



SEASON I
COLLECTED STORY



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MATCH DAY

There was a burning bright sun overhead the pitch; the sparse buildings and spectator stands cast barely any shadow and beneath the players stretched deep, dark recesses. To the morbid eye, there looked to be a deep void beneath each one, threatening to swallow them should they falter.

Ox looked to either side, quick but measured glances, taking in the state of play around him. The Butcher's Guild trailed by two but had possession, the ball rolling out in front of Brisket as she sprinted several paces safely behind him. To his left, Boar lumbered along, barely breathing heavily despite his exertions so far. To the right Boiler and Shank ran alongside, knives glinting in the bright light. Out in front, Ox could see the huge form of Kraken towering over the other Fishermen as they stood in a semi-circular defensive formation. He risked a sidelong glance at Boar, subtly gesturing at the Fisherman blocker. The beast grinned a feral smile beneath his thick moustache, the sight unsettling in spite of being partially hidden from view.

Ahead, five paces now, Ox could feel the tension rise and increased his speed, the team pushing harder to keep with him. His ears detected Shank whispering threats under his breath, short sharp breathing from the others. Four steps, three steps, Ox saw Siren's hooded form dart out to his flank, sidestepping with an easy jog. Too late now to change the plan. The rest

stood firm and Ox could only hope that either Boiler or Shank would show the initiative to mark her.

Two steps, Ox heard the percussive slashes of the Fishermen's spearguns firing. He threw heavy feet to the right, feeling one dart pierce his cheek with a sting of pain, the sharp flue tearing his skin open and leaving a bright red streak. Somewhere behind him came an anguished grunt as at least one missile hit its target. Ox let out a blood curdling roar, the sound tearing from his core, shattering the determined silence from both sides as they prepared for the inevitable collision.

'Get 'em boys!'

Half of the crowd screamed its raucous approval, the other let loose their own volley of curses and cries in answer as the Butchers slammed into the Fishermen. Ox ducked low and further again to the right as he closed, slipping beneath a swing from Corsair's spear. Droplets of blood from the scratch on his face splattered onto the Fisherman's clothes, painting a macarbe pattern onto the pale cloth. As he moved, his cleaver arced up in a fluid motion and into his opponent's unguarded stomach. Corsair snarled as the blunted edge struck his plated armour, slid several inches to the side and leapt into the air, the impact driving him backwards two steps. He reacted with a swift downwards knife strike towards Ox which the Butcher desperately turned aside with a hard shove; blocking the shoulder of the arm holding the knife. Corsair once again stumbled back several paces and

Ox pressed his advantage by stepping into the space. The Butchers all knew that close quarters where their adversaries would be unable to reload their spearguns would offer the more powerful, brutal team a significant advantage.

Ox could see that his first strike had hurt his opponent more severely than it had seemed. Corsair's eye twitched, the tell-tale narrowing suggesting the pain he felt, a thin trickle of red slid down from the side of his mouth. Ox stepped out left and Corsair circled right; his stance low like a knife fighter, warily watching the Master Butcher. The world had shrunk to the two of them, the players, images, and sounds around them losing all significance in the moment. Ox feinted to step left again but instead dove forward, trying to take Corsair by surprise, only to curse as the light footed Fisherman captain neatly dodged away. He made a careful side step right to maintain their distance. Ox glared, but knew that the longer that this held, the more chance that one of his crew around him would waste their mark and be able to force a mistake from Corsair. Then he could finish this.

Although Boar started any drive slowly, he housed so much physical momentum that by the time he picked up speed he became an overwhelming force. At the time of Ox's battle cry and the point of impact, Boar had already become an unstoppable juggernaut. The bulky Butcher crashed into Kraken, heavy pummelling forearms smashing into the huge Fisherman's thick

set frame, who lost ground trying to hold the attack at bay. Boar's charge and Kraken's resistance pitched the Butcher forward and off balance but he was able to turn the movement into a head-butt. With no free hands, Kraken did all he could to absorb the damage, tilting his head forward into the blow to take the impact on his forehead, with a sickening crunch, both players recoiled.

Boar was the first to recover and with a bestial roar lunged forward again, a huge hand reaching out to slap his opponents guard away whilst his foot simultaneously rose up and kicked out at Kraken's knee. As the blow made contact there was a loud crack and the Fisherman staggered. Furious, murderous intent giving rise to a madman's cackle, the red mist descended over Boar's eyes as he leapt upon Kraken, striking over and over at the giant's smashed knee and throwing heavy, punishing fists into his ribs.

Boar could tell that Kraken had managed to hit back several times in retaliation whilst he had tried to hold off the enraged Butcher, but he was so numbed by bloodlust that he ignored any sensation other than the coppery taste that filled his mouth. As the two players collapsed in a heap of struggling, writhing limbs, Boar briefly entertained the thought that he might have bitten his own tongue. He didn't care.

Fingers, pink at the tips from pressure, wrapped around Kraken's throat and he grinned at the Fisherman. His muscles strained against Kraken's

white knuckled attempts to prise his hands away, viciously exerting his strength to smash the back of his opponents head into the ground, once, twice. The Butcher knew he was the stronger man and let loose a victorious shout. Again, he smashed Kraken's head backwards, feeling the hands around his own lessen their grip and then fall away as Kraken lost consciousness. Boar spat in the man's face. Satisfied, he took deep, hard breaths into burning lungs, and climbed to his feet, looking around for another mark to waste.

Ball carefully controlled before her, Brisket slowed her pace, looking for a break to run past the rival guild's lines. She could see Boar and Kraken tangled together, Ox and Corsair squaring off and Shank facing down Shark. Boiler lay in a crumpled heap a few feet away, impaled by a heavy harpoon flue and groaning pitifully as he tried to pull it out of his side. A growing puddle of blood soaked into the ground beneath him. Brisket wouldn't normally feel much remorse for a player on either team that was downed and she already could tell the rook had lost enough blood to have taken him out of this game. Hearing her footfalls, he looked up, face contorted with pain.

'Help me! Help me pull it out!' Watching as Boar unsteadily clambered up, she ignored Boiler and ran past without a word heading towards the Beast, Boiler's screams fading behind her. She suspected that ripping out the twin flue barb would actually do him

more damage anyway, causing fresh cuts that would leave him bleeding far more than he was already.

Where were the other Fishermen? A change in movement and she could see Greyscales now laying on his front, near to Shank. She could guess what had happened there. No sign of Siren that she could see. Brisket dashed past Boar, kicking the ball out further in front of her. Boar got out of her way, watched her pass, then ran in the opposite direction, his eyes focused on Shark's back. Brisket increased her pace to sprinting, easily keeping control of the ball, kicking it out further and further as the distance between her and the open Fisherman goal shortened. Time to start a comeback.

She got a handful of steps closer before Siren came skidding out of nowhere between her and the ball, the bitch looking to steal it. Brisket tried a headlong tackle rather than arresting her motion, not expected by the other woman, who deftly dodged out of the way of the more physical player but had to concede control of the ball. It bounced crazily to the side, away from both of them. Why could Boar not just learn to play the game and give her a little back up just once?

Ox was careful to keep Corsair away from his speargun as they circled each other. No use at short range and needing to be reloaded before it could be used again, it couldn't be used as a ranged weapon but its heavy stock might be a valuable melee tool. Ox risked a kick at it, sending it skidding off backwards. He timed it well but didn't anticipate the rope still attached

to it tripping him. He managed to keep his balance but the lapse in his attention gave Corsair an opening; he attacked as Ox's defence faltered for a moment.

Ox didn't block the strike and hit back with his cleaver, hoping that his armour and tough hide would mitigate much of the trauma. There was a dull thud and a sharp pain forced Ox to grit his teeth. He had forgotten how precise the vicious cutthroat could be, but his own attack had struck the Fisherman hard in the side of his head. Sprawled on the floor, split open from a savage cut that ran from his temple down and underneath his jaw, Corsair's eyes rolled backwards, the man knocked out.

The Master Butcher allowed himself to grimace, slump and hold a hand to his side. Most injured Guild Ball players were simply bludgeoned in their armour, over and over until huge welts covered them, they collapsed during the game due to exhaustion and the bleeding. He wasn't done, but he could tell that the attack had hurt him badly. He limped on unsteady legs, almost doubled over, surveying the pitch around him. Shank and Boar had Shark pinned. He wasn't worried about that, no matter how slimy the agile bastard was. He couldn't see either of the mascots; screw them both. The apothecaries were dragging Boiler off towards the sidelines, he'd got wasted. Brisket and Siren were at each other, some distance away, the ball forgotten temporarily. He felt wet on his hand. Blood. His blood, soaking through onto his fingers. Shitty

knife must have gone through the armour. Not good.

Ox knew what his guild wanted. Still holding his hand to his side to keep some semblance of pressure on the wound, he started towards Corsair. Sometimes, winning wasn't everything. All the best, most longstanding players and teams knew that. Ox had got where he was by knowing his role, and who paid him. Put the guild before the game.

Gods, breathing was difficult. Scragging Fisherman scum had hit him far harder than he'd hoped when he had got the opening. Drawing deep breaths, as much air as he could, he stumbled into the prone player and rather than kneeling as intended, fell to his knees.

Carefully, he positioned his cleaver blade over the bastard's ankle. His wound burned and a thin line of pink drool fell unbidden from his lips. Raising the weapon high over his head, he swung it down. The blade bit, skidded past the ankle and tore out a huge chunk of the Fisherman's boot, skin and the meat beneath. Blood shot everywhere. His shaking hands slippery now, Ox grasped the cleaver firmly, positioned it in the same place and repeated the terrible action, again and again, driving the blade into the gristle of the joint.

Bright red blood covered everything. He could see the bone; even that was stained red. Red, gory violent red, the world became one hue. Ox's own spit, much darker now and closer to crimson, ran down his shirt. Corsair stirred. Urgently, as fast as his wounded body

allowed, Ox moved over and struck a boot into his face. With the last vestiges of his strength he raised his cleaver two-handed above his head and drove it down, once, twice. The Fisherman's Guild Captain might have screamed, he didn't know any more. Ox's world had shrunk to numb already, his senses shutting down. His last thought as he passed out himself was that it didn't matter whether they won the damned game or not now. The guild had won regardless.

He collapsed sideways, next to the maimed player. Burning bright sun overhead. To the morbid eye the darkness of the deep, dark void seemed to have claimed them after all.

— IN THE BEGINNING —

Early afternoon sun bathed the courtyard outside of the Butcher's Guild in Aldebrecht, where the group of hopeful apprentices had been running exercises under the watchful gaze of the Master Butcher all morning. The guild house was a large, expansive building festooned with intricately detailed banners and imposing statues; it resembled a fortification from the Century Wars more than anything else. Standing out even amongst the extravagant residences in the cosmopolitan Skaldic capital and the many other guild houses in the District, it was as if the Butcher's Guild had sought to dominate their surroundings with its construction, form over function.

However, even looming over the courtyard as it did, the building somehow provided only the barest hint of shade for the aspirants below. For several hours now their stamina had run dry, drained out by rigorous activity. Some twenty or so in number, they had begun the day with nearly double that. Each of the apprentices had felt an unusual combination of pity and elation as the first boy broke down and collapsed early on. He had been a cheerful and popular member of their group, well liked. But as a guild official dragged him out of the yard and into the street beyond, all of them recalculated their improved odds of success. And so did they lose compassion for their fellows, giving way to an increased determination as the day passed.

Avicious cycle, designed to harden them mentally.

Some of them were new to this. Others, like Boiler, had already been at the guild for some months now, the relentless drills and exercises had become slightly more tolerable as their muscles had tightened and become stronger, their minds focused, hungry, ruthless. For the new arrivals it was like being a piece of meat being thrown to the hounds. Adapt and survive, or be heartlessly discarded. Ox did not permit second chances.

