief consuming her, the loss of the Master Butcher too much to bear. Before long, Brisket had alienated everyone. It had been far easier to walk alone than try to repair bridges.

Besides, she was forced to admit, she had changed herself. She looked for the hidden threat in every darkened corner, felt her body tense at sudden movements, had been left distrusting the glint of metal. A confidence Brisket had taken for granted was irrevocably gone, never to return. What remained was urgent and scathing mistrust, backed by a thinly veiled contempt for the world.

Even when the struggle for power had begun against Fillet, Brisket had felt apart from her supporters, unable to confide in them. For as long as most could recall, Ox had always been the figurehead of the Guild, an old soldier respected and feared in equal measure. With him gone, the whole Guild felt different, the magisters and chamberlains plotting to take control in the vacuum.

Fillet was the spiritual embodiment of that change, the champion leading the charge.

Brisket didn't dislike the woman who had taken up the mantle of captaincy. To the contrary, she even saw the wisdom in Fillet's appointment. The Flashing Blade was tough, mean, and determined, a ferocious fighter and a natural leader. However, Brisket's sense of loyalty towards the Master Butcher had remained strong. Too strong, enough that she could never see another in the role with any sense of satisfaction.

And then, of course, there had been the meeting with the Longshanks. After that, there was no turning back.

She stood in the grand entrance hall, Boar and Boiler at her back, along with a handful of magisters and clerks. These were the truly brave, yet hopelessly foolish, souls. Regardless of the outcome this bloody day, they would likely be put to death.

Opposite from her, Fillet stood at the head of her own, much larger crowd of supporters. The remaining members of the team were there, at the forefront. Tenderiser towered above all the others, huge arms



crossed. Brisket had never even begun to entertain the notion that she could sway him. It was also no surprise that Meathook had followed her heart, siding with her lover. Brisket had once hoped Shank might side with the old family, but ever the opportunistic mercenary, the Master Cutter understood only loyalty to who paid the most coin.

The unspoken threat of violence lay heavy in the air, and all eyes were trained on the two women. This was a confrontation as had never been seen before, a spectacle that would likely become legend in years to come. Fillet had vowed to break the old family once and for all and bring the rebellion under control.

This was her chance, even if Brisket did not intend to let her take it.

Fillet's lips curled into a feral smile. 'You know the rules. No one leaves the Guild. No one. Especially not under my captaincy, and not you, most of all.' The words were a sinister hiss, full of venom. 'Of all the old family, you're the one I would cut to strips and feed to the dogs, Brisket. I can muzzle the Beast and cow the boy. But you? You are different. Obstinate, spirited, and unyielding. I know as much as you do that you will never bend the knee for the good of the Guild.'

The burden of what she knew she must do weighed heavily upon Brisket's shoulders. The Butcher's Guild had always been her family, the only one she had ever known. To turn her back on them was betrayal—not only of the Guild and her family but of herself too.

She didn't have a choice, though. No matter how painful, Brisket had to leave the Butcher's Guild and her loyalties behind her in order to free the Master Butcher. Her debt to Ox was more important than anything else.

Her actions now would be for the greater good of the Guild, for the future.

Brisket slowly nodded.

'This team belongs to me, not to the ghost of a man long passed over. I will lead, and your people will follow. But for your betrayal?' Fillet's smile grew larger. 'Death. You cannot be allowed to live.'

Brisket took a deep breath, all too aware of the path she was about to step onto. There would be no way back once she committed herself. 'Then why don't you try to cut me? Are you craven?'

Fillet narrowed her eyes. 'Do not doubt me. This has gone on long enough.' Brisket knew the next sentence before Fillet said it. 'I invite you to take the trial.'

It was done. The inevitable words had been said and could not be taken back, just as the course had been set all those moons ago when the Master Butcher had been taken.

Boiler was almost crying beside her, the poor boy overwhelmed by fear. Despite her determination, Brisket found herself sharing his sense of foreboding. She had known that to sacrifice herself, she would have to undertake the trial. It was the only way by which she might win her freedom from the Guild without

inviting death at the end of an assassin's blade. But that knowledge did little to assuage her doubts now.

She refused to be intimidated, steadily returning Fillet's gaze. 'I accept. We go to trial.'

---

Barely more than a rough circle of sandy dirt, the pit bled murderous intent into the world, promising primal and archaic violence. The air was heavy, humid, and close, the heat from the surrounding torches oppressive. Down in the darkness, even they managed to be threatening, the flickering light a bestial, pulsing heartbeat.

These places were meant to decide the final outcome of any dispute, and today would be no exception. Brisket only hoped she could find a way to defeat Fillet. Regardless of her conviction, the older woman was realistic—her opponent was arguably the best duellist in the Empire of the Free Cities. She didn't entertain any idea other than that she would be lucky to escape with her life.

Although she had known the death pits as a silent spectator, Brisket had never stood in the circle before. It was an entirely different experience. In the past, she'd wondered what had so possessed those unfortunates who descended into the pit, why they had chosen to spend their last moments duelling with the ritual knives.

Today she knew her own story, at least. Someone clapped their hands together, and without

any further ceremony, the trial began.

Instantly, the world shrank to the duel, everything else inconsequential shadows, even the other Butchers surrounding them. Circling, the two women eyed each other, waiting for the first move. Brisket's breath came in short bursts, the tension and the clammy heat already taking their toll. Involuntarily clenching her free hand into a fist, she felt her skin wet from the bleeding with Fillet. It was as much a reminder of the price of failure as the ruddy stains in the dirt and the musty stench of death surrounding them.

Brisket broke the silence, offering Fillet a final warning. 'Let me go. There is yet to truly be blood between us. I can still walk away.'

'No blood? Do you put aside the pact so cheaply, traitor?' Fillet's expression matched her hard words.

'Fillet, listen to me. If you don't let me go now, I will have to gut you and leave you for dead.' Brisket hadn't expected Fillet to accede. The woman's pride was too hurt.

'And if I do let you go, I look weaker still. Tell me, what did you think would happen once the trial began? Don't play the fool.'

Brisket's reply died in her throat as Fillet leapt forward, the fast movement and gleam of her knife a visceral reminder of her ominous moniker. Brisket managed to clumsily deflect the attack, her feet slow to react. The second swipe was lower, and Brisket almost lost her footing, barely able to block the lethal edge of the blade.

From nowhere, Fillet struck Brisket in the flank with a hard knee, one arm reaching across to disarm her. Brisket frantically reversed the blade in her hand and tried to stab at Fillet's fingers. Fillet danced away easily, Brisket was sure she saw a hint of a grin in her opponent's expression.

They were back to circling once again, and Brisket could tell that the exchange had merely been a test. Without taking her eyes from Fillet, Brisket returned her grip to normal. The long blades were awkward to use, a ritual weapon with a unique and unfamiliar shape and design.

It didn't make them any less deadly, especially in the hands of the Flashing Blade herself.

The other Butchers watched impassively from underneath the dark granite arches. Each duel was different, some dominated by jeers and cheering throughout, others taking place in absolute silence. The final conflict between Brisket and Fillet played out against a backdrop of deathly stillness, a chilling portent of the fate of the Guild.

Fillet offered up the same taunting smile once more, her teeth bared in a feral smile. She broke from her cautious sidesteps and boldly advanced just outside of Brisket's reach. The ritual knife floated sideways, still held in Fillet's right hand, blade tilted slightly upwards.

Brisket hesitated for a second, trying to determine the angle of attack. Fillet's body language was perfectly even, not betraying the slightest hint of her intent, her



breathing even and calm. Brisket chose to lunge away from the blade, arm raised to swipe at Fillet as she passed.

Brisket's reward was a stiff boot, unbalancing her and leaving her unable to parry a smooth cut that easily parted the exposed flesh on her arm. She gasped in pain and crashed to the ground before hurriedly regaining her footing. Fine grains of dirt had rubbed into the wound, mixed with a stream of blood. It stung enough to be more than a simple flesh wound, and Brisket could already feel her fingers slick around the handle of her knife.

Fillet stared at her prey without the slightest movement. Undoubtedly, her intention was to bleed Brisket dry and watch her strength slowly ebb away—and her leadership challenge along with it.

Brisket switched her knife to her offhand, trying to prevent the hilt from becoming too slippery to use effectively. She didn't dare try to clasp the injury, a sign of vulnerability and weakness that didn't belong in the circle. Smelling blood, Fillet danced forwards, her strike only turned away at the last moment by Brisket. Before she could think to retaliate, Fillet was back on the opposite side of the circle, skipping backwards.

Several seconds passed as Brisket warily watched for the next attack. When it came, once again she was forced to desperately parry the blow, only able to swipe at empty air as Fillet dodged away. Both women could sense that this murder-duel was building to its inevitable end. Twice more Fillet tested Brisket, the

lethal edge of her blade ever closer to tearing into Brisket's tanned flesh once more.

Brisket's arm was coloured red, painted by a thin layer of crimson blood. Her breath was short, and she was so light-headed that her vision had started to dim at the edges, symptoms of her blood loss. Across the circle, Fillet smiled her widest, most sadistic grin yet, relishing the approaching moment of her victory.

Brisket didn't intend to give the bitch the satisfaction. She wasn't dead yet.

Fillet came at her, feet gliding smoothly forwards, knife raised and ready to strike. Brisket feigned staggering, deliberately looking dazed. It wasn't hard.

She waited until Fillet had committed herself, propelling her body into the strike. Then Brisket sprang back into action, diving forward into a headlong tackle. She enjoyed a moment of satisfaction as Fillet's smile was wiped from her face before the two women crashed into each other and went rolling in the sand.

Almost immediately Brisket realised her knife was gone and she was struggling barehanded against Fillet. Managing to clamber above the smaller woman, she pushed her left hand down over Fillet's wrist, pinning the remaining knife in place. Her weakened right arm tried to do the same with Fillet's offhand. It was a losing struggle., Almost without strength at all, the arm was numb and unresponsive to Fillet. Beneath her, Brisket could feel the other woman's hips twisting, threatening to push her off.

Brisket brought her forehead down as hard as she could, a vicious head-butt aimed at Fillet's face. There was a sickening cracking sound, and the impact jolted Brisket backwards in time to see blood flooding from Fillet's nostrils. Brisket had broken the smaller woman's nose, and Fillet's grip relaxed for a split second.

It was barely enough time for Brisket to knock the remaining knife out of reach before Fillet regained her senses and began to fight back once more. Her ruthless determination was terrifying.

Fillet spat a mouthful of bloody spit at her assailant, and still seeing stars herself, Brisket was unable to turn aside quickly enough to avoid it. As her vision turned a cloudy red, Fillet twisted her hips to steal the mount and slam Brisket into the sand. Suddenly on her back, Brisket could only bring her arms up to protect herself as Fillet began to relentlessly punch and claw at her. Each time a hard fist struck Brisket's skull, she heard as much as felt the dull thud.

Unconsciousness beckoned, threatening to overtake Brisket. Her arms, clasped together over the top of her head, began to weaken and fall away. Every blow was funereal death knell, as a great darkness closed in over her life. Brisket's eyes shut and faces swam through her head, replacing Fillet's demonic sneer.

Her parents, their expressions warm and loving.

The first lad she had lain with, smiling at her in the aftermath of their coupling.

Boiler, the boy playing with Princess in the sun.

The face of the Chameleon, sneering as the knife plunged deeper.

The Master Butcher.

Ox!

Brisket lurched back, eyes snapping open, awake. She bucked violently, throwing Fillet off, and grasped the smaller woman by a bloody fistful of hair. With a new determination, Brisket repeatedly smashed the back of Fillet's head into the unforgiving stone beneath the sand, watching the light drain from her opponent's eyes.

Her right hand found the knife, bloody fingers barely able to feel the smooth grip. With supreme effort, she wrenched her unresponsive arm back until the knife blade came to rest against Fillet's neck. The blade bit against Fillet's throat, the thin edge to the blade drawing a white line. A long arterial vein stood out against the woman's pale skin, dark pink and vital, matching Brisket's racing pulse. She held Fillet's life in her hands. She knew the tradition. The trial at last over, it was time to make her kill.

Just like the fate that had been promised to Brisket by Snakeskin months before.

Brisket's eyes widened a fraction as she realised how far she had fallen, how darkness lurked within her own heart as it did amongst those of the Union. The events of that day had stolen Brisket's innocence, her soul. She had been helpless to hold back the tide turning her into a recluse, a spiteful and vicious woman who forced others away lest she be hurt again.

It was the same darkness that had claimed the Master Butcher.

Urgently, in need of assurance, Brisket looked to the other Butchers surrounding her. In the poor light, it was as though devils leered out of the shadows, each wearing a mask of red and orange. Their features were lost to stony expressions; animosity and hatred bled from most of them, hard stares that accused betrayal and promised vengeance.

Boar was the worst. He projected nothing but horrific rage and violence, a terrible smile struck across his face at the promise of death before him. Brisket could see deep into the Beast's eyes, black orbs of berserker madness, totally devoid of humanity, uncomprehending of compassion or kindness. If she finished Fillet now, Brisket would be abandoning the Butchers to the Beast, leaving a path for him to step forward and accept leadership.

The idea brought sour bile to the back of her throat.

Brisket remembered all too well the fateful dawn when the Beast had staggered back to the Butcher's Guild, carrying the story of the Master Butcher's death. Beaten and bruised, dried blood covering his huge frame, Boar had even seemed sincere for once in his brutal and callous life as he recounted Ox's last moments. Those lies, from the mouth of the devil, had led to the precipice where they stood now, an impasse that threatened to forever change the fate of the Butcher's Guild.



Boar would destroy the Butchers. With none willing or capable of standing up to him and no rival for the captaincy, the Beast would murder all dissent, throwing away the lives of those who did not fall to his blade.

Brisket couldn't leave her family to that fate. It would mean breaking one last tradition, one final step away from all she knew, but she knew she was already too far along that path to turn back now.

She looked down at Fillet, helpless beneath the blade, a single trickle of blood running over her delicate skin and onto the floor, the knife inching into the flesh. She had regained consciousness and lay deadly still, glaring defiantly even in defeat. Brisket met the other woman's gaze and held it for long moments, seeing her answer—and another future.

A true heir.

Slowly Brisket removed the knife from Fillet's neck and threw it into the darkness, where it clattered against a stone somewhere. The sound broke the reverence of the scene, heralded that she had severed the last ties to her family and to the Butcher's Guild. This trial was done, the tradition denied.

Looking around wearily at the witnesses, Brisket hoped at least one might understand, but she found no such solace in their eyes, only a mixture of contempt and sorrow.

She was dead to them, their verdict final and damning.

Slowly, one by one, the watchers began to turn their

backs to Brisket. Each familiar face that disappeared into the darkness was a savage spear thrust into her heart, a lifetime of friendship and respect callously discarded.

Boiler was the last. The boy's eyes ran freely, and he wiped them with a dirty cuff, his expression silently pleading with Brisket one last time.

His agonised look almost broke Brisket's resolve, in spite of her determination and all she had been through. This is for the future. This is for the good of the Guild. She repeated the mantra over and over in her head, even if she couldn't tell him.

'You too, Boiler. You have to do this.' Brisket's words were unsteady, her voice soft. 'Please forgive me.'

As with Fillet, the moment stretched long, Brisket realising she would always be haunted by this painful memory. She tore her eyes from his face and shook her head gently, with as solemn and sober a movement as she could manage.

Boiler gave one last sob, his entire body shuddering, and then he, too, turned his back to Brisket. The final door to her past had closed at last.

Brisket knew that there could be no forgiveness, no return.

It was over.

# REAPERS

---

## LAST DANCE

---

A storm had raged overhead the previous day, leaving the already destitute pitch in an even sorrier state. The few remaining blades of grass had been flattened by the deluge, and the soil had turned into watery mud, which was slowly drying out in the sun. Large areas had become expanses of dirty brown puddles that were yet to evaporate, concealing dangerous slick ground or treacherous footing over uneven stones.

Nature's wrath now expended, the skies above were painfully bright. With no clouds in sight, the glare of the sun was blinding and cast bottomless shadows. After a long season of games over the course of the autumn and winter, spring had finally returned, the heat already hinting at summer once more. These first days of warmth were as oppressive as ever, the air clammy and unpleasant due to the lack of a breeze.

The crowds had packed into the stands regardless. This game was far too important to miss, and worth enduring the exasperating humidity.

Heads lowered to keep the light from their eyes, players on both sides struggled through the exhausting conditions, brawling in the mud and splashing through the puddles as they ran. Most wore uniforms soaked through with sweat, the colours muted or completely hidden by dirty water and a thick layer of grime.

The score was tied at two goals apiece, and both teams were desperate not to make a mistake that would cost them the game. Hushed by anticipation, very few voices rose from the stands. All eyes were trained on the pitch through the shimmering haze, whether they belonged to spectators in the crowded stands or to the Guild officials standing on the sidelines.

In the next few minutes, one team would advance to the finals.

‘Go! Leave this to me!’ Thresher pointed Bushel and Tater out wide with one hand, his gaze set on the advancing Colossus engine. He knew it was better for his team to score rather than try to take out the robust mechanical creatures employed by the Engineer’s Guild. It was unnecessary for his kin to put themselves in danger here.

Thresher stepped into the path of the construct, ensuring that his teammates had adequate time to get away. Due to the long, spider-like legs that protruded from beneath the chassis, the Colossus and its driver were far taller than a normal man, and the engine loomed over the old Farmer. With the sun directly behind it, the shadow of the vast machine completely enveloped Thresher, the hard surfaces of the construct’s arms and legs outlined and magnified to even more outlandish proportions.

Thresher warily watched the sharpened ends of each foot stab into the earth. Where they struck dried

soil, it cracked from the weight focused into acute points, and Thresher couldn't help but wonder how much damage the driver could do to him with those monstrous limbs.

Somewhere behind the engine, the Farmer could see the Engineer mechanic, Ratchet, and one of his Mainspring fireflies. Thresher would have to try to buy as much time as he could, but he knew he could not hope to fend off three players.

The old Farmer went on the offensive. Using his greater reach, he forced the operator to block, slowing the Colossus from its relentless march. His initiative was rewarded as the immense legs reversed a step and a solid arm guard swung up to defend against the long blade, his strike deflected by the hard wood. Thresher's success was short-lived, however. The Farmer gasped in pain as one of the legs kicked him in the ribs, knocking him back a pace. Tipped with cold steel, the foot had punctured the skin, and the spear of pain shooting through his flank told Thresher the blow had broken him inside. The Engineer had obliged him with an answer to his earlier question, with brutal consequence.

Thresher still needed to keep the engine away from his teammates, broken ribs or no. Slipping on the mud but retaining his footing, the Farmer moved back to interpose himself between his kin and the Engineers. Another leg lashed out at his body, but this time Thresher was ready and shouldered it aside. As his softer flesh struck the unforgiving hide of the



machine, he groaned, wishing for times past when his legs had been agile enough to dodge rather than deflect. The Colossus kicked like a mule, with just as much bad intention.

Before Thresher could react again, a flailing wooden fist smashed into the side of his head just above his ear. The blow sent him staggering, but still Thresher refused to fall, righting himself as best he could through the daze. The Farmer saw two of his opponent now and tried to shake his head clear. The driver pressed the advantage and hammered the engine's mighty body forward, bulldozing Thresher clear and thundering past in pursuit of the ball.

An explosion detonated behind Thresher, leaving a crater and making his ears ring as Ratchet bombarded him from afar, preventing him pursuing the Colossus. Still shaking his head, the injured Farmer hoped Tater and Bushel could close out the game. He could be no help to them now.

As his eyes and ears cleared, a Mainspring propelled itself towards Thresher. He would be forced to contend with this bloody thing before he could make for Ratchet. Still shaky, the Old Father dug down to try to find the strength to finish this quickly.

The Mainspring leapt about, long legs propelling it into the air like a tick navigating the hide of a shire horse. It emitted a high-pitched mechanical whine, painful and irritating in equal measure, seeming to become louder by the moment.

Thresher listed badly on weary and uncertain legs, fighting back the lancing pain from the gouge in his ribs. He swung his scythe ineffectually once again, and the creature dodged underneath the blow; the fearsome length of his scythe was actually proving a problem when dealing with such a small, mobile target. The mechanical contraption tried to ram him in the shin, but a firm boot to the wooden chassis sent it tumbling backwards with a splintering sound. The fatigue in Thresher's right leg was replaced by numbness as the rigid impact reverberated through him, but he pressed his advantage, stepping towards the creature.

Jabbing the blunt head of his scythe forward like a staff, the Farmer struck to knock the construct over onto its back rather than damage it. The attack struck true, flipping the mechanica over, and Thresher swung his weapon back to deliver as hard a blow as his aching arms would allow.