'Again!' The order was gruff, hard, echoing off of the stone walls that surrounded them. None of the boys, men or women dared to voice dissent or doubts, wearily dropping back into position.

Ox strolled between the lines of apprentices facing off against each other, watching them all as they sparred. He raised an eyebrow here and there, nodded to one or two of them, but shook his head at most of the others. As the sound of the last metallic clink from the final duel had finished echoing in Boiler's ears, the Master Butcher called a stop once again. Standing with his back to a huge red and black banner thrown over one wall, he looked at the group with barely concealed loathing, nearly all of them gasping for breath and wilting under his gaze.

One rook not much older than Boiler was sitting in the dirt of the courtyard, utterly exhausted. His legs were straight out in front of him, his arms rigid behind his back, holding him up. His head rolled back, drawing in deep breaths, each desperate gulp of air as

if he were a drowning man suddenly given life again. Boiler couldn't remember the boy's name, his own mind blank from exertion.

One of the girls tugged at the boys sleeve urgently, trying to rouse him to his feet. With a shaky hand and a breathless, weak voice, the boy stuttered something about needing to stop for a moment, and that he could continue. Still she was insistent, her own voice shrill and pleading as she cast nervous eyes around her. Boiler knew this to be a mistake for both of them. Some rows back, they hadn't been noticed. Yet. Boiler had doubts it would stay that way.

Early on in his apprenticeship, he had been taken to one side by an older boy that had taken pity on him and taught the trick to keeping the Master Butcher from noticing of you. Even when you were so tired that you wanted to double over with your hands on your knees and puke, you fought to stand straight and put your hands on your waist instead. Initially, Boiler had struggled, especially with trying to keep a nonchalant face as he pushed the bile back down. But it had worked. Not once had Ox or one of the other instructors laid into him like the others. The boy had made the team a short while after and Boiler intended to follow his example.

'Shit. Pathetic.' The Master Butcher spoke, angry eyes staring down the assorted apprentices before him as he resumed walking around the yard. Most couldn't meet his gaze. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to

Boiler, Ox saw the rook sprawled out behind the rest of them. Snarling, he strode purposefully over to him.

'You – new here are you?' He spat the question out violently. Boiler realised with a growing fear in his gut that the boy didn't even realise that Ox was talking to him. The girl that had been trying to pull him back to his feet was long gone, had left him to his fate. Boiler saw her standing motionless a few feet away, chin up and purposefully not looking at the boy any more. Good for her, although Boiler fancied he might have seen a tear at the corner of her eye. She was cute in a tousled way, hair short, spiky and golden. He hoped that she might be around for a bit longer at least.

'Answer me!' Ox's statement came with a hard kick, and spittle that showered down onto the figure before him. The apprentice cried out in pain and tried to hide, with his arms over his head. Boiler winced at the impact, the same way he did every time he saw this happen. He chanced another look over at the girl. She was definitely crying now, head still held immobile. Boiler mentally made a point to try and console her afterwards, assuming that either of them would still be here by the time the evening forced a break.

'Don't bother making any friends, you won't be staying here long.' Not waiting for an answer, Ox gave the rook another kick, even harder this time than the last, and stalked off angrily, shaking his head. Behind him, it was as if the life had fled the boy's body all at once. He collapsed completely, not trying to fight

anything anymore, able to give in at last.

‘Any of the rest of you that can’t take this should join him. I work my boys hard. Sweat more now...’ lips contorted into a familiar sneer, the Master Butcher somehow managing to leave each one of them with the impression that he was talking to them personally. ‘..and bleed less on the pitch. Or end up like that piece of shit.’ He pointed at the unfortunate rookie he had just dismissed, crawling towards the edge of the training ground in shame. ‘I don’t care either way.’

Avarisse kicked a heavy foot into the door, in the same place as the last three kicks had been. The first time it had shook violently, the dull thud lost even in the quiet alleyway, but that had been all. The second and third time, the door had groaned under the assault, each successive kick shaking it more than the previous time. Finally with the fourth kick, the door unexpectedly gave in, shattering splinters of old discoloured wood all over Avarisse, the alley floor and the passageway beyond.

One piece had managed to land embedded in Greede’s left shoe. Grimacing at the damage done to the fine leather, he reached down and plucked it out, before tossing it aside. He strolled past Avarisse, the larger man comically hopping up and down on one foot and flailing his arms wildly, trying to keep his balance with one steel toed boot stuck in the door. Greede ignored Avarisse’s plight, examining the door

and its frame, running one finger thoughtfully along the broken lock.

'They simply do not construct doors this way anymore Mssr Avarisse. That we have been forced to reduce the number of such fine examples left to the world by one truly must be considered a disaster.' As ever, his cultured accent and expansive vocabulary was in stark contrast to his appearance, which any person that had encountered him could only have called troglodyte at their most generous.

He looked beyond the door, where the sunlight struck a flagstone floor that had not seen daylight for many years. A thick layer of dust, now disturbed, floated in the air. It was as if they had opened a square of darkness in the side of the universe and the world now rushed to reclaim it.

Greede looked up at his accomplice, still trapped.

'Oh, do come now Mssr Avarisse. There will be time enough another day to play silly games.' Greede walked through the doorway, taking a handkerchief and pressing it to his nose and mouth to keep out the dust as he did.

Grunting, Avarisse bent his knee and hopped closer to the door, almost losing the battle for balance completely as he did so, until he was able to push both hands against the door frame. Leaning into his arms for support, he wrenched the trapped foot clear in another shower of tiny shards of wood. Before he followed Greede, he took a moment to compose

himself in the alley, straightening his hat across his brow, and smoothing down the creases in his trouser leg, thick fingers brushing splinters to the floor. Satisfied, he stepped out of the light, ducking his head slightly to fit.

'Bastard thing.' He did not share Greede's generous appraisal of the door.

Greede knew that like many of the older cities throughout the Empire of the Free Cities, Mullenbrecht had simply grown on top of itself as it expanded. The result was a labyrinth of sewers, old cellars, tunnels and rooms far from the light of the sun topside. This was the undercity and it was such places as this where he and his colleague had spent a considerable part of their lives. Although he had never set foot in Mullenbrecht before this morning, Greede had known without fail that it had existed. A man of his education simply knew these things. It had just been a case of finding the way in.

Avarisse held the lantern to illuminate the way for them both, an arrangement that Greede had long since become comfortable with. It did not concern him that they might encounter an undesirable of sorts. Greede was sure that should this be the instance, Avarisse would be perfectly capable of despatching an assailant as well as carrying the light source. The man was remarkable in his faculties.

The pair were walking along a pathway which might once have been a catacomb of sorts, judging from the

iconography carved into the grey stone walls. Greede could tell that the area had not been disturbed in some time due to the unmarred sheen of dust that sat on the floor. Although he couldn't see them, the echoes of rats, running from the unexpected light scratched at the edge of his hearing. Greede had no interest in either the carvings or the rodents, although his suspicions were confirmed a short while after when they began to see alcoves with carefully wrapped remains in them. In places, the rats had torn through the linen to reveal skeletal faces, grinning back in the light. A lesser man might have turned back.

Neither Greede nor Avarisse were lesser men. They continued into the depths.

The corridor ended in another plain door which was unlocked. It opened into a moderately sized and long since abandoned room. Surrounding them on all sides, defining pathways around the room, were tall piles of furniture. Chairs and tables all stacked on top of each other, a chest here, crates against one wall, a cupboard leaning on another. Closer to Greede's eye level, books lay scattered where they could on the floor. Dirty rags that might once have been clothes or furnishings lay in one corner in an untidy heap, rotting. High above, around where the ceiling was some twenty foot away, was a small grille, through which daylight bled murkily through the gloom.

Avarisse had begun to explore the room, thrusting the lantern before him and kicking through the books,

propelling vast bodies of dust into the air. He sneezed, spraying mucus irreverently over what looked like a Solthecian cross lying on top of a cabinet. Greede made a tutting noise to show his displeasure, earning him a filthy look from the larger man. As Greede watched on, Avarisse reached down, tore out half the pages from one the books and by way of apology, blew his nose noisily into them. Greede chuckled.

This place would suit them very well as a home for a few weeks. Already they had found several rooms prior to this one which could easily be used to dispose of bodies or other such inconveniences from their work. It amused Greede to think that the Union had approached the pair with a Guild Ball commission, something which they had accepted but had little interest in pursuing. Certainly, they neither would let it interfere with their other operations.

But, a contract was a contract. Whatever one might have thought of his dubious morals, Greede always made a point of justifying to his own warped principles that he completed them to the best of his abilities. Thus, here they were.

‘Mssr Avarisse, I believe me that we may well have found ourselves another home away from home.’ He didn’t wait for the other man to answer before he continued. ‘And now that we have done so, it is time that we progressed on with ingratiating ourselves to the guilds in this fine city. We do, after all, have our primary contract to satisfy and time grows short.’

— ENTER LONGSHANKS —

Magister Lundt of the Butcher's Guild looked disdainfully out of the carriage window as it was slowly pulled along the road. Out at the edge of the city the poverty was jarringly evident. Half rotten timbers shot with woodworm supported ugly one and two story buildings, packed closely together in irregular fashion; starkly different to the carefully spaced inner city residences that he was used to. Clearly it had been the their constructors' aim not to waste any available land that could be turned into dwellings for the spread of the low born, barely human residents. Dirty alleys ran between each of the buildings; the filthy walls receding into darkness, thickset thugs leaning against them and staring aggressively at every passer-by. It amused Lundt to think that the whole shanty town would probably go up in seconds with the slightest spark.

Overhead the houses bulged outwards, each one looking more structurally unsound than the last. There was no pleasing aesthetic here; no thought or care in what could be laughingly termed as their craftsmanship. Mankind in this district had no shame, no respect. As if to prove his point, a window slid open on one of the buildings and a filthy woman leant out with a bucket of waste, emptying it over the street below. Pedestrians leapt out of the way of the disgusting shower of excrement, but none looked up,

likely used to this horrid spectacle. Lundt could smell the stench inside the carriage. Shaking his head, he leant back inside and quickly pinched a clump of snuff between thumb and forefinger; held it to his nostrils and inhaled deeply.

After a time the carriage thankfully left the buildings behind, fading from the view of the rear window. The remaining vestiges of the smell at last abated. The road became narrower and the cobblestones of the city gave way to a ground stone track; then dissipated altogether into a muddy path. Bare trees lined the road underneath the afternoon's grey skies and between them Lundt could see the outlines of tombstones in the graveyards. The land where the Mortician's Guild had made its home was desolate and miserable in comparison to the vibrant Guild District that the Butcher spent most of his time in.

The man was modestly dressed with little regard for current fashions. In every respect he looked smart, his clothing functional. Smoking from an ornate pipe with a gold coloured mouthpiece, he lounged back in the Lord Chamberlain's chair; his boots propped arrogantly on the office's expensive antique desk. Thick smoke clouded the room, betraying that the man had been here for some time. As always, Lord Chamberlain Vincent de Laurentis wondered how his strange guest managed to enter the Fisherman's Guild and his office unseen by everyone; and how he knew when Laurentis would be out on business and when

he would return. This was not common knowledge to any but a few trusted servants and his junior staff. For the Lord Chamberlain, a person whom prided himself on knowing everyone and their business, it was entirely too infuriating to not know not even a name for this man, let alone anything else, whilst at the same time being so apparently predictable himself.

'I assume that you find my office and chair to your satisfaction?' Laurentis asked bitterly.

'Quite.' The man smiled revealing yellowy, tar stained teeth. His left foot shifted a fraction and ruffled some papers that had been conscientiously stacked on Laurentis' desk. The Lord Chamberlain bristled.

'And to what or to whom do I owe the dubious pleasure of your company this time?'