Legs frantically kicking, the Mainspring managed to right itself just as the lethal inside edge of the scythe struck. Brittle woodchips showered over the patchy grass as the scythe cleaved through the hull and into the metal gears beneath. The momentum from the attack buckled the delicate machinery, shearing through the drive train and sending several small cogs whirring into the air.

The high-pitched whine that emanated from the construct became an ear-splitting screech.

Artificial spine broken, the creature could do little except for twitch erratically and wail. Thresher aimed his weapon point down like a pickaxe, straight into the gaping rent in the Mainspring's body. As the hard metal spike punctured the mechanism once more, the screeching noise became louder still, deafening the Farmer and drowning out all other sound.

It suddenly stopped as the scythe finished its swing, utterly destroying all pretence of life in the construct. The Mainspring detonated in a thunderous explosion, the sound as loud as a score of cannons firing together.

Engulfed in flames, Thresher was blasted from his feet, sailing through the air with his scythe and pieces of the Mainspring spinning high overhead. He landed roughly, feeling something internal crunch painfully, and then he was rolling, dirt in his mouth and water splashing over him. The aged Farmer eventually came to a stop in a puddle, his body blackened and bent at unnatural angles.

He opened his eyes just in time to see the blade of his scythe arcing downwards towards him.

With a sickening thud, the blade embedded itself point first into his chest, impaling him in place, buried through his flesh and into the dirt underneath.

By the time Grange reached Thresher and took the Old Father's hand in his own, his captain was dead. Half-submerged in the dirty puddle, the corpse was hideously burnt, speaking to the intense agony of Thresher's final moments. The old man had borne

the immense pain of the flames in silence, not one cry escaping his charred lips. The water had turned a terrible shade of crimson from the blood that had drained from the gaping wound in Thresher's body. Close by, the apothecaries seemed to move in slow motion as they approached Thresher, perhaps already aware that they could do little for their patient.

With trembling fingers, Grange closed eyes surrounded by seared flesh and glared accusingly across the field at Ratchet. The Old Father had still had years left in him; he was strong and hale, able to work the fields and the yard. There was no way it had been Thresher's time. And yet he was gone, taken far too early. Grange bellowed impatiently at the apothecaries, the outburst born of raw emotion. He was aware there had likely been no way to save the Old Father from such severe injuries, but that knowledge offered little consolation.

Grange had lusted for the captaincy ever since he first stepped out onto the pitch. He had known in his heart that it was the role for which he had been born, his destiny. Denied by Thresher, a living legend, Grange had still never given up. He had known the mantle would inevitably pass to him one day, when the Old Father judged him ready.

Grange's own moment was now upon him, and he felt his hubris and sense of self-importance fade. For the first time in his life, he realised he didn't want to be captain, not like this. The cost was too great. The

weight of captaincy hadn't been bestowed as much as it had fallen upon him.

On the other side of the pitch Tater scored, his strike a screamer that hammered into the Engineer goal, answered by the ecstatic roar of the crowd. The Colossus hadn't made it in time to stop the Farmer drive on goal, delayed by Thresher's sacrifice.

Against all odds, the Farmer's Guild had done it. They had made the final.

It almost didn't matter now.

Grange knew they would leave the best part of themselves behind today. It was the passing of an era marked by the first days of blistering sunlight.

---

Greyscales' eyes opened slowly, struggling to focus, his vision swimming with blurry shapes. He raised thin, skeletal fingers and clumsily tried to rub away the sleep that had formed at the edges of his eyelids, forcing them open as much. The back of his throat burned with bile, which the aged Fisherman tried in vain to hawk up and clear.

Each time his head moved, the hangover distressed him with sharp spikes of pain, like having nails hammered into his head. He abandoned attempting to sit up for the moment and closed his eyes again. Greyscales had never been one taken to drink, even in his younger days. He had learned early in life that



his constitution didn't appreciate excess, after many a night heaving overboard or into a bucket instead of enjoying himself with a lass, the same as his shipmates.

He didn't need to open his eyes to know the bottle of rum would be somewhere nearby. He didn't recall drinking from it or why he had started. It had probably seemed like a good idea at the time.

For a moment, Greyscales allowed himself to forget everything and just listen. Lying on his back, he could feel the warmth of the sun on his skin, bathing him in its glow. Far above, birds circled, calling and chasing each other on the wind. The air sighed as gentle gusts blew across, sending dried leaves spinning, tumbling over and over, scratching as they crashed into each other. That was all there was.

No voices, no carts or livestock, no creaking of the hull or snapping of the ropes and the sails as the wind took them. He smiled. It had been far too long since he had heard those things, all the way back to when he was just a lad. His memories from then were tinted gold: long summer afternoons with time to waste just listening, lying still out on the deck as the world drifted past like clouds in the blue skies.

Youth had long since passed behind him. It had been claimed by the inevitable passage of time, minutes that became hours, days that became months, years that became a lifetime. Time was relentless, never resting, stopping, or slowing. Undefeated throughout the ages, it always beat a man in the end.

He faced this battle alone now. All those close to him had long since succumbed to time themselves or simply abandoned the Elder Fisherman. As he had endlessly done these past days, Greyscales wondered how it might have been different had he managed to make the most of the captaincy when it was offered to him.

Before the working lifetimes of most of the current crew, Greyscales had served as captain of the Fisherman's Guild, a laughable dynasty that lasted for precisely two games. Before then, fresh from the Shadow Games, it had been his time, the best of his life. Game after game, he lived the most exciting and breathtaking moments he had ever known, a rising star, brighter than all others in the history of the game. Until he was given the captaincy.

As captain he had fallen woefully short. Both games with his hand steering the ship were crushing defeats, and the Guild had lost a man to a Butcher's blade. With no end of talented stars in the making, all reaching for the crown, Greyscales had been ditched before the horn had even sounded to end the second game.

At the time, Greyscales had made excuses that sounded hollow even to his own ears. In truth, he had been trying to shake the image of the dead man's last moments, spent staring accusingly at his incapable captain. He had made exceedingly poor roster choices for both games, and his reputation had plummeted afterwards, the star falling relentlessly back to earth.

Ever since, he had been relegated to the outside,

tenaciously seeking support amongst the only audience that would humour him by listening to his stories and advice. But even the rookies and junior players soon grew tired of the old seadog, especially once they had a season or two under their belts. Every time he saw the inevitable disinterest painted plainly in their eyes, he felt it like a fresh wound.

Young bloods had no power and no influence. Even Greyscales' appointment to first mate, during Shark's first season as captain, had only filtered down due to the complete unsuitability of the rest of the squad.

At last, Greyscales had decided to face the truth. He had earned no true friends over the years. Now, as his career ended, he was left with precisely the same number of people whom he might depend upon.

He didn't need to look down to see why it was over, to see the shattered kneecap. It was wrapped in bandages that were a week old at least and stained by blood and pus from the infection that poisoned him. As soon as the bone had broken into impossibly tiny pieces that cut into his flesh and malevolently refused to bend to the sawbones' skill, it had been over.

In that moment, Greyscales had ceased to be a part of the world which he had devoted his life to, at the expense of everything else. It was the lowest point he had ever sunk to, he knew.

There was little point in fighting it.

Greyscales forced himself to open his eyes again, to move through the spiteful torment of his hangover.

Propping himself up on weak elbows, he took in his surroundings for a moment. He realised he was sprawled across Thresher's grave; he'd used the base of the stone for a pillow. Petals from crushed flowers beneath Greyscales peeled from his flushed skin and drifted pitifully to the ground.

The Farmer's Guild had kept the stone simple. It carried only Thresher's name and the proud title his kin had bestowed upon him in his life.

Old Father.

Even for one as adored as the Farmer captain, Greyscales couldn't help but wonder how long before people forgot the name and the man passed into obscurity. The Guilds didn't care, and the people had short memories. The Fisherman smiled bitterly. Actually, he knew that last statement to be untrue. The Elder Fisherman would openly admit to being jealous of Thresher.

The man would be remembered throughout history as one of the unsung heroes, the best type of legend. Not the sort of bandwagon that fickle supporters would jump on, only to abandon as soon as their limited attention wandered, but a real sportsman, for those illuminated few who knew their game. The kind of man who had built his reputation with hard work, sweat, and muscle. Never taking the easy way, never compromising his beliefs. It was the best any player could ask for, a real legacy to leave behind.

Thresher had even been taken on the pitch, the

hallowed grounds on which hopes and dreams came to life, where a man might flirt with immortality. Taken down while standing proud and alone, fending off half the enemy team so his kin could score to take his team into the finals? Greyscales had no doubt that regardless of whether the Farmer's Guild took the title this year, there would be a wealth of statues erected in Thresher's honour over the next few years.

Greyscales had always thought he was destined to go out on the field, too. It seemed the height of folly now, but the old veteran realised that he had honestly never considered otherwise; he had just always assumed that would be his fate. But the Elder Fisherman didn't have a fine legacy in the end. He wasn't a timeless hero, deserving of a grand send-off or even a quiet and dignified ceremony, surrounded by his team. Likely very few would actually turn up to see Greyscales' ship sail into the sunset. Time had proven his hubris, and he had become just another story, one like those the young players had grown tired of hearing.

Lying on a better man's grave, Greyscales felt like crying, but the Elder Fisherman had run out of tears for how he had lost his course, and none fell now. His life was far behind him, all out to sea, and he was done drowning in his own self-pity. Greyscales was just another meaningless name fading into history, soon to be forgotten.

It was finally time to cast the Elder Fisherman back from whence he came. He was done with this game, once and for all.



# — EYE OF THE STORM —

Angel quietly strolled through Boujonte's late afternoon streets, near deserted in the lull between the end of the trading day and the start of the evening's festivities. She knew people would be out in force again tonight, as they had been the previous evening and would be the following one. The sleepy city had a thinly veiled hush over it, the air tainted with a sense of eager excitement. There were only a handful of days between the semi-finals and the final of the Sovereign States Championship, and each of those days brought parties and celebrations that spilled out into the streets. All across the Empire of the Free Cities, people were watching and waiting, in rapt anticipation of which Guild would be the next to take the title.

Even the foul weather couldn't dampen their enthusiasm, although it certainly made Angel's journey less pleasant. The skies were overcast, lending an unseasonably cold chill to the brisk air. Strong winds whipped Angel's robes tightly around her slender limbs as she pulled the hood up over her head to prevent her hair from trailing over her face.

Angel hastened on her way, ignoring the elements as best she could, her mind going over the events of the last few days. It was only a short walk from the Fisherman proving grounds to where Greyscales laid his head at night, and Angel found herself itching to talk with the aged veteran regarding the Championship.

She could still hear the roar of the crowds from yesterday, as Flint hammered home the winning goal for the Mason's Guild and secured their place in the final—against the most unlikely opponents there surely had ever been.

Everything about this season had been normalcy turned on its head, not least of all the unexpected promotion of the Farmer's Guild and their astonishing achievement in reaching the finals. Their semi-final victory against the heavily favoured Engineer's Guild had been a result that resounded around the world.

But then, their entire season had been an underdog story, a tale of such audacity that Angel wouldn't have believed it, had she not seen the games for herself.

First there had been the truly bizarre defection of the First Lady, a bold transfer of which still nobody knew the details. If the pundits hadn't sat up and paid attention then, they definitely had once the Farmer's Guild started winning games. It had been a slow start, but before too long the names started piling up. The Hunters, the Messengers, the Butchers, the Alchemists—near enough every Guild had seen a reversal of their fortunes when playing against the Farmer's Guild.

Including the Fisherman's Guild, eventually. Angel knew that match had ruffled feathers. It shouldn't have; the meteoric rise of the Farmer's Guild had been clear well before that particular game. Angel would even privately have admitted to a little excitement

watching the Farmers play. It was almost impossible not to like them, each player a friendly breath of fresh air, all dramatically different from the jaded veterans she had grown used to.

Then Thresher fell, taken in the semi-final, seconds before his team secured their place in history.

It had been heartbreaking to see, and Angel couldn't even begin to imagine what it must have felt like for the rest of the Farmer's Guild. He had been the guiding presence, the steady hand at the tiller for years. Most of the team had not even known any other. Angel had been fortunate enough to never have experienced such loss in her life, especially not of one so instrumental in her upbringing. The closest she'd come was the absence of Greyscales this season; the old veteran no longer trained with the rest of the team since his injury in the preseason warm-up games.

It was odd, how things had worked out.

While Greyscales had been on the team, every day with another story or a word of advice, the entire Guild had been guilty of speaking ill of the man behind his back. He had been mocked, not so subtly, as an anachronism, a doddering old man past his prime. Angel was embarrassed to admit it, but if she were honest with herself, she had been no exception. She may have felt bad, but ultimately she'd brushed the sentiment off and joined in with her teammates, the peer pressure too strong to resist.

Since Greyscales' departure long months ago, all but

Corsair had come to express that a sense of gloom had settled over the team. Without his amicable and easygoing attitude, a vital bond that knit the crew together was absent, and each player admitted to missing the old sailor. Even the most bullish players keenly felt his absence, hiding it poorly behind all-too-transparent bravado. Apparently, the dynamic that Greyscales brought off the pitch was even more pronounced than his presence on it.

The Fisherman's Guild needed him back, that much was obvious. Angel had been the closest to the old man in recent times and had decided that it fell to her to visit him, both to see how he was getting on and to ask him to return.

The Elder Fisherman lived on the seafront, as one might have expected. He was situated away from the docks proper but still close enough to clearly see the trawlers, naval ships, and stately galleons sailing through the water. It was the perfect place for the old man to have made his home. It was remote, but the few people in the surrounding area were proud of their local hero, even if time had taught them to leave the old loner be on most days.

Angel had extremely pleasant memories of the place from times gone by, a pair of summers when she had spent time here, just talking with the venerable Fisherman. They had watched the sun set over the shimmering water together as he regaled her with his beloved recollections of yesteryear.

Angel wondered why she had stopped listening and grown out of coming here. Being too busy on Guild business was a poor excuse, she knew, even if it was the only one she had.

She knew the Elder Fisherman would likely be at home. He wasn't much of a night owl and was even less partial to indulge in the nightlife itself unless Mallet dragged him out. Sure enough, the door was ajar when she arrived.

The old shack didn't look much from outside—but then, it never had, with just pieces of old timber for walls, and slats over a frame for a roof. Greyscales had never cared for much beyond his game, and he'd certainly never been house proud. Angel had rolled her eyes at the place more than once, whilst the old seadog had only offered her an amused chuckle by way of reply.

Slowly, Angel climbed the creaking steps outside. If Greyscales was inside, she couldn't hear him singing one of the old sea shanties he was so fond of. She could recount most of the bawdy stories word for word after spending so much time with him.

It seemed pointless to rap on a welcoming open door, so she cleared her throat and called out to announce her presence. Her only answer was an empty echo, the sound of her voice reverberating from bare walls and floor.

Venturing inside a couple of steps, she could see that Greyscales was out somewhere. Angel was alone with the handful of possessions Greyscales owned, his prized



collection. She had seen it before, but the assortment of memorabilia never ceased to be fascinating, a museum to Guild Ball itself. A thin layer of dust covered several generations' worth of trophies, shields, medals, and busts, but it was the rest of the collection that was truly a memorial. There were carefully folded and preserved kits, belonging to both the Fisherman's Guild and other teams, sitting alongside old weapons, most blunted and worn. There were even pictures of old players, sketched by Greyscales' own hand—surprisingly well and accurately, if the image of Mallet was anything to go by.

Seeing embers still burning in the small hearth that occupied one corner, Angel realised he couldn't have been gone for long. As she stood amongst these memories and keepsakes from a lifetime of Guild Ball, a strange and uncomfortable feeling came over Angel, as though she were intruding somehow. She stepped back out into the open air.

Outside, the natural light had darkened considerably, much more than Angel would have expected for this time of day, well in advance of the evening proper. It matched both the heavy air pressure and her sense of foreboding.

She stepped back through the abandoned building and stopped in the doorway, taken aback. Darkening the horizon was one of the largest and most menacing storms she had ever seen. It dominated the whole skyline. It was immense, riding in on powerful ocean winds.

Clouds stained the colour of thick ash loomed threateningly above the water, and Angel could easily see darkened areas beneath where the rain already lashed down heavily. The storm was moving rapidly inland, blotting out the sun and swallowing up the blue skies completely as it approached. As she watched, a jagged line of lightning briefly illuminated the rolling darkness, hinting at the ferocity within.

Even an inexperienced rookie could tell that impossibly harsh seas were coming, that no ship with a skipper in their right mind would attempt to sail through. Angel wasn't surprised to see frantic activity when she looked towards the docks. There, tiny figures hastily secured sails and rigging even as the great vessels were slowly being moved as close to land as they might manage. Although she was too far away to hear their voices, she could imagine the sailors screaming to each other at the top of their voices as they prepared for the worst.

Now that she had stepped out from shelter, even standing on land Angel could feel herself being pulled about by the wind. No one would want to be caught out in this. It would be a death sentence on the seas.

A terrible thought suddenly occurred to her.

Angel leapt down the wooden gangplank that led up to Greyscales' door and dashed as fast as her feet could take her towards the tiny inlet where she knew he tethered his rowing boat.

The rickety old craft was gone, one end of the frayed

and discoloured rope left dangling in the water, the other still knotted to the post.

Panicking, Angel tore her eyes from the empty water and back to the bay, where the massive storm hung threateningly. She couldn't make out any sign of the boat, or of Greyscales, but darkness was steadily falling as the clouds swept in. She felt the first drops of rain on her skin, urgent and quickly increasing in frequency.

Angel's composure and compassion were lost in an instant. What could Greyscales be thinking? He was the most experienced seaman within the Fisherman's Guild, a veteran of years on the ocean. He had surely forgotten more about sailing than Angel had ever known. He couldn't have missed the signs of foul weather coming long before now.

Was the old bastard trying to prove something by sailing out into that godsforsaken tempest? And if so, who was the foolish show of courage for? His Guild? His shipmates on the team? Himself? Angel refused to believe it was simply a mistake he was out there. It would have been obvious to the greenest rookie that the seas would be too treacherous for even a large fighting ship, let alone an ancient rowing boat with a pair of tiny oars.

The rain was much heavier now, driving Angel sprinting back to take refuge in Greyscales' shack. The wind rattled the wooden planks and the slats on the roof and slammed the door behind her as she ran through, the force nearly violent enough to shake it from its hinges.

Standing inside, soaked clothes plastered to her skin by the unexpected deluge, Angel wiped water from her face that was part rain, part tears. She had no idea at all what to do—or even if there was anything she could do. Greyscales was gone, apparently sailing into the eye of the biggest storm she had ever seen.

Outside, there was a crack of lightning that illuminated the world, followed a few seconds later by a rolling, deafening avalanche of heavy thunder. Angel clasped her hands tightly over her ears, trying to block out the noise.

When she looked up, her eyes settled on two new pieces in Greyscales' collection she had missed earlier. Sitting alongside the other uniforms from over the years, neatly and deliberately placed in clear chronological order, Greyscales' match day kit from last season looked uncomfortably final, the last in the line. The shattered remains of his spear, still broken in half from months ago, were propped up against the wall next to it, the blade dull and lifeless, still dirty from that fateful day.

They were a powerful symbol that something or someone had passed on. That the last page had been turned over and the book finished.

Angel sank to her knees and cried, listening to the storm rage overhead. Humans had no place in such a monster, no hope of riding out the primal wrath of the Lords of the Deep.

Not even the Elder Fisherman.

The prisoner's bare feet padded over the chalky tile steps as purposefully as his manacles would allow, the skin of his soles hardened and coarse from spending so long barefoot on hard stone. For most of the poor souls lost in the darkness of this forgotten place, walking was one of the first faculties to fail them. They spent the remainder of their miserable lives huddled in a heap on the bare floor of their cells, incapable of even the most basic human function. The prisoner had refused that fate, spending long hours maintaining as punishing an exercise regime as could be managed in the tiny space allowed him.

He reaped the benefits now, standing proudly, still strong enough to have shrugged the guards off when they came for him earlier.

The corridor was wide, likely able to admit four men standing side by side, and long, the end swallowed up by inky blackness beyond sight. For the prisoner and his two guards, it felt empty indeed as they made their way slowly through the darkness. There were no sounds here other than the echo of footsteps.

The prisoner had been as removed from the world as could be possible, given to purgatory and left to rot.

Far overhead, heavy grilles set into the ceiling permitted the only light. It was a faint, sickly white hue that barely illuminated the path before them. As the prisoner passed underneath each of the grilles, for



a few scant seconds it was possible to make out the barest outlines of his form, before he was lost to the dark once more.