'Unsurprisingly enough, something extraneous to your own activities, outside of your considerable sphere of influence. But then you never invite me here at the best of times.' The man opened his arms wide as he elaborated on the subject; as if to emphasise the point. He ended the movement with folded hands behind his head; resting even more insolently, if such a thing was possible. Laurentis rolled his eyes at the pointless pantomime of the act.

'Now that the Butcher's Guild have removed Corsair from the active Fisherman's Guild Roster, my colleagues and I do not wish to see him return. Ensure that he is replaced, effective immediately.'

Laurentis offered the smiling man a hard, cold stare.

Corsair represented a significant guild commodity in terms of the amount of training and upkeep that had been afforded him over his career. Whilst Corsair was by no means indispensable, the gall of the stranger in asking so casually for the Fisherman's Guild to throw away their team captain offered one of the most discourteous and ridiculous insults he could imagine. Inwardly, he was simultaneously seething and guessing at this hated man's intentions.

'Are you quite aware of what you are asking?' Laurentis finally managed.

'Of course. Obviously we appreciate that our request has certain implications.' Serious now, the man removed his feet from the desk, unfolded his hands from behind his head and leant forward. 'But nonetheless, for a capable individual such as yourself, not impossible. We are happy to leave the exact method of achieving this to you Laurentis. Your faculties are more than sufficient for the task.'

'Flattering and generous. And if I refuse?'

'You should try not to entertain such ideas. For all that your guild is currently part of an appreciable political alliance offering you significant degrees of both power and protection from the state, it is not insurmountable. We are not the state and we are not limited by its laws. You would do well to remember this.' The man had ceased smiling, all hint of any mischief earlier gone – but then, his eyes never had been throughout their conversation. They remained fixed on the Lord

Chamberlain as he rose from the chair.

Laurentis kept an even return stare, not wanting to back down, to resist this tyranny. His mind raced through possibilities. He could call the guards now and have this man taken into custody. He would show him how having little power or protection felt in the guild's dungeon. Yes, he could think of more than a few methods of extracting information from him before leaving the man a broken husk in the darkness. But then he was also unlikely to be working alone, as he had alluded to on several occasions. Laurentis might simply be removing a one of many, potentially incurring the wrath of another more powerful entity in the process. He could refuse to throw away the asset as he had been asked and both he and the Fisherman's Guild would incur that same ire. He had little doubt that the man's threats were sincere.

His only consolation was that he didn't believe that the Fisherman's Guild were alone in this. Although none of the other guilds would admit weakness in their dealings and little avenue for meaningful discourse existed between them; Laurentis was of the firm conviction that the man paid visits to each of them, exploiting them all in the same fashion. It made no sense to exploit any one alone, when you could easily do the same to all.

Far better then to play the long game. Laurentis was a politician and understood all too well how to build a long term strategy. At the present, he simply did not

have enough information on the individual before him nor his mysterious organisation to act. More than anything, he wanted to know the man's agenda. He could only make wild speculation at present and Laurentis did not entertain such concepts. Anything that hurt his rivals could easily be turned into something that benefited him; even considering the web of half truths and lies that the man spun.

The silence stretched out between the two. The ticking of an old timepiece in the darkness at the rear of the office was the only sound. Finally, Laurentis spoke, a terse, stubborn answer, purposefully short.

'Yes.'

'Wait here, I will fetch the master.' The tired face bobbed once in reverent submission and then the old man scuttled off into the darkness of the guild's open doorway. Lundt shivered. The cold late winter air cut through his thick coat and the layers beneath. He stepped closer to the gothic building to get out of the wind and huddled his arms further around his body.

The houses of the Mortician's Guild were unlike any other. Tall, imposing stone arches covered in leering gargoyles and cryptic script rose up around the entrances to the building. Murky stained glass windows lined the walls; their colours muted with age and giving the appearance that they would barely let any light in at all. In the courtyard, several statues depicted devils and angels locked in mortal embrace. Others represented divine gods watching the conflict;

eternally judging the combatants. Lundt did not feel comfortable here. The statues all seemed to be staring at him no matter where he stood, the interloper in their midst, promising damnation to that which did not belong. Scolding himself for thinking something so irrational, Lundt forced his gaze to the area around the building, away from the statues condemnation.

He could see in the dying afternoon light that surrounding the guild were hundreds of gravestones in neat, organised rows; their order cold, precise, efficient. Larger mausoleums were dotted about, their shadows long and deep on the ground. Lundt's mind, already nervous, spent a moment too long wondering how many crypts surrounded him. He shuddered, this time not from the cold. The uneasy nervousness he had tried to cast aside returned.

'Magister Lundt.' The low, deep voice dragged him from his reverie. Lundt knew the voice belonged to Magister Abendroth, one of the higher ranking Morticians within this house. He turned in towards the building again and customarily held out a hand to the man. He intended to keep this as artificially cordial as was possible, hoping that the visit would be a brief one.

Abendroth looked at the Butcher's hand, making no effort to offer his own, before his gaze returned to Lundt. Apparently Lundt had misjudged the moment. Inwardly cursing the smile he could have sworn he saw at the edges of Abendroth's mouth, he withdrew the offered appendage. He should have known better

than to expect one of the damned Spooks to be anything other than a lifeless, humourless ghoul. He fought to keep his shivering form steady lest he show another sign of weakness to the man and forged on, eager to escape to the relative comfort and familiar surroundings of his carriage.

'Very well. The Butcher's Guild have paid our debt to you as requested. The Fisherman's Guild team captain has been removed ahead of your own game with them. We trust that you now accept that the bond is spent.' It was not a question. Here, Lundt found his confidence after his initial misstep. He was a negotiator, a man of words, comfortable within the confines of language and the careful sculpting of it to his own ends.

'We are agreed. The Butcher's Guild has repaid its covenant with us.' The frankness of the reply surprised Lundt. He had expected some negotiation here, a power struggle to retain some bondage over the Butcher's Guild. He had been prepared for that, not to have the bond so carefully dismissed. Unsure of the moment, his next words faltered, caught in his throat, unnecessary.

'You may leave, Magister Lundt. I have tasks remaining of me, and little time to waste with you.'

Lundt saw it now. The bastard had calculated the whole exercise as its own exertion of power. Demanding that that a representative attend the Mortician's Guild to confirm the obvious, leaving Lundt waiting outside and then not lowering himself to debate but simply of

dismissing the debt and the representative. It actually had turned the completion of the bond into a sign of submission from the Butcher's Guild and not the restoration of their strength. Lundt would remember this, not appreciating being used this way at all. With nothing else to be said he turned on his heel and strode off, keeping his head held as high as possible. Screw the Spook and his piss-poor guild in the middle of nowhere.

Abendroth watched the Butcher leave. He detested the younger Magister, like all of his kind now. So openly brazen in their dealings, supremely confident in their own abilities, honed by exploiting each other like children. No understanding of the subtlety of discourse, of how to properly reach accord. A more worthy man would have demanded that the Mortician had met him on neutral ground, would have insisted that the gatekeeper permit him entrance. Abendroth could remember the Butcher's predecessor. Yes, he had much more respect for the old ways than these young ones. The Morticians always remembered. Theirs was a guild of tradition. The young men and women like Lundt, puffed up with false bravado, were a stain on a rich history of negotiation. Perhaps Lundt would mature with age or gain some insight over time; although Abendroth seriously doubted it. The stench of failure would haunt his future dealings whether he realised it or not. It was of no concern to Abendroth in any instance.

‘We too have reached accord, Longshanks.’ He spoke to the figure hiding in the darkness against the wall, watching the entire proceeding unfold. Lundt might not have noticed but Abendroth let very little escape his perception.

‘For now,’ the man paused to retrieve an ornate pipe from his coat pocket. ‘Although my colleagues and I already have in mind a greater task for your Guild.’ He lit the pipe, puffing into the silver mouthpiece, briefly illuminating his face with an orange glow.

‘You ask too much. Already my mistress chafes at discarding the claim we held over the Butcher’s Guild for your advance and not our own.’ This much was true. The Guild Master of the Mortician’s had raged for days after Longshanks had demanded such a cherished covenant be wasted on injuring what seemed an inconsequential player from the Fisherman’s Guild. ‘Tread carefully now, lest we tire too much of your incessant annoyances.’ The threat hung in the air.

‘You misunderstand. This time the Mortician’s Guild stands to profit from my intervention. Although, of course, I can easily withdraw my offer and instead make it to one of your rivals. Perhaps they will find the venture more to their liking.’ The man paused, watching for any sign of reaction from Abendroth. After a moment, Abendroth offered him a barely perceptible nod. Longshanks continued. ‘Then let us discuss this further within the confines of one of your crypts, away from the ears of others.’

Laurentis stood in front of his desk and appraised the large man in front of him. He knew much about the one that had been named Shark, although he had never spoken to him. He did not often have any contact with the Guild Ball players, preferring to leave that in the hands of menial staff who would then report to him. Far better not to muddy any waters with the commodity by allowing them to think that he offered them any patronage at all.

Despite this, Shark was one of the most imposing men that Laurentis had ever met, an unusual quality in a Fisherman's Guild player. Whilst not as physically large or brutish as many of the other Guild Ball players, instead he had a gritty solidity to him. All hard, lean working muscle from long years of labour in his younger days, every action seemed measured, with total economy of movement. Any moment, Shark looked like he could burst into violent action if required. Until then, he stalked. Yes, Laurentis thought, the name Shark suits this predator very well.

'Shark, I am making you permanent team captain of the Fisherman's Guild.'

Silence. Laurentis knew that as a native of Luemmyr, a Sovereign State in the northernmost part of the Empire of the Free Cities, the man did not speak Skaldic as his first language. Perhaps Shark simply did not understand Laurentis' words. For a moment, he entertained the idea that reports on Shark had missed something and that he would need to rethink the

candidate to take over the captaincy.

‘What of Corsair?’ Even though familiar, when spoken with Shark’s careful deliberation and thick accent the words sounded alien.

‘Corsair will not be returning,’ Laurentis hesitated, unsure of how to best phrase the next part to Shark to ensure total understanding. He decided on a direct approach. ‘Corsair is no longer a concern of you, or this guild.’ The words were very final and Laurentis suspected that he had not quite kept the frustration at the situation from his tone. Shark nodded.

‘Will you need me for anything else Lord Chamberlain?’ Shark’s voice betrayed none of any emotion he might be feeling at his sudden promotion.

Laurentis came to the conclusion that he had chosen well after all. The man might lack charisma, but he certainly possessed an appreciable pragmatism and obedience that was extremely suitable to the role at hand. Corsair, an obstinate and stubborn pirate by nature, had threatened insubordinate behaviour on more than one occasion. It had been his natural talent and ability which had kept his place on the team rather than any sentimentality on the guilds behalf. In actuality, the removal of Corsair’s captaincy would potentially make the rest of the team increasingly compliant.

Laurentis knew that he had come to accept this bitter hope in the way that a man with few options is forced to and was deliberately searching for an upside to the situation.. The lie was vaguely reassuring at least.

‘No Shark, you may leave now.’ Laurentis dismissed him with a casual wave of his hand.

The player left with little ceremony, slipping out of the room quietly; the only sounds were his boots on the lavish carpet and the creak of the door that open and shut a few seconds later.

‘An excellent decision,’ the man had said when Laurentis had offered him the name Shark.

‘I do not have much choice from the existing squad.’

‘Perhaps. However, you should be content that our agents would have recommended him if you had chosen otherwise.’ The notion gave Laurentis little peace of mind.

‘One day, you will lose the ability to exploit us as you do. It is only our inherent distrust of each other that maintains your control.’

‘Yes, it is. But I personally have so little belief that such an accord would ever be possible between you now. Ever since the Empire of the Free Cities was founded, your kind have escalated your feuds and silly politicking like never before. Even prior to the Century Wars you were unable to ever exist without conflict. Now that you have your own contained and carefully orchestrated gang wars, what do you honestly think could ever bring you back together again?’ The man had paused to offer Laurentis chance to disagree. When none came he continued. ‘The simple answer is that there is nothing. Now that your petty rivalry has become institutionalised on a national scale and your

objectified thugs perform for the baying crowds each week it has become impossible to contain; or for any of you to even contrive to do so.