For the first few weeks, his flesh had been a patchwork of discoloured bruises, but now his tough skin showed only dirt from lack of washing. His body was much the same as before—leaner and with a shrunken frame, but unbroken and unblemished. They'd tried to beat the backbone out of him early during his incarceration, only to fail repeatedly. Eventually they had given up. The prisoner promised himself that the last thing he would give the bastards was the satisfaction of breaking him, of making him yield. He had seen too many wretches dragged through the halls of this place, heavy mailed arms under each armpit, wailing pathetically.

That would never be his fate.

The prisoner had murdered one of his tormentors, one of the guards who'd thought him prey. The fool had made the mistake of thinking him too weak to break free of the frayed ropes holding him and had paid with his life. Since then the prisoner had been continuously shackled by heavy iron chains. Yet his self-respect remained strong and his alone, a bright flame in the darkness of his cell. That was one thing he'd learned here. Pride was by no means as worthless as he had once thought. Now it was an intrinsic part of his being, as much as his self-determination.

The prisoner held his head high, even as he slowly made his way towards what he could only assume

would be his execution. He had no idea how much time had passed since his imprisonment here. He guessed that it had to have been a year, at least. He knew his beard had grown out longer; it matched the shaggy locks of his matted hair. No one had cared enough to give him water to wash or maintain himself. That was how little he was worth to anyone.

Looking back the way he had come from his cell, he saw that the path had closed behind them entirely, swallowed up by the dark. The guard behind gave him a vicious prod with the butt of a spear and grunted for him to keep his eyes ahead.

Forward only, then. The path disappearing behind was obviously closed to him now. Fortunately, he entertained no desire to return.

The prisoner's mind settled into a calm and meditative state, while his body mechanically kept moving forward. It was much the same, he mused, as before a battle or before walking out onto the pitch. Whatever came next would be sure to overwhelm his senses. This time was a moment of pause to ground himself, to prepare.

He smiled to himself. As a boy, he had once called it the calm before the storm. After being banished here the prisoner had forged himself into something new, but the old tricks remained.

Eventually they reached the end of the tunnel, where a narrow opening led to the base of a small stairwell. Inside, the prisoner could see simple steps set into

the brick wall, leading upwards. Another jab from the spear directed him inside.

Ducking his head to step under the low arch, he immediately noticed the change of smell in the confined space. The musty, rotting stench to which he had become so accustomed was almost entirely banished, overwhelmed by the strong, earthy scent of incense and smoky candles in the gloom. Flooding downwards, it settled at the bottom level, leaving the air pungent and stale. The prisoner coughed from lack of good air as he started his passage upwards, straining to fuel his powerful limbs.

Mercifully, as they climbed breathing became easier with each step, fresher air fast dispelling the stagnant fumes. Light bled from above, spilling between the bars of another dark iron grille to light the path before them as they climbed from the depths of this subterranean hell.

The prisoner kept his head down as he took step after step, but even so, by the time they had reached the top, he was blinking away artificial sunspots. Too many days spent in the murky depths far beneath the surface had weakened his eyes, and they burned in the light.

Eyelids involuntarily clenched tight, the prisoner was led over the final threshold, gulping great breaths of precious, clean air. Out of the confines of the stone passageway, the clinking of his chains was overpowered by new sounds that rushed to his ears.

Hundreds of voices, all raised in harmonious

verse, competed with the harmony made by the keys of an immense organ, a stream of booming, shrill, threatening notes all varying in pitch. It was a deafening wall of sound that forced its way into the prisoner's skull. At the edges of the noise, he could faintly hear the metallic clanging of atonal bells.

No matter how daunting the sheer volume was, how oppressive and overwhelming, it was the sound of mankind, of civilisation. Once again, he was a part of the world, a prisoner no longer. He smiled, the sight no doubt unsettling to his captors. The abyss was far behind him. He had returned.

Ox opened his eyes to bright white daylight once more and faced his fate with dignity.



---

# DELIVERENCE

---

Winds whipped around the mound on which Brisket stood, a broken-down wall of dull grey bricks patched with a thin layer of damp green moss. The whole world seemed muted, falling into indistinct shadow, the sun unable to pierce the heavy clouds that filled the skies above.

The desolate graveyard had been built in the barren foothills of a high cliff face, sentinel to the city below. It was cold and isolated; only a single winding and treacherous footpath linked this place back to humanity. With each step along the faded trail, bleached with limestone and salt in some past age to prevent life growing over, Brisket felt herself dragged further away from civilisation.

Stones and monuments of all shapes and sizes surrounded her, standing valiant against the corroding elements. Time had defeated several of their number, which lay broken on the withered grass or sunken into small pools of stagnant, muddy water. The names on most were indistinguishable, although that mattered little. This place had been forgotten by man and left unattended by even the most devout priest for years, probably for longer than Brisket's own life.

In contrast to her gloomy surroundings, the elevated view before Brisket was utterly captivating. Dropping away from where she stood at the edge of the cliff was a majestic if lonely stretch of mountains, the peaks



wreathed in clouds and the bases far below enveloped in a thick forest. Increasingly, such remote places had disappeared from the Empire of the Free Cities, and it was rare to find somewhere yet to be tainted by the will and tools of man. She knew to simply enjoy the sight as it was, just as the forces of nature had intended.

Brisket opened her heart to the solitude and eerie calmness of this place. She was very far from all her struggles here, in both body and heart. Since the loss of the Master Butcher, she had felt no end to her sorrow, no respite from the guilt that had come to rule her. It had only grown more pronounced around the others as she had watched the slow disintegration of Ox's crew, a family that had long since become closer to her than her actual kin.

And now she had blood on her hands, too. The day of the trial, she might well have contributed to the death of the Master Butcher's legacy as much as his disappearance had.

She pushed such thoughts to the back of her mind; they threatened the short measure of blessed peace she had attained in this place. While she could, Brisket planned to absorb as much of this peaceful serenity as possible and forget about the rest of the world.

It was the quiet that gave this place its reverent aura. Even the birds avoided it; not one single dropping stained a surface, and no calls broke the silence, leaving the winds free dominion. This high above water level, the air was fierce and untamed, plastering her short,

cropped hair close to her scalp and wrapping her clothes to the contours of her body.

Time passed with Brisket mercifully alone, one life amongst the buried dead. It would be dusk soon, the sun failing to have brought any colour to this remote part of the world over the day.

Shame defeated her once again before night came, despite her best attempts to ignore it. The physical pain from her duel with Fillet would ebb away soon enough, and even the scars would likely fade over time. The eyes of the others, and their condemnation at her betrayal, however, those things would forever be burnt into her soul. Boiler had been the most harrowing, the poor lad already lost in a world without the Master Butcher. Brisket abandoning him had wrenched yet another part of his life away, never to return.

By abandoning her loyalties to not only her Guild but also her family, Brisket had wrought damnation for herself and would fall into darkness. She remembered something Ox had once said to her, years ago.

I can't trust anyone who changes sides.

Brisket didn't know if she would be able to bear having earned his hatred and mistrust. It didn't matter that she had made her sacrifice for the good of the Butcher's Guild, or even to secure the Master Butcher's release. It was still a betrayal of all she held dear, and it hurt with a fresh urgency that shortened the breath in her lungs.

Unbidden, tears began to roll down her cheeks as at last all the tension and trauma of the last months fled

her body. Here, alone and away from the eyes of others, she finally could admit that she had failed the old family, that it had been her weakness to blame for the Master Butcher being taken. Brisket didn't care how absurd it sounded—she knew the truth in her heart, and it tormented her. Her betrayal had been the only way to make amends, to make the Guild strong again.

She collapsed to her knees, thankful that she could stop fighting, cease holding it all inside. This was the first chance she'd had for release since the fateful day when the Fisherman's Guild had attacked her and left her for dead, and she let it all out.

Her thoughts drifted away to nothing as she surrendered to her grief.

He found Brisket like that, her eyes bloodshot. A strong hand, skin calloused and rough to the touch, gently patted her shoulder. It was a curiously paternal gesture, suited to the moment.

She knew it was him, sensing his familiar presence even after so much time. Brisket knew she should be ashamed to let herself be seen this way, but she was past caring. Her life from now on would be wearing a mask to hide herself anyway. She could forgive this one time it slipped.

Without looking up, Brisket turned and wrapped her arms around him, feeling thick, knotted muscles. Her fingertips traced against his rough shirt, and bristles from his thick beard tickled her face as she dried her

eyes on his chest. It was a more genuine moment than she had ever shared with another person, let alone such a ruthless one.

His body tensed in reaction before giving in and pulling her closer to his substantial frame. Somewhat clumsily, his free hand gently stroked her hair. He was as unfamiliar with the honesty of their reunion as she was.

‘How long have you been watching?’ She spoke into his tunic, her voice muffled.

‘Not long. Enough time, perhaps.’ His gravelly voice was just as Brisket recalled. Forceful even at low volume, commanding, but not without warmth and passion. It brought back a hundred memories of better times. She nodded, words inadequate to express her sense of relief at seeing him alive.

‘They told me you are the reason I am free.’ The mighty chest moved as he rumbled the words.

She nodded again, unwilling to give voice to the acknowledgement even as she struggled against her tears.

‘I know what you have given up to return me to this world, thanks to the bastards and their games.’

Brisket’s body stiffened as he spoke of her stark future, as though he were somehow giving life to her fate. They parted, and she stepped back.

‘I have done terrible things since you left us. I am not the same person anymore.’ Brisket would not look in his direction, instead staring out at the distant mountains. She felt fresh tears threatening, and she refused to give in to them. ‘I couldn’t stop them from

taking you, couldn't stand up for myself. I was so weak, back then.'

He shook his head. 'It wasn't your fault. I know that. You would do well to put that out of your mind. No one blames you.' One huge hand tenderly took hers and squeezed.

'I let Fillet live, gave her back her life when I held it in my hands at trial. They will tell you that, as well as of my betrayal.'

'Let them speak. Their words shall not become truth to me.'

Brisket smiled tightly into the wind. It was scant cause for contentment, even if his opinion was worth twenty times that of another. On the horizon, the sun was edging towards the tallest mountains, the day coming to an end. As it dropped below the clouds, at last colour came to the lonely graveyard, illuminating both of them in golden hues.

'Do you forgive my betrayal? Do you know what it is I gave up? It was all for the greater good of the Guild—I knew it to be the right decision then, just as now. But even so, I can't tear Boiler's face from my mind. He's still there, haunting me, the anguish painted on his features.'

She stared remorsefully at the sunset. 'I can't be there for him anymore, not now. I can't be there for any of them.'