‘My colleagues and I are merely here to maintain balance. To curb your excesses and to act in the best interests of the Empire and her peoples. That is all.’

‘You lie.’ Laurentis had been entirely unconvinced. ‘I do not know what your motives might be, but they are far from altruistic. You have your own secretive agenda. I do not now know what it is, but I will. And I promise you, I will crush you for this. You and your so called colleagues.’

The man chortled. ‘Grand claims indeed. Who are you to think that I have not heard such threats before? Still, I wish you the best of luck. It will get you nothing more than my name, which I shall offer to you freely.’

Laurentis bit his tongue. He would not let this man lower him to begging for scraps.

‘Very well. If you will not ask, this once I will allow you to maintain your foolish pride. Do not misunderstand my kindness for weakness.’ The voice had sounded sinister. The man had reached the door now and at the threshold broke stride for a moment.

‘You may call me Longshanks.’ And then he was gone.

— CROWD CONTROL —

Flint caught the pass on his chest, bouncing it a couple of inches up into the air before hopping backwards a step and catching the ball with a thunderous strike; he twisted his hips into the shot and powered his right leg straight out in front of him. No one present was under any illusion that he would miss the shot. He never did.

Seconds later the Brewer's Guild goal post was rattling violently from side to side and Flint was sprinting back up the pitch, grinning like a madman with hand raised high in familiar salute. The Mason's crowd stamped their feet and cheered their hero. A group of female supporters who had collectively adopted the sobriquet of 'Flint's Bedrockers' sighed his name as if he were the second coming of Solthecius; several of them throwing lovingly woven strips of delicate material on to the pitch. As the flowery embroidery fluttered through the wind around him, Flint offered the ladies a wide smile, not committing himself to even one token.

Over in the Brewer's Guild stands, his identity hidden by a thick shawl, Ox watched the match with disinterest. In contrast to the rabble pressed around him who continued to hurl abuse at the Mason's Guild players for daring to score yet again, the result didn't concern him in the slightest. As Flint jogged by them, the invective was accompanied by projectiles. A shower of stones, bottles and pieces of rotting vegetables ricocheted around the Mason as he passed.

The Master Butcher raised an eyebrow as even a knife flashed past Flint's face, only narrowly missing him. The people in the stands booed loudly.

The Brewer's Guild supporters were legendary in the sport. By nature of their team's shadowy gang affiliations, many were dangerous and ruthless criminals, the remainder often easily led to violence by the outlaws in their number. The Brewer's Guild turned a blind eye to the behaviour, not even bothering to acknowledge it officially. Intimidation was just another part of the power struggle; whether it was towards a guild directly or just their people. With the Brewer terraces always volatile, the opposition knew not to flaunt their victories over them lest they suffer brutal retaliation from an unforgiving mob.

'Screw you and your faghags, you lady-boy bastard!' One old man's voice seemed to succinctly sum up their feelings. Ox chuckled in genuine mirth at the insult. The crowd that Ox stood amongst now definitely qualified as that. They were a tough, seasoned group, each one proudly wearing scars from previous fights and segregated by their underworld clique or connections. Each looked around warily; the slightest jostle or push could spark off confrontation with their neighbours. Today however they were unified, united in the single purpose of supporting their team. And their team was losing.

Badly.

Barely suppressed aggression pressed in. Ox could

feel the tension in the people and the air around him. It was like being thrown into an arena with a caged animal, waiting for it to be released.

On the pitch in front of them, Hooper charged shoulder down into Mallet, connected with a vicious looking hook to the veteran Mason's head and then floored him with a leg sweep. He stood motionless, a granite hard bastard too miserable to wear a smile. Unlike any other spectators, the majority of the Brewer supporters erupted in jeers at the fallen player rather than celebration of their own. Spit and ale began to rain down onto Mallet from the stands.

'Rough crowd today, eh?'



Ox turned his attention to the small man who had spoken to him, but made no effort to reply.

‘Never been to a game before? I can tell. You don’t look the type. Not into this at all, are you?’ His eyes were nervous, looking around him instead of at Ox directly.

‘Not the type.’ Ox affirmed. ‘And not into what you’re doing, trying to get at my pockets.’ Ox’s hand closed on the stranger’s forearm, crushing it in his grip and causing the thief’s fingers to spasm outwards. The eyes looked straight at him, wide eyed and afraid. Ox chopped the pickpocket in the throat without another word and released the arm as the man slumped to the floor, making a strangled choking sound. No one around them seemed to much care.

Brick wiped the sweat from his brow and spat at his feet. The Mason’s Guild were having a good game, despite the opposition supporters. Brick faced off against Hooper, grinning from ear to ear, two warriors testing their strength against each other. They traded insults, easily lost to Ox in the noise of the crowd around him.

The whole stand had become increasingly rowdy as the game had worn on; the alcohol adding to the sour mood of being first one, then two goals down, with two players out early. By the time Hooper had evened the numbers by wasting Mallet and then Harmony it had made little difference. The thugs surrounding Ox were disgruntled, angry and drunk. Their team was still trailing by two and the Master Butcher doubted

that even goals could assuage the rising frustration. Around him whispered promises of violence coalesced into choral agreement.

Friday sprinted past Hooper and Brick as they struggled against each other. Spigot was waving his arms in the air far over on the far side of the pitch, looking for the pass and nothing else. Fool. Ox saw the tackle before it happened; Tower swinging his hammer through the air and into the Brewer. Spigot took the blow full in the chest, driven up into the air and off his feet, before crashing, face down, to the pitch. He looked unconscious.

The Mason watched him warily, gingerly kicking his opponent as the apothecaries ran towards the pair. Typical Spigot as far as Ox was concerned, the man being a liability at his best. Drunks should have dropped him years back. Back with the ball and Friday remained unmarked. A professional's eye told Ox that Honour or Flint would be somewhere to block the shot. Both couldn't be tied up with Stave, surely.

He was distracted from his search for them by sunlight reflecting off a metal blade a couple of feet away. Turning his head slightly so it wasn't obvious that he no longer watched the game, Ox saw a suspicious looking woman in a muddy brown cloak giving out wicked looking shivs; sharpened lumps of metal or spikes with dirty cloth strips wrapped around them as makeshift handles. The weapons quickly spread throughout the crowd, passed hand to hand.

Very few people looked uncomfortable at handling the weaponry. Barely any.

Now that he knew to look, Ox saw another woman passing out the blades over by the front near the pitch, and then a man two rows down. Someone next to Ox tried to pass one to him, their grubby fingers pressing the cold metal into his hand. He tapped the shoulder of the man in front of him and thrust it towards him, before fading back so he wouldn't need to do it again.

Over at the entrance, three men were worrying at the locks of the gate.

On the pitch, Friday scored after all. It was too late though. Nobody cheered in their stand. The air was different now.

The raw, seething fury had been replaced with quiet, deadly anticipation.

The doors to their stand thrown open, the Brewer crowd surged out and headed towards the opposition. Several of them brandished their weapons in plain view of match officials, who turned tail and fled rather than risk their own necks. One brave soul didn't, trying to hold his ground and stop the bloodshed that was about to happen. The first man to reach him delivered a head butt which floored the official, who was then trampled by the tide of skin headed thugs. He managed to struggle his way up briefly, bobbing into sight, before being pulled back down again and lost forever.

Some hero. Ox wasn't impressed.

They were at the Mason stand now, angrily hammering away at the gate with their fists and heavy kicks. The opposition supporters inside looked terrified, some frozen where they were with mouths open, others trying to pull up bits of wood and metal from anywhere they could to have something to fight back with. As Ox watched, one huge Brewer supporter, all scars and green-blue tattoos on a bare chest, pushed his way through the throng of bodies to the front of the mob. That was when the wooden gates really started to take a pounding; the man was armed with a massive club, thick arms bulging as he struck. Others started to climb the walls, trying to get in that way. The Mason's supporters inside were throwing missiles at them as they did, each one raining down onto the crowd outside. Both sides yelled obscenities at each other at the top of their voices.

Ox couldn't be sure, but he thought that he saw even more gangsters rushing in from outside the courtyard, underneath the large metal crescent that marked the entrance to the stadium. If that was the case, this boded very badly for the Mason's supporters. They had looked outnumbered already and had nowhere near the wild fury of the Brewer side. Certainly the main entranceway was blocked if nothing else. The officials that had tried to flee were surrounded nearby, being bludgeoned into the dirt by a circle of thugs wielding clubs and metal bars.

It was pandemonium, pitchside warfare, a siege.

It reminded Ox of his days as a mercenary. He was surprised to realise that he was enjoying the spectacle, having long since given up on watching the game for any sort of entertainment.

There was a bright flash and several screams. As he looked on, Ox realised that an inventive individual trapped in the Mason stand had taken inspiration from the Brewer player Stoker. He had gathered up a collection of bottles into which several people were stuffing rags, setting the ends on fire and then throwing them over the fence to douse their assailants in flames. Ox was impressed by the entrepreneurial spirit almost as much as he was by the mob, which redoubled their efforts and refused to give in quite so easily.

Not all of the missiles hit their mark. Ox saw one crash into the fence and shower burning liquid over the group of defenders who were trying to push the doors back against the tide. They didn't share the same berserk dedication of the Brewer supporters it seemed; every one of them leaping back trying to pat down the flames. The gate caught light, but it didn't matter. With a bestial roar, the frenzied mob finally broke it down; taking some of the wall with it and collapsing brick and mortar onto several people inside who stood waiting to fight.

The horde flew over the debris and into the fray, a tide of thrashing limbs and steel. Bright red and yellow flames shot upwards where the stands themselves now began to burn. Ox knew that the next colour he would

see would be a fine red mist of blood.

The first indication to the players that something was wrong was the absence of sound from the stands. Ordinarily it would have taken a simple glance towards the supporters to see that the Brewer stand was rapidly emptying, or that the Mason supporters were no longer paying any attention to the game. But with both teams missing several players and the result of the game hanging in the balance, none could afford the time to look around them.

The Brewer's Guild were just beginning their comeback as the Mason's Guild tried to break their drive and turn it around. The game descended into a brutal ballet of feet hacking at the ball, the players brawling with each other in a tight circle. The other indications all came at once and gave them no notice.

Tapper tried to get the ball and his players loose; crossing to Friday who was fighting her way out wide. It was intercepted by Honour who managed to get an outstretched foot to it. Even so, the ball bounced wildly out of her control and into the path of Marbles, knuckling alongside her. Teeth bared in a feral snarl and looking to protect its mistress from Tapper, Marbles leapt over the ball, completely uninterested.

It rolled past the Mason players and back to Stave; the huge Brewer trying to control it but unable to do so whilst simultaneously defending against a tackle from Brick. Heavily listing from his injuries sustained brawling with Hooper and trying to continue fighting;

the Mason didn't pay attention to the ball either, though his left foot did by chance accidentally punt it away back towards his team mate Flint. It rolled through the grass and over the bare mud, slowing its momentum drastically, but still managing to stop within reach.

The Mason Vice-Captain kept his cool at least. He ducked under a wild haymaker punch thrown by Hooper and pushed the Brewer backwards with every ounce of strength he could muster. It didn't make much space, the burly Brewer barely losing any ground, but an out of breath Tower dived between the two to block any further attempt by Hooper to attack directly. Both he and Flint knew that the Brewer would likely floor the exhausted rookie player in moments and Flint desperately looked for an opening before he was forced to try and fight off Hooper again.

He carefully dodged between the fighting, trying to make his own space to escape. Finally, as Brick managed to best Stave for a moment and drive his opponent down to one knee, Flint saw his chance and quickly exploited the gap. Yellowy eyes wild with primitive exuberance, Marbles followed at his heels. That was just fine with Flint as long as the unusual creature didn't get in his way. It did probably mean that Honour was down somewhere, but he didn't have time for that.