'Don't worry.' His voice was comforting. 'I'll make sure Boiler understands. He'll heal, given time. I'll take care of the family. All of them. They'll be all right with



me. You can lay the burden down.'

Brisket nodded. She desperately hoped so. To hear the words was comforting, at least. She didn't doubt his sincerity.

'And I swear I will save you. Save you as you have me, from the depths.' His voice was as resolute as his words. 'You are still my family, too. And I will not watch you dragged out to be left to the wolves, this I promise.'

His hand tightened against hers once more. He held it for a moment, in silence, before almost reluctantly drawing away. Along with the failing light of the sun, the happiness at their reunion was draining away. Brisket knew it was impossible to try to deny the inevitable.

'We have no more time. I must go. I have work to do.' The Master Butcher's voice was uncharacteristically soft, a whisper.

Brisket turned to face him, forcing herself at last to look upon the man that embodied the world she was leaving behind more than any other individual or institution ever could.

He looked just as she remembered. Strong, proud, and rugged. He had weathered captivity well. His eyes were earnest and loyal. Part of her wanted to hold him close again and never leave his embrace. There was a strange tension between them, awkward and uncertain. Something that had never been there before.

He broke it by speaking, his words a final farewell. 'I give you my eternal gratitude, Brisket. Know that we shall meet again.'

Their moment was over, likely the last when they could speak so openly to each other. Brisket couldn't bear to watch him go again, to leave her life a second time. She forced herself to look away, closing her eyes and keeping them shut tight as his footsteps faded into the wind.

When eventually she opened them, darkness had fallen and she was alone amongst the cold graveyard stones. Far above, the low clouds had begun to dissipate, the first stars starting to gleam in the skies. Brisket stared at them through eyes that shone with a courage unknown to her before.

Quietly, she spoke. 'Farewell, Ox.'

---

Gentle waves crashed against the shore, miniscule tides which were soon absorbed into the wet sand. There was no wind to compete with the sound, tranquillity having claimed the scene, lending it a deep sense of calm. Pale moonlight from above bathed the deserted beach in ghostly white, casting deep shadows in the footprints behind Honour. Although the First Lady walked without a crutch to support her, the odd misstep still betrayed a slight unsteadiness, her paces not quite regularly spaced.

Harmony waited for her sister, standing in Honour's path like an angelic statue carved from purest marble. The younger woman wore a scowl over her beautiful face, masking natural radiance with seething anger,

head tilted dismissively to one side as she awaited her older sibling's approach.

Honour had anticipated the encounter at some point, and her younger sister's stony expression did not surprise her. There had always been enmity between them, and Honour was all too aware of her sister's flair for theatrics.

'Harmony.' Honour inclined her head in greeting and wiped away a strand of hair that was stuck to her forehead by a thin layer of sweat. She hid her exertion well, but she knew her body was still healing. Crossing the sands was significantly more work than walking across an even surface.

'Well met, First Lady. You're looking better on your feet than last I saw you.' Harmony's words might have been friendly, but they were at odds with her tone. She spat them with as much condescension as she could, avoiding eye contact, looking out to sea instead.

Honour chose to remain civil and ignore her sister's attempts to goad her. 'How did you know to find me here? I didn't know my evening stroll was so predictable.'

Harmony shrugged. 'You forget that I know your rituals, First Lady.' Again, the name was tinged with venom. 'How many times have you escaped like this, on the eve of a championship or tournament?'

Honour nodded, eyes narrowing at the implied insult and the very deliberate choice of words. 'Do you want to go somewhere and sit, Harmony, or shall we do this on the beach, now?'

'Like we're little girls once again, playing in the sand? Is that what your old, brittle limbs want? To have a rest?' Harmony brushed off her sister's reply with a cruel sneer, walking around Honour with light and easy footsteps. 'Those days are long behind us.'

'Why are you here, Harmony?'

'Why am I here?! Why are you here, First Lady?' Harmony aggressively rounded on her older sister, voice raised. Whereas before she had avoided eye contact, now her eyes bored into Honour's, lit with a fiery spark to match her scarlet hair. 'You abandoned us. We were on top of the world, two triumphs back to back. Lesser teams could only dream of our success! But you didn't come with us, did you? Broken or not, you abandoned the team! Dismissed all of us and made our victories about poor Honour, the dove with the clipped wings. You sent us away so you could keep our glory for yourself and still be First Lady.'

'I was crippled! I didn't abandon any of you.'

'We needed you. I needed you!'

Honour was stunned by the admission. She started to speak, but Harmony interrupted again.

'But you know what? I'm glad you didn't come with us. Without you, we became stronger, better. The team under Hammer makes what you achieved look like a Cage Ball side in comparison.'

Honour saw red, her voice raised and echoing back over the empty beach. 'You had no right to steal my team! They—the Guild, they would have given it

away, but before they could, you took it from me. Don't pretend otherwise. Before the game was even over, your heart was elsewhere. With him.' Honour struggled to keep the rising thunder from her voice. Harmony had struck a raw nerve. 'Even so, I forgave you. I forgave you and the rest. Flint, Brick, and Mallet—all of you.'

'So that's it? It's over, and you've decided to make up with me? I need forgiveness, from you of all people? You're full of shit, First Lady. Yes, I can believe that in your self-involved world you probably did feel we cheated you somehow.' Harmony's voice wavered with her own fury. 'But that doesn't make it true, does it? And why should I care about your people, the attention-seeking sycophants who followed you? They're just some old veterans, running out their days until they wind up as spent as old Greyscales.'

'Because they're your people, your team as well, Harmony!' Despite herself, Honour heard her own voice raised in anger still.

'No, First Lady, they are your people, your team. Everything is always about you and always has been. Even now, you've taken the glory away from those backwards simpletons who got you here, just like you did with us. The Farmer's Guild is your team and no one else's. Just like the Masons were.'

Honour glared daggers at her sister, hands balled into fists. 'How can you say that, Harmony? I spent years trying to shape the Masons into a team that could be



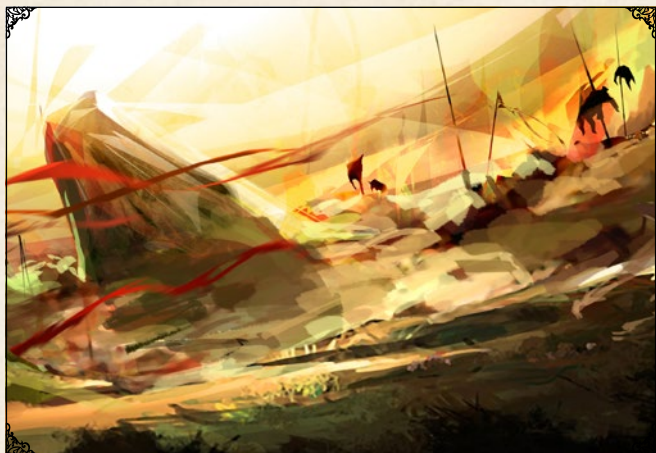
great once again. I did it because they deserved it—not for my own glory.’

She lowered her voice. ‘Now I’m moving on. Was this season about me? Maybe it was, once. Now, though, I know it’s not. It’s about them, the Farmer’s Guild, and their courage to become something great. I see that now. I wish you, my own blood, my sister, could too.’

‘You haven’t been my sister for a long time.’ The growled response was low, dangerous. ‘Not since you became the First Lady. Don’t ever call me that again. I owe you nothing. Nothing!’

‘Harmony, listen, please.’

‘No, you listen.’ Harmony spat each word. The two women faced each other just feet apart, the air between them simmering with cold hatred born from years of repressed frustration.



‘At last I feel free of you. Of your shadow, of your curse. You have been a hex upon me, First Lady, and that has finally been broken.’ Honour’s eyes watered at the condemnation, harsh and spiteful. ‘I’m glad that you did make the finals with your new people. I don’t know why I ever would have doubted you.’ The next words were as sinister as Honour had ever heard, forced through gritted teeth. ‘But we don’t need you now. It’s over. You are dead to us. Tomorrow we will prove that to you and your miserable excuse for a team.’

Harmony turned her back to Honour and strode away without looking back.

Honour could have shouted after her, but she didn’t see the point. The First Lady watched her sister walk away in silence, with just the breaking waves for company.

Harmony was right. It was over, once and for all.

---

# THE FINAL

---

The day was finally here. The final. Despite every set back, contrary to all logical probability, the Farmer's Guild were here. Their season had been one of the most hard-fought and difficult that Honour could recall, each game a bruised and bloody step further along the path to glory. They had lived through the heights of elation and sweetest victory as well as the lows of the most bitter and heart-breaking tragedy.

On their journey, they had found themselves and taken their fate into their own hands. Under Honour, the team had been broken and regrown into something much more potent than anyone could have dreamed. The Farmer's Guild now not only stood shoulder-to-shoulder with any other but were finally a team worthy of the Sovereign States Championship.

This day they faced the last barrier to that crowning achievement, the most difficult challenge yet. Standing against them, between the Farmer's Guild and their ultimate victory, were the reigning champions.

The Mason's Guild.

As the stands stood and sang for their heroes, the First Lady realised she had never before been so moved to be part of the journey of a team, tears forming at the edges of her eyes. Each of the Farmer's Guild players were awestruck, humbly accepting the weight of expectation, the hopes of a thousand spectators on their shoulders.

On the other side of the field were the Masons, all vividly familiar to Honour yet somehow also distant strangers. The players seemed impossibly tall, proud and mighty like ancient titans, a court in thrall of their new monarch. Hammer himself basked gloriously at their centre, the opposition stands chanting his name in a long, drawn-out dirge, the droning sound of a cult at worship. He was a monstrous king, the tyrant of a stolen kingdom.

The shrill note that commenced the game had yet to die before the Masons reacted, leaving the Farmer's Guild in the dust. Bursting forward at a sprint to retrieve, Harmony easily reached the ball before it came to a complete stop and passed it back to Flint. The handsome Mason didn't break stride as it flew across to him, a deceptively gentle tap dropping the ball down to his feet. Dribbling it along in front, he stepped out wide and pushed down one wing.

Falling back into formation, Harmony broke away to mirror Flint, hand gracefully held aloft in salute as the stands cheered deafeningly for their Scarlet Star. Brick marched forward aggressively, straight down the middle of the pitch, flanked by Chisel. He lowered his head like a bull preparing to charge, swinging his heavy chain in one hand.