Suddenly, Flint was away with the ball and running out of the scrum, down the pitch towards the Brewer

goalpost, unmarked. He didn't know why guild officials from both sides were suddenly running onto the pitch waving their arms, but Flint had no intentions of stopping. He couldn't make out whatever it was that they were shouting at him over the sound of his own heavy breathing and the screaming crowd. Or what that unfamiliar roaring sound was; like a hearth, but much, much louder. He slowed his pace and let the ball roll out in front of him ready for the strike, looking up in the same movement for his target.

And stopped, ball forgotten. Behind him, the players all had too, even Hooper. Friday pointed, mouth wide open.

The Mason stands were burning brightly, great black clouds hanging in the air above them.

Perhaps they had finally found the heart to fight back, or perhaps it had been the fires licking ever higher, but the Mason supporters had managed to, at last, break out before the end. Several groups still fought running battles with the Brewer gangsters, trying to escape into the city. Injured men and women from both sides lay everywhere; as did pieces of wood, metal, rock and the odd weapon. Most were very bloody, the weapons stained dark crimson. The Mason's stand had collapsed in on itself long since, gutted by the fire and scorched black.

Ox, alone in the Brewer stands but for the corpse of the pickpocket from earlier, decided it was time to leave. He judged that the city guard would be along in short measure now that the real violence was over and

the risk to life and limb was minimal. He couldn't be bothered with either talking or fighting his way past them in the event that they found him in the mess outside. He rose from the perch he had occupied, pulled his shawl tighter around him and made for the wide open gate at a brisk pace.

At ground level, the smoky air was thick with the scent of charcoal, tiny embers fluttering around like glowflies. Coughing but still moving, Ox slipped out of the stands and into the connecting courtyard. Visibility was far reduced from the view he had high up in the stands, but it was not so poor that he couldn't tell which way he needed to go. Walking quickly, he ignored the bodies lying around him and the shadows prowling through the gloom.

As he ducked out of the stadium's entrance and moved further away from the raging fire the air began to clear a little, revealing more of his surroundings as the wind blew great billows of smoke aside. Soon, he reached an entrance to one of the underground passageways that he preferred to use instead of the crowded avenues and roads. He debated whether they would be more dangerous with rioters still on the loose. Probably no more so than usual. These places were the hangouts of thieves and vagabonds, and Ox had dealt with them enough that all but the most desperate gave him a wide berth now. He started down the stone steps, silent footsteps taking him out of sight.

At the bottom of the stairs, four thugs stood around

a figure curled up tight into a ball, his hands clasped over his head. As Ox continued downwards towards them he heard their voices echo; loud, boisterous insults accompanied kicks and laughter and a pathetic whimpering. They had their backs to Ox for the moment, but he would need to walk past them in the tight confines of the passage. It didn't occur to him to worry about not being able to proceed.

Just as he approached to within arms' reach from the closest of them, one looked up and saw him, alerting the others. Even in the darkness he could see the telltale glint of sharp metallic weapons, likely knives or improvised shivs. The group stared in silence, hungry wolf-like eyes on him. Ox glared right back, an alpha male amongst their pack, daring any of them to challenge him. His thumb, unseen by any of them, rested on his concealed cleaver, rubbing back and forth over the pommel.

The moment was broken by the young man at their feet. Realising that the assault had halted, he looked up, crying eyes afraid, settling on Ox. He reached out a trembling hand.

'Please! Please, don't leave me to them! I just wanted to watch the game with my father, I didn't want to fight with anyone!' He was very young, Ox realised. Maybe fourteen or fifteen. No age to be able to fight off four fully grown gangsters.

He couldn't be sure but the boy's voice seemed familiar, the features were recognisable in the half

light too. Startled, Ox realised that he was thinking of his brother, missing all these years.

'Listen, you have to help me!' Tears streaming down his face, the boy still babbled, but Ox barely heard him. Now that he stooped to look closer, ignoring the strange glances from the pack around him, Ox saw a great deal of resemblance. The same messy crop of sandy blonde untidy hair, a gangly build with broad shoulders that promised he would mature into a strong, thickset man. The bright blue eyes, always staring outwards. All just like Jacques. It was uncanny.

'Look here lads; I think this one wants the boy for himself!' One of the gangers smiled a predatory grin towards Ox. The rest joined in on the laughter like chattering jackals, the sound echoing through the tunnel and making it seem as if there were an army of them.

'Better look elsewhere for your sport if you know what's good for you. This one is ours.' The second speaker was no less threatening. Ox tore his eyes from the boy to the thugs, stepping his back to the stairwell.

The laughter stopped. A nervous silence descended once again. Ox's thumb continued to graze along the handle of the cleaver inside his cloak. One of the men openly began to pull his knife free, until Ox caught his eye.

Hesitation. Uncertainty.

Then a click as the knife was pushed back into its scabbard. The boy started snivelling again. Ox looked at him, a long, hard stare. 'You're not him, boy. He's dead. And I don't care about those not strong enough

to stand on their own two feet.' The gangsters were completely confused by the unexpected statement and behaviour, the boy even more lost. 'You scum can have him. Now get out of my way.' Ox shouldered roughly past the group, long strides leaving the scene behind him.

He heard the boy crying for him, pleading, the impact of several blows, laughter. And then he heard a familiar swishing sound, like the air was being cleaved open, and a wet gurgling noise. Abruptly, all other sound died.

Ox didn't look back. Jacques was long gone, and so was the Master Butcher's honour.



— COMMENCEMENT —

The afternoon heat was sweltering, anything at distance seeming hidden behind a hazy optic. Every player felt it; their clothes sticky, tiny beads of sweat leaving trails across their skin as they stared each other down across the halfway line, waiting for the horn to sound that would begin the match. The restless crowd murmured amongst itself, a frustrated, petulant beast tormented in the harsh unrelenting sun. A strange noiseless calm permeated the game, each side daring the other to be the first to break the silence.

Finally, the sound came.

At once, from both sides of the pitch, the stands roared their deafening approval, as if in some unspoken agreement each side tried to best the other. The players broke from their reverie as one; some wearing faces that betrayed excitement, whooping with joy; others set serious; even one or two finding the occasion to look nervous, frightened.

In any game of Guild Ball, the pride of both guilds would be at stake, pressure from within creating a constant tension in each player to perform their role. On the opening day of the playoffs and with each game of the Championship this urgency increased tenfold, the stakes much higher. Even the spectators felt it, a tacit understanding that the team would perform harder.

Overhead, the ball soared into the sky, all eyes fixated on its arching path as it sped towards the Alchemist's

Guild players. One or two ran underneath, taking up position on point as Midas nodded to Calculus to intercept it. Across from them, the Fisherman side waited, ready.

Emitting a bestial roar to rival that of the huge crowd, Katalyst slammed into Kraken in the middle of the pitch. Dirt flew up underfoot as Kraken absorbed the brunt of the charge on his broad shoulders, his boots scrabbling for purchase in the mud. The two men wrestled with each other for long moments, each second a drawn out struggle of a forearm turned into a lock, broken and then reversed into something else. Chest heaving with exertion, Kraken's stoic silence was a stark parallel to the maniacal screaming from Katalyst, the filters on the Alchemist's mask streaming dirty foam and drool over both of them.

Kraken reared back a meaty left arm and then swung it forward in a heavy jab. Katalyst absorbed it by twisting his shoulder blade into the blow at the last moment, a raw thudding sound echoing out. Unconcerned for his own safety, the Alchemist let loose a muted bellow from behind his mask and head butted Kraken squarely on the bridge of his nose. With a line of thick red crimson running all over his shirt this forced the Fisherman back two steps, before he barrelled forward to intercept Katalyst once again. The crowd cheered on their heroes, locked in mortal embrace.

Calculus sighed inwardly at the smashed form of Flask at her feet. Brutes! How could they do such a thing to

a harmless creature like the automaton? It served no greater purpose than bringing her fresh flasks. At least the apothecaries had ignored it. The Alchemist's Guild's own engineers would have to look at this.

At present, though, she gauged that she had wasted far too much time here already and that was not part of the greater concoction. Already, she was shamed that the Fisherman's Guild had blunted their offence, gained possession and launched a successful counter attack to take the lead. This would not do in the slightest. It was time to introduce the unstable elements at her disposal into the equation and demonstrate the superiority of the Alchemists over these stunted imbeciles and their backwater followers.

Calculus stood in a small inclined area of the pitch, next to a large tree and a shallow ditch. It offered some mild shelter from the hard glare of the sun in its shadows. There was no breeze at all and the world was still. She rose from her knees, brushing the dead leaves and twigs from her leggings. She never saw Shark behind her until it was too late.

He was as gentle as he could be, given the circumstances, using the flat of his blade to send her spinning down into the ditch. She did not rise and he saluted with a casual hand to the apothecaries who ran on to administer first aid.

'I think I saw the Lab Rat mascot there too.'

Angel saved herself by diving to one side as whatever the vial held exploded outwards. It sent fragments of

glass shredding through the air all around and hissing acid splashed towards her. Even so, the armoured griever that covered her left arm was covered by the foul substance, corroding its way through the polished metal. She could already feel it burning the skin of her arm, where it had gone straight through the protection in places. Gritting her teeth, she frantically tried to unstrap it one handed, whilst warily backing away from the Alchemist that had thrown the bottle.

She came at Angel, long strides much faster than the rookie Fisherman's scabbled escape to safety. Deftly vaulting over the lethal pool of acid, Vitriol descended like one of the Soltheician Angels of Conflagration, hair splayed out behind her like wildfire. Angel peddled back as quickly as her feet would take her, still vainly trying to tear the melted sleeve from her arm. She managed to avoid the initial blow, as Vitriol landed in the spot where she had been standing a moment before, the vicious downward strike of the staff swiping air only. The Alchemist sprang up again, aiming another wild swing at Angel, who finally managed to shed the remains of her armour but had no time to block the inevitable follow up.

With a loud metallic clink almost drowned out by the eruption from the crowd, the staff head impacted into the edge of a spear blade, thrust from the side. The kinetic energy was blocked and rebounded and Vitriol's momentum drove her into her own weapon, causing the woman to crumple in an inelegant heap before Angel.

Gasping and groaning for air, Vitriol tried to regain her feet as Angel looked around at her unexpected saviour.

Shark offered her only a flat stare as he slashed his spear around through the air back to his side: 'I'll take care of her, get going!'

Angel nodded and sprinted off up the pitch back into formation, the acid burns on her arm forgotten for the moment. By the time that she had caught up, she could see Greyscales had possession, Siren was on his left, drifting in and out of the traditional centre forward position. The cheers from the Fisherman's Guild stands grew louder with every step closer to the Alchemist goal post. As she stepped in, Greyscales offered her a nod.

'Remember the play.' The grizzled old veteran stuck up middle and forefinger to his cheekbone, a cocked eyebrow the question to go with his statement. Angel had time to nod subtly, hoping that she wouldn't let him down.

Only two remained before them now: Midas, and Mercury. Midas looked as unassumingly pedestrian to her eye as he ever did, except for that bright shining hand holding his accursed blue gem. Angel had underestimated him once before and spent a week at the pleasure of the Physician's Guild. She did not intend to make that mistake again. Mercury could have been one of the towering effigies that the farmers of her village set ablaze each spring, meant to represent the ancient gods that would bring favourable harvests. The flames

normally swirling around his fists flared out, lending the appearance of a mighty creature of legend, wreathed in fire. He too would be a formidable opponent.

Angel didn't waste time wondering where the rest of the Alchemists were. Too late for that. Two early goals and the lead had set the pace, but that had been broken by the Alchemists scoring one of their own and then equalising. Time for the Fisherman's Guild to sprint to the finish. Anything else was another world away right now.

Greyscales dummied a safe pass to Angel as Mercury approached, fists blazing brightly. He somehow made the shimmering afternoon heat even more unbearable despite still being yards away from her. Gods knew how Greyscales could endure it so close. As the Alchemist reached him, Greyscales seemed to duck under the swing of an arm, lost for a moment in the haze, before reappearing several feet away and stroking the ball out wide to Siren. Angel meanwhile had run towards the centre and the waiting form of Midas.

The Alchemist Captain smiled as she approached, the self satisfied grin of one lost in his own importance. It seemed odd to Angel that he didn't follow the ball as she had expected, instead preferring to face her down. Cautiously, her steps slowed, an eye kept on Siren moving into position to fire off a shot at the goal. If she could keep him engaged then he couldn't defend. Midas smiled on, eyes laden with murderous intent. Siren, ball rolling out in front of her, passed out of

sight behind Midas for a moment. The crowd stamped their feet rhythmically, although Angel couldn't tell which side. She guessed it was her own.

Somewhere behind her over the sound of the crowd, she heard another sort of roar; a rolling, thunderous whoosh, followed by terrified screams torn from a strangled throat. Angel dared a glance behind her just in time to see Greyscales drop to the ground and roll away from Mercury, desperately trying to extinguish the fire that engulfed him. Her heart stung as she realised that she couldn't do anything to save him and that he wouldn't want her to anyhow. If he was lucky, then he would be able to carry on during the game. If not, maybe the apothecaries could get to him in time to prevent too much scarring.

Heavy feet drummed into the floorboards of the stand, picking up pace. Siren took the shot at the Alchemist goal.

There was a flurry of movement around her, of a dark cloak whipping in spirals like a vortex. The man that it belonged to? Mist? It was one of the Union players, the one seldom seen. Angel thought she had the name right. As with Greyscales, there was nothing Angel could do. She had Midas to contend with. Somewhere, she registered the shot missed, sailing past the goal post and into open field.

She and Midas faced each other down. Without taking his eyes from hers, the Alchemist palmed the Crucible and smooth skin began morphing into sharp,

jagged metallic shards. Angel didn't wait, dashing to her flank to chase the ball, hoping to use her greater speed to gain the advantage. Midas followed. She knew that any attempt to fight him off would have been pitifully one-sided.

The ball had come to a rest, bouncing near to the boundary, almost over the line. Unprompted, an overzealous Alchemist Guild official booted it back up the pitch before Angel could get to it. The Fisherman supporters in the stands let loose a torrent of abuse at him, matching the cheering of their rivals opposite. Angel watched the ball pass over her head, disheartened.

It was intercepted by Shark four paces forward from the halfway line, the roar of the crowd louder than ever. The Fisherman skipped around the recently returned Calculus and her battered pet metal man, the ball skilfully rolled between her legs.

'Siren, head in the game!'

His shout seemed to reach the hooded woman even above the ambient noise of the crowd, their complaints about the weather long since forgotten. She snarled at Mist, the wrath of a thousand years enmity passing between the two, before dropping alongside her Captain as Mist faded backwards. Shark still in possession, they pounded down the pitch together, towards the goal.

Angel was happy enough just to try to survive against Midas. Desperately, she ducked, parried and sidestepped as his assault forced a retreat away from

the Alchemist lines. The burns on her arm throbbed painfully as she moved, even as air passed over them. She dared not try to deflect any blow with the limb. She was exhausted and couldn't last much longer; exertion, the heat, the natural dynamic of the game had all taken their toll. Still, some force of will inside forced her to fight on.

Shark judged that he could reliably hit the goal in another five strides. He might have tried earlier, but at distance he would have been at the mercy of the Gods and Shark did not gamble. His pace slowed slightly as he broke his sprint to kick the ball a little further out and set his legs to make the shot, eyes on the target. His right boot struck the muddy turf, left swung back for the next...

He barely had a chance to pull up and hurriedly parry the left handed blow from Katalyst, the warning from the shadow cast by the huge Alchemist hidden by the overhead sun until he was right on top of the Fisherman. Off balance, Shark missed blocking the second strike, a powerful overhand haymaker. The blow dropped Shark onto his arse like a haul spilled on to the decking. Head spinning, his vision seen from the bottom of a bottle, he tried to push himself back to his feet and fight off the follow up tackle.

His head cleared a little and in the fleeting moments when his eyes focused properly he could tell that Katalyst was in a bad way, probably why the strike hadn't knocked him clean out. Several of the thick

tubes that ran around the Alchemist, usually plugged into barbaric looking sockets on his arms, had been torn out and leaked yellowy syrup that stank like sour lemon. Those same sockets, now open to the air were swollen red and bleeding. Still, the giant screamed incomprehensibly behind his mask, hammering mighty fists all around him, even as his feet stumbled uncertainly. Shark had time to wonder at the peculiar sort of pantomime they must look before Katalyst's knuckles connected with his temple and knocked him clean out; the Alchemist losing his balance and tripping over Shark even as the Fisherman fell.

The unreal world around them shimmered, the colours all too bright, edges indistinct, blurry. Mist was there, always gloating, smirking, too far away to reach by a hair's breadth any time she tried to get him. Again and again she tried to trick him with sudden turns, lunges or grabs at his cloak. Each time, the same frustrating failure.

The misdirection was absolute. Siren could not tell where she was on the pitch any more than she could have known what happened to the sound. It was deathly silent. The crowd, now muted, seemed to her to be moving at unusual, fractured angles, pointing their fingers as though to do so was to conduct some onerous duty, their arms moving in what should have been agonising directions. They might have screamed or sighed, mouths opening and shutting in either slow motion or at increased speed, totally at odds with reality.

Past a grinning face many times the size it should have been, Siren saw what they might have pointed at; the ball sitting at rest in a patch of green grass turning brown amongst great oceans of mud, bright orange in this odd world. She punched through the apparition in front of her, making long strides towards the ball. Mist seemed to sense the change as it happened and she was suddenly assailed with doubts, wild accusations of inadequacy and insults; all delivered in a mocking, singsong voice from leering masks surrounding her.

‘Get out of my head!’ Her scream sounded shrill, not her voice at all. The reply was thunderous, a chorus of the childlike voices all at once, repeating her eventual demise, that she belonged lost, forgotten to all.

‘No!’ The going was harder now, like wading through water, each foot weighing progressively more as she took every step. Not far left at all. Her back was slick with sweat, soaking through her robes. Just one more. She told herself that every time. The voices continued, unending, louder as if she was surrounded by spirits.

Finally, she was upon it, reaching out a hand before her for some reason, grasping at air, legs betraying her. The voices stopped for a moment and the air before her seemed to coalesce into the image of a small child; an infant, painfully familiar.

‘Why do you try so? Why, for these people, that abandoned you?’ The creature spoke in Siren’s own voice.

‘Begone. You cannot exist.’ Though Siren tried to shout, her voice was robbed of all volume.

'Yet I do, and you have not answered my question.'

'I do not answer to devils of air!'

The thing that wore her face considered her, its expression a cruel parody of her own smile.

'Devil am I now? You never find occasion to smile any more, do you? You haven't, since... but then, you are too afraid to talk of that, are you not? I smile. Perhaps it is you who are the devil, a devil of the seas and I am the true individual.'

Siren paused, mind churning through the impossible, somehow plausible. The thing that was now Siren carried on talking to her.

'You understand me now I see. So concerned with forging your path forward that you never stopped to look inwards. Never once wondered what crawled out of that broken husk that day.'

Siren stared at her younger self with blank eyes; except that she was no longer Siren after all. She was something unknown.

'You must be exhausted, you have travelled so far, with a wound in your heart so large an ocean could flow into it.' Siren's voice continued, soothing, calming, erasing all frustration. The figure that had thought it was Siren was forced to admit that it was tired, desperately so. Like a puppet released from its strings, it fell to its knees, in front of the real Siren. A hand like a soft wind gently ran through the hair on the figure's head, pushing the hood back, exposing the neck. It offered reassuring noises and familiarity.

‘Never!’ A banshee’s shriek tore through her throat, ripped raw from her very core. Siren surged upwards, smashing through the visage of the imposter and tore her way out of the hallucination. She raised her head from the dirt. The colours reverted to normalcy, the sound returned back to the universe. She tasted dirt and grass in her mouth. Spitting, Siren rolled over onto her back, and stood warily.

Mist was gone, nowhere to be seen. Over to her right, Shark and Katalyst lay in a tangled heap of limbs. Midas looked to have the upper hand against Angel; the young girl nearly cowering away from him. His face betrayed his frustration that the rookie had held his play so long, the usual composure completely gone, replaced by a something else.

The ball sat at Siren’s feet.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Snapped them open, and made the shot.

SET PIECE

Shank had warned Boiler that the changing rooms for the pitches in Erskirad were all shitholes and he remarked now as he looked around him that the one in Trabesilev was no different. Never yet having travelled very far afield to see the alternatives and admittedly lacking the experience of the older player, Boiler still had to agree. This place was a shithole.

The worst problem was the lack of separating rooms. It was literally one big, empty space, with just a hole in one corner to function as a toilet and no door to keep out the cold wind. The roof was thatched, but in places had rotted through completely, further exposing them all to the elements. Moss and lichen grew up the grimy brownstone walls, adding to the sense that someone had started building the room and then given up and abandoned it. It smelt of mould. Princess decided to add her own flavour to the earthy aroma, cocking a leg and pissing against the bench closest to Boiler.

The worst part for Boiler had been actually using the room for what it was intended for. Shamefaced and convinced that all eyes were upon him, he had slunk into a corner, turned his back on the others and tried to conceal himself as much as possible as he quickly stripped off his normal robes and pulled on his match clothes. Once his breeches were on he felt much better, and a lot less conspicuous. Turning to face the room again he saw Shank grinning at him.

‘Ain’t got nothing that the rest o’ us haven’t seen there, boy,’ Shank leaned in conspiratorially, his voice lowering as he gestured with his thumb behind him. ‘But just you wait for the real show to begin in a second. A young ‘un like you might learn something if you keep your eyes peeled and your mouth shut.’

He was, of course, referring to Brisket, who like Boiler had no privacy for stripping off. Unlike the young apprentice, she simply looked around for a suitable bench to put her clothes on and then brazenly begun to unlace her bodice. With each rustle of string, the material slacked off causing more of Brisket’s skin to become exposed. Boiler was caught with his mouth open, halfway between wanting desperately to look in any direction but hers and a stirring below telling him to do the exact opposite. Next to him, Shank leered openly at the woman, earning him a cuff around the back of the head from Meathook.



‘Draw a picture, it’ll last for longer.’

‘What’s your problem? Upset I’m not paying you enough attention as well?’

‘You wish, gutter rat.’

‘If you had more to look at, I might be more interested.’ This earned him a slap across the face from Meathook.

Boiler stood watching the exchange, still with his open mouth catching flies and a fiery red complexion. To his eyes, Meathook had plenty to look at; for all that she would be extremely unlikely to appreciate the compliment.

‘Leave him alone ‘Hook. Most likely more action from a woman than he’s had in months.’ Brisket joined in the conversation, her thick Skaldic accent heavy with a dismissive tone.

Boiler turned to look at her and immediately wished he hadn’t. His face now an even darker beetroot, burning red at the sight of the topless woman before him; he fled, her laughter ringing in his ears.

If Boiler had thought that inside the changing room was cold, outside was proof that it could be even worse. Now wearing his match clothes instead of the thick robes he had been attired in when he arrived earlier, the piercing frost took the breath out of him at once. He would not have to worry about a red face for long out here. Somehow, even in the dugout, the wind found its way to sweep down and set a chill into his bones. Out across the empty pitch it looked desolate, grey.