On the opposite side of the pitch, Grange dropped to forward point, carefully maintaining distance between himself and Hammer. With practised hand

movements, he gestured for the other players to fan out behind him. The Farmer's Guild hastened to react, taking up defensive positions and awaiting the first Mason to make a play. Chisel and Brick both looked eager, determination clearly writ across their faces as they continued to advance. They flanked Hammer on either side, their captain jogging at an easy pace between them as he barked orders at his team.

Honour nodded to herself as Grange directed the defence to focus on Flint, undoubtedly the wildcard. She had spent long afternoons drilling her new team on his unpredictable style of play and ability to move at pace with the ball. It was exactly as she would have instructed them herself.

As Bushel and Tater moved forward to block Flint's advance, he suddenly dived off at a sprint and left them behind, changing direction back towards the centre again. As Flint moved, a flick of the rolling ball sent it spinning towards Chisel. Although the young woman received the pass with awkward feet, she followed Hammer's screamed command and punted it into her captain's path.

Hammer dodged forward into position to collect the pass, barely touching the ball as he unexpectedly skipped past and left it to be collected by his team. Too late, Honour saw that the burst of speed had taken Hammer on a direct path towards Grange, eating up the space between the two captains far faster than the Farmer had been ready for.



With a barbaric war cry more appropriate to a vicious pit fighter than a Guild Ball player, Hammer smashed into Grange with a brutal shoulder tackle. The Farmer staggered under the momentum of the charge and he fell back a step, only to be knocked onto his back by a huge doublehanded swing of Hammer's deadly weapon.

Even as the Farmer hit the dirt, Hammer laid into his opponent like a man possessed, bloodlust lending frenzy to his attack. The dazed Farmer tried to raise an arm to protect himself, striking back punitively with the other, but Hammer seized the blocking arm with one huge hand and pulled it away. Muscles in his arms bulging, Hammer mercilessly pummelled his downed opponent with a series of vicious strikes, all aimed directly at Grange's face. Before any other players could reach the uneven struggle, Hammer's hands and shirt were stained bloody red, and Grange lay unconscious, skin covered in welts, broken in several places.

Hammer leapt back to his feet and stared down the Farmer's Guild supporters, every one of them shocked at the brutality of the tackle. In the stands, the Mason crowd exploded into cheers, crying his name like that of a triumphant gladiator even as the apothecaries scurried onto the pitch. Hammer didn't look far from it as he stepped condescendingly over the unmoving and bloody Grange with a deliberate kick.

On the far side of the pitch from Honour, Flint thundered down the wing in possession once more,

Harmony now keeping pace beside him. Chin down and broad shoulders set wide, Millstone came out to meet them for the tackle as they neared the goal.

Knowing herself to be the last defender, Millstone went straight for the throat.

Tracing the movement of Flint's feet, Millstone moved left and then crossed back again as Flint started to dodge right. She swung both of her axes towards the Mason as she moved, hitting the centre of his breastplate with a tremendous crunch. The impact caused Flint to stagger backwards, but he managed to keep the ball between his feet, still in possession. As Millstone's backswing whistled through the air towards him, Flint passed off the ball to Harmony before he was hit again. Harmony didn't even wait to get the ball under control, dodging away and blasting the ball towards the Farmer goal.

The shot ricocheted from the post, and Millstone pounded a fist into the dirt in frustration before letting loose a string of profanities at Harmony's retreating back. It didn't take a veteran to realise that in one play, the Mason's Guild were already halfway to victory.

They were making this look easy.

The Mason stands erupted once more, with blaring instruments joining raised voices in a deafening roar. The bright blue banners and ribbons among the crowd cut through the wind like sails on a galleon. Over it all could be heard the same atonal drone as before the game: the chant of Hammer's name sounding like a funeral rite.

Arms wide and fingers outstretched, Hammer nodded arrogantly, both to himself, and to the stands. Spotting the First Lady, he strode directly towards the Farmer dugout, stopping just shy of the painted boundary of the pitch. His lips were set in a sneer as he snarled contemptuously at her, each word a spear thrust directly at her heart.

'Listen to them! This team is mine now. You hear me, traitor? Mine. You are an old memory, faded and dead.' His long fingers stabbed roughly into the centre of his chestplate as he spoke, underscoring his words. 'These pathetic amateurs of yours don't even deserve to share the pitch with me. With my leadership, the Mason's Guild will triumph as never before. This is my time, the first day of my era!' He spat the final words, eyes bloodshot and filled with fire.

Honour tore her gaze from Hammer, a wretched man she would forever know only as a vile despot. His cruel words echoed in her ears even over the volume of the crowd.

Grange lay on his back behind her, the apothecaries wrapping his head in a wide cotton bandage. Possessed with a strength born of anger and frustration, Honour whirled and leaned over to feverishly wrench Grange by the collar of his bloodstained shirt. She bellowed at him as the Sawbones scattered, making herself heard over the roar of the crowd.

'We're losing this match, letting them run roughshod! You can't let them play the game they want to. You

understand? Hammer is dictating the game right now, and you won't stand up to him, or any of his Masons that way!' Honour's fingers grabbed the scruff of Grange's neck and shook his head, fixing him with an icy stare.

His eyes looked frightened and weak, slightly unfocused.

'Why are you here? What do you want to be? You can't be here if you don't want to be champions!' She stopped and gestured behind her to Hammer as he jogged down the pitch back towards the Mason goal, huge chest heaving and one arm aloft to salute the stands. 'They don't just want it—the Mason's Guild need it. They eat, sleep, and breathe the championship. I need you to feel that same urgency, the same determination.'

Grange's expression was starting to change, fear slowly being replaced by something else as his sense of pride was ignited by Honour's words. She was still shouting at him, showering him with spit as passion overtook any grace.

'I can only push you so far, Grange. The rest you have to do yourself. You don't deserve anything, even now. You have to work, fight, and take what you want! Don't do it for me, don't do it for the crowd, don't even do it for the Old Father. The Farmer's Guild need to do it for themselves! And you, Grange, need to lead them. Step up, and take the mantle like Thresher wanted you to!'

Grange's brow was furrowed, his lips spread into a determined grin on his brutalised face. His eyes shone

with fierce passion, as proud as she'd never seen him before. Honour recognised that look all too well, and her heart leapt to see it.

The look of a winner. The look of a champion.

Honour had one final message, one last push to make.

'What you do now, in this very moment, is how you'll be remembered. We've got further than anyone ever dreamed we could. They say this team is mine, but it's not. It belongs to you, you and the other Farmers. This is your legacy now, not mine! Step out there and show me how a championship is won!'

Grange nodded solemnly, scarred face still set and determined, and regained his feet. He gave Honour one last look and then sprinted back into play.

Bushel danced away from the Mason goal, eyes wide. Until this season, she had been merely a home-grown lass from a small village, kicking around a ball in a cabbage patch. Now she had just scored in the Sovereign States Championship final. It was a story that would likely make her a hero the world over, whatever the outcome of this game.

She looked overwhelmed.

That was fine, though. Grange knew that Bushel's passion would keep her head in the game, keep the pressure at bay. Tears could come later. Now was not the time.

Grange also knew they still faced an uphill battle. The Farmer's Guild might have equalised to bring it to one



goal apiece, but the Masons had had two take outs, giving them the advantage. Poor Jackstraw had been caught by Brick and beaten near enough beyond recognition.

The Farmers could ill afford any mistakes.

He currently faced off against Chisel, the young woman who had man-marked him in the drive that had led to their goal. The Mason prevented him from backing away with dangerous swings of her pick, tracing rough lines through the grass and into the dirt below. Grange knew that putting her down would be his only way out of the scarred circle.

By the magnificent bruise on her jaw and mouth, it looked like whoever had duelled with Chisel before him had at least been able to land one good hit. Grange caught himself feeling sorry for the pretty young thing, innocent features marred so.

She almost took him out there and then for making that rookie mistake.

Chisel threw herself forward with reckless abandon, her bloody, swollen lip only fuelling an inner rage to be expelled on the Farmers. Grange successfully parried the initial thrust, the steel blade of his saw bending from the impact. Bouncing back aggressively, the diminutive woman put all her weight behind the oversized pick, smashing it downwards with a savage cry that was disturbingly gleeful.

A split second before it landed, Grange hurled himself to one side, smashing his shoulder into a large stone hidden in the grass. The collision left his whole

arm feeling numb, but that was better than having his skull smashed in. Hurriedly he threw the dented saw away and drew the other from the strapping on his back. He was just in time to meet Chisel's follow-up, the force again pushing him backwards. There had to be a way to overcome this assault and the ferocious strength behind his opponent's pick.

Footwork, lad. Half the battle is having good footwork, not power.

They were the Old Father's words, from years past, when Grange had been a rookie. It had been the first time Thresher had spoken to him as he oversaw the new aspirants in the training grounds. Grange had taken the advice to heart, from that day onwards tempering his own aggression with a more composed approach.

Now that he looked, Grange could clearly see Chisel had not received any such mentoring—her feet were uncertain. She leapt for him once again, but Grange deflected her first strike and watching her keenly.

She always led with her right foot and wasted a step with the left on the backswing. She hid it well, usually forcing her opponents back after blocking, and thus stayed free from retaliation, but it was there all the same. Grange ducked the second strike and circled away. He swiped weakly at Chisel's legs. The strike was easily kicked away by a steel toecap, but the kick unbalanced her.

Chisel didn't step back in caution like others might, instead using momentum from the kick to pounce in

a counterattack as Grange had gambled she would. Instead of blocking, he risked stepping into the strike. His good hand clenched the handle of his sawblade with white knuckles as he swung it at Chisel even while taking the full brunt of her blow onto his aching shoulder. As unforgiving metal struck the much softer flesh and bone, the spike of pain was incredible. The impact dislocated the joint, and he felt himself spinning through the air.

Cries from the stands filled Grange's ears, waking him after a few seconds of darkness. He struggled back to his feet whilst he cradled his useless arm, the words of the First Lady still seared into his mind.

Chisel had definitely gotten the worse of the exchange. She lay unmoving on her back several feet away, a jagged, ugly tear ripped across her face and through her lip. Each low breath came in claret bubbles trickling from the edge of her ruined mouth. Grange shouted to the apothecaries, hoping they would hear him over the crowds.

He hoped Chisel wouldn't be permanently scarred.

Flint sprinted past, ball bouncing before him as he carefully kept it under control with light taps. The Mason was heading for the winner. Grange was too slow to react, still too injured to do anything but watch helplessly as Flint sped onwards. The Farmer's heart sank. It all fell to Millstone to stop him and save the match.