Ox and Boar were already out here, talking to another figure that Boiler did not recognise. The man

was tall, almost eye to eye with Boar, but nowhere near as broad shouldered, being instead seemingly slender under a long coat that hid most of his features. He wore the same curious furry cap with no peak that the more affluent Erskirii people seemed to; although his bore no decoration on it, unlike the majority of others that Boiler had seen. With the high collar pulled up against the cold and the hat covering most of his head, Boiler could barely see his face, and what he could see was covered by a thick white beard. Protruding somewhere from that thatch of hair was an ornate brass pipe that the man was smoking; Boiler's eyes catching its delicate styling in the light.

The three looked over at him briefly and then continued speaking as if he wasn't there.

'Finally, my associate in Valentia warns me that the Fisherman's Guild currently pursue an agenda that might have some unhealthy repercussions in this match.'

Ox nodded. 'No surprise there. Last time around we wasted Corsair hard.'

'Indeed. Having heard this news, I nonetheless thought it best to bring it to your attention. I am sure that you are able to make arrangements for your own protection.'

'Don't worry about us, Longshanks. You just watch after your own worthless hide like usual and we'll watch out for ours. I'll do what you have asked like always; you can forget trying to get on my good side with your empty warnings.'

Whoever this was, Ox afforded him little extra

respect; for all that he appeared to be a superior of some sort. The man chuckled in response, mirth entirely the wrong response to Ox's threat.

'Asak'sya, Master Butcher.'

'Asak'sya.' Ox spoke the strange Erskirii word surprisingly fluently.

Pulling his coat tighter to him, the man left, ducking his head under a beam across the dugout's entrance. The sickly sweet smell of his tobacco remained.

Meathook ducked the blow and swept her right hand upwards, delivering a savage uppercut to Jac. Her vicious hooked blade caught his temple and a spray of rich red blood flew up into the air, moving in the opposite direction to his heavy steps. Staggering and unable to right himself, the Fisherman's knees buckled and he hit the ground hard, the frozen soil having seemingly little give to it. Meathook twirled her blades for the crowd who roared their approval. The whole movement had seemed to Boiler like an abstract dance with explosions of coloured ribbons, like those he saw in the Valentian marketplaces.

Not bothering to see whether the prone Fisherman would rise, Boiler and Meathook ran in the direction of the opposition goal, the ball running out before them. Princess loped alongside out of nowhere, her jowls spilling drool all over the snow underfoot.

Seeing Kraken closing in on them, Boiler quickly passed out to Meathook and sprinted out wide, the other Butcher mirroring his movement. Princess kept

to his heels. Predictably, the larger man opted to follow the ball. A moment away from contact, Meathook neatly controlled the ball behind her, changed direction and punted the ball out sideways back to the Boiler. She was rewarded with a big meaty fist in her side, just into her lower ribs; she crumpled to the floor. Boiler didn't hang around to see what happened next, pushing the ball out before him, taking aim and kicking it as hard as he could. He hit the goal squarely. He heard the crowd scream, one or two even cheering his name. That had to be a first.

As an official from the Fisherman's Guild scampered out to kick a new ball into play and retrieve the old one, Boiler jogged back to where Kraken had left Meathook laying on the ground. Boiler offered her a gloved hand to help herself up.

'Was it worth the broken rib?' She jested, as she pulled at his proffered limb and rose to unsteady feet.

'Yes, its 2-1, we have the lead!' Boiler smiled crookedly back.

Meathook nodded, turned to make her way back downfield, and winced at a sharp shooting pain. She swore two unfamiliar words of her native tongue.

'Thought the bastard pulled his punches against women. Holy Pantheon, I wouldn't want to see how hard he hits other men.'

Snakeskin faced off against Brisket. The tough Butcher couldn't have known it was her though. She had carefully disguised herself as one of the rookie

Fishermen, a semblance so carefully orchestrated that the trick had even fooled that old trout Greyscales. Snakeskin had been forced to listen to the old goat wheeze on for hours of pointless trivia and meaningless advice before the game, just nodding and forcing herself to smile politely. Loved the sound of his own voice so much that he let his eyes lie to him, which was fine as far as Snakeskin had been concerned.

The Butcher girl eyed Snakeskin warily, the ball at Brisket's feet. The crowd simmered, watching the confrontation. With the Butcher side on two goals, another would secure their advancement to the semi finals of the Championship and send the Fisherman's Guild crashing out. Understandably, the next goal was probably worth its weight in gold to the player that scored it. Brisket would do her utmost to keep possession.

That would be her downfall. The Union player didn't care about the result of this game, or who scored the next goal. Even if she did, the gold would be earned by the face of the rook that she had bled out and thrown into a ditch yesterday. No, Snakeskin was here with an entirely different agenda.

Brisket chanced a quick look left and right, clearly hoping for one of her team-mates to be lurking nearby and be able to help, but Snakeskin knew that they were otherwise engaged fighting off the Fisherman side. Shank had been taken out early by Kraken and thanks to Shark, Boar was sleeping off a concussion in the dugout; one of the extremely rare instances that

someone had been able to knock the big bastard out of a game. That left the Butcher side with a numerical disadvantage, which Ox naturally countered by pushing his team hard to waste the opposition and pick up bodies again. A more astute captain might have tried for the remaining goal to finish early, but it seemed that Brisket was the only Butcher with a sensible head on her shoulders.

A pretty head on pretty shoulders at that. A shame that she should be the one. Always the pretty girls.

But she was. So Snakeskin couldn't care less for either of those things, instead focusing on her delicate and fragile neck that connected the two.

Enough time wasting. Let's do this.

Snakeskin feinted directly forward towards the Butcher, hoping her disguise as a rook would fool Brisket into a predictable dodge in turn. She surprised Snakeskin by instead sidestepping and pushing the ball out seemingly unmarked. Not what she had expected at all, but then she kept the advantage; as long as Brisket thought that her opponent was wet behind the ears, she'd assume that Snakeskin would chase the ball as most rooks and defenders did. The mercenary silently saluted Brisket's aggressive posture, assuming that she planned to attack first and escape with the ball second.

The ball was within reach but instead of lunging forward, Snakeskin turned suddenly and tackled Brisket, her feet aimed at her opponent's shins. She

caught Brisket as she was about to step behind her and try for a choke, barrelling into her, the pair collapsing in a heap. Brisket broke the Union player's fall, all of Snakeskin's weight landing on top of her. She rolled out to recover quickly, regaining her feet, not winded as intended at all. The sound of the crowd grew louder, all eyes on the pair.

Fast, aren't you?

Brisket eyed Snakeskin more carefully now. She had lost some of her advantage in the exchange. A line of red across Brisket's bared stomach said otherwise though. Her left hand was pressed to the wound, thin lines of blood trailing downwards between her fingers.

Not fast enough.

Snakeskin doubted that the Butcher had seen the concealed knife on the approach, even less so as it flashed out between them as they fell. Snakeskin still had plenty of surprises for her opponent. The ball temporarily forgotten, they played out the duellist's jig once again for the onlookers. It never failed to amuse Snakeskin how the players all forgot the game once they realised that their life was imperilled, every one of them.

Once again she tried a feint, but this time Brisket was ready, circling back. She followed her, not letting up on the pressure and forcing Brisket further away from the ball. Snakeskin had no doubt that even this Butcher might have long since tried to run if it were not for that anchor, something Snakeskin had carefully

waited for during the match.

Brisket looked nervous now, her hand stained with her own blood, running along her forearm to the elbow. By forcing her to keep moving, Snakeskin was causing the wound to keep bleeding heavily and open further. The pain must have been considerable. Brisket had been lucky that the confined space between them had meant she couldn't have been gutted properly, although in a sense, it had only delayed the inevitable.

The opening came when Brisket lost her footing on the snow. It was only momentary, she recovered well, but the moment was all Snakeskin needed to be on top of her opponent, foot tripping Brisket again and pressing down her forearm to the Butcher's pale throat. Brisket tried to fight back, her bloody hand reaching for Snakeskin's face, inches from pushing in at her eye sockets, whilst a knee sought to strike between the legs. Her right hand had caught Snakeskin's, keeping the Union assassin from using it to stab her with the knife again.

Clever girl. But I am left handed.

The stiletto flashed in the sunlight as Snakeskin stabbed into her adversary, the lower back, just below the ribcage, aimed upwards. She twisted it as she pulled it back out, feeling the grip lessen on her wrist. The second strike hit the same spot, the blade this time a muted red from the gore. Brisket gasped as it slid into her, breaking the soft skin a second time and her struggles grew weak. Snakeskin chanced relaxing

her right arm to allow greater movement and the third thrust cut deeply into Brisket's stomach. She started upright at that one, spraying a fine mist of red over the surrounding dirt and shredded blades of grass from their struggle.

The crowd had worked out that something was amiss by now, several jeering or shouting to get the attention of the other Butchers. This would have to be finished quickly. The last two cuts were hurried, one driven into the right flank to match the first two, pulled out to tear her insides as much as possible, the second across the side of her throat, Brisket's convulsions and the glistening layer of wet blood making it too hard to aim precisely.

Snakeskin could not afford to wait any longer. To the crowd, they must have looked like a bloody parody of the painted girls from the Seamstresses Guild. Snakeskin chuckled as she dashed in the direction of the stands, shedding her disguise as she went. Reaching them, she leapt over the barrier in one bound and quickly became entirely inconspicuous amongst the disgruntled supporters.

'This looks bad. Real bad.' Boiler couldn't be sure whether he was speaking to himself or for the benefit of anyone else. Either way, it did look bad. He didn't know the human body had so much blood in it, as it lay in crimson puddles before him, staining the snow pinky red.

Brisket wasn't moving. Even the nearby crowd,

usually bloodthirsty, were quiet. A sense of dread hung heavy in the air. Meathook was trying to roll Brisket over onto her side, her own injury sapping her strength. Boiler snapped out of his reverie and hastened to help her.

‘Got to stop her choking on her own tongue or drowning on the blood in her mouth.’ Meathook grunted.

Whilst he was sure that might be true, Boiler wasn’t sure that there was much point. No one could lose this much blood and survive, surely. Brisket’s dead weight seemed to be impossibly heavy for some reason, but they both pushed the slight woman over. Brisket made no reaction. Boiler put his head down to her face, trying to ignore the vacant stare of her eyes, to check to see whether she was breathing still.

There it was. Impossibly shallow, but it was there. Barely.

He looked up to ask Meathook what to do next, only to realise that she too had passed out. Princess nuzzled her maw at Brisket, making an unusual whimpering sound Boiler had never heard from the savage animal before. Boiler felt totally helpless. In an absurdly dark comic moment, he giggled as he lamented that butchers knew all about cutting people up, but nothing about how to put them back together again. That was part of a rhyme, wasn’t it?

Ox arrived on the scene, his face set in a dangerous scowl.

‘Away boy. The Sawbones are coming, there is nothing for you to do now.’ Boiler could indeed see that the Physician’s Guild Apothecaries were sprinting

towards them, as fast as their bulky instruments and bags would allow. He suddenly was swept up, off of his feet, as the Master Butcher grabbed his shirt and dragged him up face to face.

‘Did you see who did this?!’ The eyes that stared back at Boiler were that of a madman. They promised nothing but violent retribution, brutal revenge. There was no mistaking that. The hard lines set into Ox’s face had frozen at the corners of his narrowed eyes as he asked the question again, shouted this time, drops of spit landing on Boilers collar.

‘Did you see which bastard did this?!’

Boiler shook his head in a frantic no.

‘I swear that I will find them. I will find them and then I will end them.’ The eyes stared still, but Ox wasn’t talking to Boiler now, any more than he was to the panting Apothecary trying to tend to Brisket. Already, the cold white smock of the Physician’s Guild and the metallic tools were stained sticky red with her blood. Princess was snarling at him, obviously confused as to what the man was doing.

Ox dropped Boiler and directed a heavy boot towards Princess, who yelped and ran off.