Time moved slowly as Millstone shifted her weight between her feet. The Masons could not be allowed to get another goal. She knew the Farmer's Guild were not done, not yet. In her hands, she felt the grips of her hatchets moist against her palms and tightened her grasp. Flint would lead with the left foot, then feint on the right, push off again from the left, drag it over and scuff the ball wide... Millstone had prepared well for this. Flint had a pattern, every time.

She was aware that it was all on her shoulders now. She took a deep breath and dived forwards, moving to where she knew Flint's feint would take him.

The bastard didn't feint.

Flint's right foot hit the ground and propelled him away from her as she sailed through empty air and crashed into the ground. A mix of jeers and gasps sounded from the stands, and the Masons were on to finish the game, champions for the second year running. The crowd began to stamp their feet in unison, a tribal beat that picked up speed and momentum, counting down the remaining seconds of the match. It was well known that Flint, top scorer for seasons now, never missed.

Millstone scabbled in the dirt, trying to find her feet in time to tackle the ball, but it was too late. Flint double stepped and took his shot, cleanly striking the ball on his best foot. All sound died on the pitch and in the stands, where stamping boots abruptly stilled at the height of the chaotic crescendo.

Shreds of green grass drifted through the air as the ball launched, soaring towards the goal.

It sped forward with ultimate purpose, destined to be the final word of the season.

Hearts of spectators and players alike hammered in their chests, silently continuing the drumbeat as half the crowd covered their eyes, unwilling to watch their dream die.

The ball went wide, missing the goal by mere inches.

Suddenly, life burst back into the world again, and the stands exploded into cacophony. Spectators from both sides of the pitch screamed at the top of their voices, and feet resumed stamping their staccato rhythm.

Flint stood stunned, a man utterly lost. This was a moment he would lament for the rest of his life.

Millstone crashed into him from behind and beat the back of his head with her fist, pounding over and over until his struggles ceased.

Bushel collected the ball, and the game swung back towards the Farmer's Guild.

This was it, Grange knew. Their last chance. Jackstraw was still off the pitch, reduced to a broken, tangled heap of limbs pointing in wrong directions. Grange himself was barely still standing, dragging his feet as his shoulder screamed in agony. He didn't have much game left in him; willpower alone keeping him moving. He doubted Chisel would make it back at all, but the Farmer's Guild had to press the advantage before Flint returned to play.



Millstone and Barrow were somewhere in the backfield, and Tater brawled with Brick in the centre. That left just Grange and Bushel as the strike. They had the Masons on the back foot, Flint's drive down the middle of the pitch leaving one wing exposed due to a lack of players to cover it.

Hammer alone stood between the Farmers and the goal.

The indomitable Mason stomped forward menacingly, whipping his warhammer around in long, looping circuits. He grinned in anticipation at their approach. The expression quickly hardened into a scowl.

All around, the crowd continued to slowly intone the name of their hero, the sound hanging heavy in the air.

'Bushel, go wide! Leave this to me!'

Bushel shot a concerned look at Grange but dodged away all the same, rolling the ball with her. Hammer let her go, sweeping out at Grange's legs. Grange tripped but gritted his teeth through the raw pain and managed to keep his footing—until a savage boot to the belly doubled him over, breathless and huddled on the ground.

Without breaking stride, Hammer immediately turned to chase down Bushel, assuming Grange to be down at last.

Grange left his bloodstained saw discarded on the ground and mustered every measure of strength left in his battered body. He launched himself onto Hammer's back, wrapping an arm around the larger

man's neck. The desperate Farmer knew he had no hope of overpowering Hammer; his intent instead was to buy Bushel the moments she needed to score.

One of Hammer's immense hands clutched at Grange's arm, the other drove a hard fist into the Farmer's ribs. Hammer screamed at the top of his lungs for his teammates to assist, as Bushel's pace took her away from his reach. The other Masons were all still too far away, and Hammer howled in frustration, eyes bulging.

'How dare you!?' This is my season! Before the First Lady, you were nothing! Nothing!'

'This... is our... season, Hammer. Our game. We... are... champions!' Grange felt himself grinning painfully at the words, even as a brutal elbow crunched into him and he could feel his grip loosening. The struggle had overbalanced the pair, however, and Hammer began to topple backwards, pulled down by the Farmer's weight.

The Mason landed on top of Grange, crushing him. Flat on his back and coughing for air, Grange knew he had nothing left. He had pushed himself as far as he could and beyond. No resistance, no zeal could force him back to his feet. He had given everything, and all that he could hope for was that Bushel would score now.

A second later, voices from the stands soared, louder than anything yet, raw passion torn from the throats of the people blotting out everything else.

They had done it. The impossible dream realised.

Champions.

Through senses that spiralled around and around, fading, Grange heard Bushel, her voice raised to a joyous, incoherent shriek amid the final notes of the horn. His lips trembled as he tried to mouth words of gratitude to the image of Thresher that he saw floating in his delirious mind. The Old Father had been a true captain, and Grange could only hope he could live up to the title.

With a jarring suddenness that tore him out of his daze, thick, powerful fingers seized Grange by the throat and thumbs crushed into his windpipe. He was too weak to fight, arms flailing uselessly as he choked, feeling blood rise through his gorge and up to his lips from something that had torn inside.

The full weight of Hammer's body pressed down onto Grange, and the world began to fade, senses drowned out but for the taste of coppery bile.

Hammer's vendetta, his glorious march, could never end with defeat. This insult demanded retribution.

Past the point of consciousness, Grange felt his body lighten. He floated away to green fields and rich, golden farmlands.

Just as suddenly, a huge pair of forearms forced their way underneath Hammer's, breaking his hold. Life rushed back to Grange, his lungs burning scathingly, throat coughing out foamy pink spit. From deathly silence sound returned, harsh and grating.

'...names of the gods are you doing, man?! Its's over!'

'It can never be over! The championship is meant to be mine!' The indignation in Hammer's words emerged in a sob.

'You think so? We lost. Look around you, look at the faces in the stands. What are you even doing? This is no way to accept defeat.' Grange thought the voice might have belonged to Harmony, so similar was it to that of the First Lady.

Through vision returning from darkness to messy blurs, Grange saw indistinct shapes that could have been people. One large blur thrashed, legs flailing around, pinned in place by another, even more immense shape standing behind it. The hard lines of armour shined silver in the sun, sharp and piercing.

'Brick, take him away. Beat some sense into him if you have to.' The female voice, honey-like and rich, had an authoritative note that once again reminded Grange of the First Lady. The speaker turned her attention to him.

'Well done, Farmer. Tell your First Lady that you may have won this day, but next time, you won't be so lucky.'

Once again, strength fled Grange, the adrenalin leaving his bloodstream. His heavy eyelids closed, Harmony's eerily familiar voice the final sound he heard.

Halfway across the pitch, Honour fixed her sister with a pointed stare. The game had been hard, unrelenting, and brutal, as severe as she might have expected with so much at stake. The Farmer's Guild had somehow

achieved their dream, and against all odds they had taken the Sovereign States Championship. It could only have left a bitter taste in the mouths of the Mason's Guild players.

Even Honour had to admit that the Mason side had outplayed the Farmers team and had deserved to walk away with the title. Part of her felt sorry for her old teammates, Flint in particular. The First Lady knew his failed shot would haunt him for the rest of his days.





Harmony caught Honour's glare, and for a moment, it seemed as though the enmity that possessed the younger sister slipped away, her body language less taut. Slowly, Harmony's fierce expression relaxed, frown replaced with the faintest hint of a smile towards Honour. There was even some sense of a congratulatory gesture, an all too subtle nod that only one as familiar as Honour would recognise.

It was a first step in rebuilding the bridges between them, restoring their fractured relationship.

Honour could still remember Harmony's harsh words from their previous meeting; the memory was still as painful as Hammer's accusations earlier. And the moments that Honour had witnessed just after the final goal were entirely unconscionable to her.

This was not a Mason's Guild team the First Lady recognised. Not one she wanted any association with. Honour shook her head sadly and turned away from Harmony. There would be no going back.

---

# EPILOGUE

---

Daybreak revealed the bloated corpse washed ashore on the early tide, carried up from the depths as the sea gave back what it had taken. Tangled in weed and soaked through, the frail body barely resembled the man it had once been, flesh grey and pulpy from interment beneath the waves. Where skin had been exposed, the predators of the ocean had claimed their bounty, tearing strips of meat away before it became spoiled and inedible, adding a further level of anonymity.

The corpse lay on the sand for hours, slowly drying out in the sun. The ocean waters gently pooled around the body with each tide, slowly retreating towards the ankles as the day wore on. The salty water at least now left it immune to the predations of carrion-feeders and vermin, even the most starved rats unwilling to feed on the ruined flesh.

It was as if a strange calm settled over the scene, a reverent stillness, nature observing a solemn moment of peace for the departed soul. Overhead, even the gulls were silent, avoiding the stretch of beach entirely.

Jac found the corpse as he partook of his morning walk along the beachfront. The tough brawler had been surprised at the unusual quietness as he strode over the sand, his only company the soft sigh of the waves and the scampering sound of Salt's footsteps.

The otter reached the body first and set about sniffing the corpse curiously. As Jac arrived, Salt had begun to

gnaw at the fingers of one hand, long teeth sinking into the pale flesh. The otter gagged and spat out the infected flesh almost immediately, the taste sour.

Jac kicked Salt away in a spray of sand. He was a man not unused to death, but this fate affected him even so. It was a harsh reminder of how unforgiving and cruel the ocean could be. He wondered how long the body had been under the waves. It was difficult to tell due to the corpse's condition, but Jac guessed the sojourn had been a short one.

The monstrous storms that had battered the coast over the last weeks had been as severe as Jac had ever seen—worse, even. At the time he had wondered, along with the other Fishermen, at the vengeance the gods were exacting upon the world. How little he had known, he realised.

The Fisherman placed one hand over his heart and tried to remember the words of the appropriate Solthecian prayer to ask for forgiveness as the soul made its passage to the afterlife. Whoever this was, Jac felt only sorrow for them. The passing deserved to be observed reverently, and the Fisherman was sure the name of the anonymous corpse would not be forgotten by the gods.

As Jac stumbled over the unfamiliar words, Salt skulked back to the corpse once more. Possessed with an unusual curiosity, the otter began to tear away at a yellow bandage wrapped tightly around the corpse's knee, ragged and shot through with bloodstains.