‘See to it that she lives. Both of them do.’ Ox appeared to notice Meathook for the first time. ‘If they don’t, then I will find you too.’ His tone, lower than usual seemed to carry menace that could destroy buildings. The Apothecaries seemed to agree, their hands moving faster as they tried to tend to Brisket’s injuries.

Boiler remembered suddenly with a start that they were in the midst of a game. Ox read his mind.

'We've lost this one boy. It doesn't matter now.' He didn't sound too sad about it.

'But boss, this was the Championship, the playoffs, for the Final.' 'Some things are more important than gold. Your own blood is worth more than victories.' A pause, as the Butcher looked at the opposition, celebrating their victory in the distance. 'And this is not just about the game, not anymore.'

LET DARKNESS DESCEND

Lord Chamberlain Vincent de Laurentis stood suddenly from behind his desk, kicking his expensively upholstered chair backwards and causing it to topple over. Barely suppressing his anger, he leaned forward and pressed his palms down onto the wooden desktop. He glared at Longshanks who sat across from him; nonchalantly puffing grey-white clouds into the air from the end of his pipe. If the Union agent noticed the threatening look he did not acknowledge it, as had become the custom between the two of them. Their meetings had remained the same uneven power struggle over the last few months, with no signs that might ever change.

The once pleasant room was starting to reek of the pipe's thick smoke, so often had he been visited by Longshanks now. It was disgusting, staining the material of the expensive drapes and tapestries that the Lord Chamberlain had imported from Piervo; making the cream pattern on the lavish carpeting yellow and dry to the point of cracking as it was stepped upon. In every respect, Longshanks had begun to affect a sort of decay in the office, much as Laurentis would have sworn the man had to Guild Ball itself.

Thanks to the meddling efforts of the Union, their agents had managed to crop up in not only the

Fisherman's Guild side, but in nearly every team this season, all of them pursuing their own agenda. There seemed now to be too many to count; the exiled Erskirii, the thug in the top hat, the monster that made Laurentis shudder just remembering him. The list went on. Worst had been the Chameleon. That one had made Laurentis feel profoundly uncomfortable just being in the same room as her, even if it were his own office. After much consideration during long, sleepless nights, Laurentis had decided that it had been the aura of promised violence that had been so unsettling about the woman more than anything.

Longshanks always seemed to have the upper hand, a cause of constant frustration that might have broken the Lord Chamberlain. Finally however a mistake had been made that Laurentis could exploit. During the last Fisherman's Guild game, Longshanks had for reasons unbeknownst to all, ordered one of his lackeys to eliminate a member of the Butcher's Guild. Word had it that as a result the Master Butcher was out for blood.

Laurentis intended to give the brute just that.

The Lord Chamberlain had known that Longshanks would be returning to the Fisherman's Guild to meet with him before long and so he had been patient, biding his time, preparing. And now, here the loathsome man was. The slime that would destroy Guild Ball if left unchecked.

Alone, and unguarded.

Today was going to be different, a day that Laurentis had awaited for some time.

'Where is he?' As if to punctuate the question, Avarisse slammed the woman's shoulders into the alley wall with each word. Each time, the back of her head struck the brickwork with a hard jolt.

'What's the matter, pig? Ran out of little boys to play with?' Through dull eyes and near concussion she snarled her defiance at him, struggling in his grip even as the two of them knew the effort to be futile.

Avarisse grinned, an uncomfortable smile full of rotting brown teeth and shining gold crowns. It was not a pleasant smile. His left hand suddenly grabbed her by the throat and lifted her clear off her feet. Immediately her hands scrabbled against him, face beginning to turn pink. His other hand bunched up into a tight fist and reared back.

'Now bitch, I'll ask once more. But that will be the last time. After that, they find you in either the sewers or the river. I haven't decided which yet.' His voice betrayed no emotion, merely stating a matter of fact.

Eyes wide, face now red and fast turning purple, the woman tried to speak, only to find that the grip on her throat was too tight.

'Why Mssr Avarisse, I do believe that you have managed to coerce some degree of compliance out of her.' Greede's high pitched voice might have made an impartial observer laugh, if not for the deadly threat to the woman's life. 'Do be so good as to let her down for a moment.'

Avarisse relaxed his fingers and let the woman fall through them to the ground, landing badly on the grubby pavement. Greede approached her and carefully lifted his coat tail as best he could to avoid it lying too heavily in the dirt.

'Now, Neesa,' Greede pursed his lips. 'I imagine that you must prefer your actual name to the distasteful ones levied upon you by my colleague?' The woman nodded weakly. 'And so you should, of course. You shall have to try and forgive Mssr Avarisse's lack of delicate vocabulary and forthright manner, I am afraid. Over the years one becomes quite used to it and forgets how unaccustomed a stranger might be to such behaviour.' He glanced at Avarisse, but if the larger man took any offence, he chose not to show it. More likely he was used to Greede's extravagances by now and thought little of them.

'But, I digress. Neesa, perhaps you would be so good as to share us with information pertaining to the whereabouts of our dear associate, Mssr Longshanks?'

The woman coughed, and started making a spluttering sound. Greede wondered whether the woman was choking at first, until he realised it was all that remained of her strangled voice.

'How should I know? Never even heard the name. Who is he, another piss poor excuse for a man like you two are? Go feck yourself, you weird little posh bastard and take your bully boy thug with you.'

Greede removed his hat and made a pantomime of

shaking his head sadly, a sincere look on his face.

‘That is a rather regrettable answer to my enquiry. In any case, thank you at least for your involvement in our enquiries this evening, Madame Neesa. It is always a pleasure to encounter new people.’ He turned to Avarisse. ‘Alas, we do not have time to waste here and must resume our perambulations as quickly as can be facilitated. Dispose of her as you wish. I have not a single preference.’

They did not allow him even the slightest hint of light and so he had scabbled around in the darkness. He counted five paces in one direction and six in the other. But then, with no light it was impossible to tell whether he was just measuring the same pathway twice over, getting lost, turned around in his steps. He had spent what had seemed like hours trying to precisely measure the distance. He returned four and a half, five, six, seven and even eight paces. But more often than not, five and six were the most regular numbers. He took a median calculation from that, which satisfied him, until he realised that the room might not be square.

This was a setback.

After spending some time in the darkness inwardly cursing himself, he instead made a route of the circumference of the walls; crawling on his hands and

knees his palms ran over the brickwork and the rough floor. This revealed nothing, but standing alongside the wall with one hand resting upon it, he was at least able to confirm five paces by six paces. Satisfied, he groped around for the straw that served as his only bedding and tried to sleep. He had awoken after some indeterminate period of time and realised his new predicament.

He now had precisely nothing to do.

Initially, he had tried to relax and bring his thoughts to order. When that failed he tried to get his captors' attention, yelling, screaming at the top of his voice, alone in the pitch black. He found the heavy door and hammered his fists into it until he could feel that he had chafed and cut his knuckles. The pain at least had given him some new stimulus, but he had been otherwise completely ignored.

Subsequently, he raged. At his captors first; cursing, offering bitter and extravagant insults in every language he knew. This turned inwards at some point. He had been foolish, idiotic to not take precautions to prevent this, too caught up in his own sense of self importance. This had been brought on him by hubris alone. Finally he collapsed, exhausted. He had not been given food or water. His throat was hoarse, his skin itchy and clammy. It was likely that his cuts were infected from the way that they still stung; as though the wounds were fresh. They might have been; he couldn't tell.

He lay in the darkness once again, drifting in and out of consciousness.

The building burned ahead of where the pair stood, dispassionately watching the flames quickly tearing through to engulf the entire structure. In the dark of night, they were a bright beacon rising high into the sky, fluttering madly in the wind.

‘With inevitability, the autumnal evenings are beginning to draw in once again, Mssr Avarisse. Although somehow, I imagine that the people of this little community shall not thank you for the service you have provided in making them a communal fire, despite how it might serve to keep their chills at bay.’ Greede’s face glowed golden; the reflection of the firelight doing little to mask the sinister intent in his eyes, or colour any warmth to his voice. ‘Did the gentleman know nothing by way of information that might have been helpful to us in our quest?’

Avarisse grunted by way of answer and continued to pick at a piece of meat that looked like it might once have belonged to a chicken.

‘My word, masticating at a time such as now? My dear man, does the work that we are in the midst of undertaking not take some precedence over your need for consumption? Where did you even produce that from?’

There was a crashing noise as something collapsed within the inferno, a scream that died very suddenly and a fresh roar of flame. Neither made comment, seemingly not paying the event the slightest attention.

'In the larder. He wasn't going to need it any more. Shame to waste it.' Avarisse belched loudly and having finished eating, threw the remains of his meal into the conflagration before them. He turned to Greede, half of his face now hidden in shadow. Avarisse's eyes were hollow in comparison to Greede's, disinterested. 'Why did you start speaking like you do?'

'Pardon me?' Greede cocked his head and looked up at his partner in surprise, left eyebrow raised over a bulging eye and quite lost for further words.

'We both grew up spitting distance from each other. We had the same life down in the slums. Both learnt our lessons the hard way, were made into what we are together. But at some point, you started talking like you do. Different to everyone else.' Hard eyes continued to regard Greede coldly. 'You don't actually say anything different though. Not really. Just make it seem that way with unnecessary words that most people can't understand. Half the time I don't think that they even bother trying to. I can't remember when you started.' Avarisse snorted. 'Why did you?'

'Unnecessary? Why, I...' Greede tried to find words. 'That is to say, you accuse me of circumlocution? You find my attempt to provide an altogether more refined presentation to the world, my example to others, repugnant somehow?' Greede fought back an indignant tone to his voice, surprised to find himself remarkably put out by this unexpected turn in the conversation.

People were starting to gather now, an angry crowd.

Most looked worried that the fire would spread to their homes. Several had fetched buckets of water, splashing it ineffectually over the flames.

'Nevermind. One day you might cut the shit and tell me.' Bored again, Avarisse strode off; leaving Greede to hurry along after him as quickly as his bowlegged limbs would allow.

The torturer, for there could be no other word for a man as mean spirited and vicious as this one, slapped him square in the face again. Longshanks' vision blurred even more and tears sprung unbidden to run down his cheekbones. He had long since stopped feeling the stinging sensation on the skin on his face at least. The pain he felt elsewhere was another matter of course. Through his impaired vision he dared not look at his feet. Once he had tried to do so and the messy blur of red gore with little white flecks showing through had made him retch. He couldn't feel anything anymore down there beyond a constant dull ache.

Until the torturer decided to work on them some more at least. Then he screamed, clenching his teeth, biting his tongue once and tasting blood as well as the bile.

His hands were next. One by one, his nails were ripped out, sharp spikes of savage pain that left him with a bizarre phantom sensation of the injury being inflicted over and over again. What followed was

worse; when nails were driven into the soft, tender skin underneath, leaving him in agony. If he passed out, then he was awoken with a heavy handed slap.

When he thought he had already experienced the very extremes of pain that could possibly be wrung from the human body without death, one by one, a hammer was taken to his knuckles. Each of them was pulverised in turn until his fingers flapped uselessly from his hand; never again to be used for any task.

They never asked him questions. He pleaded with them to do so, at moments when the pain reached its peak, far beyond his threshold. At others, he maintained a broken silence, but for his sobbing. After the torturer had finished each infernal practice, he would throw Longshanks bodily back into the darkness. Bread and water awaited him each time. Longshanks debated starving himself to death, but human nature always took over and with broken hands he shovelled the food into his mouth and trembled as he gulped the water down. Once his hands were beyond function, he simply ate off of the dirty floor, tasting sand as well as the stale bread.

He did not dare even try to touch his fingers or toes. The horrors that had been inflicted upon him were too much to bear. Even in his dreams they swam up at him, waking him screaming.

The man that had once been Longshanks had lost all sense of the passage of time. He was a man lost to the world, removed from any consequence. That

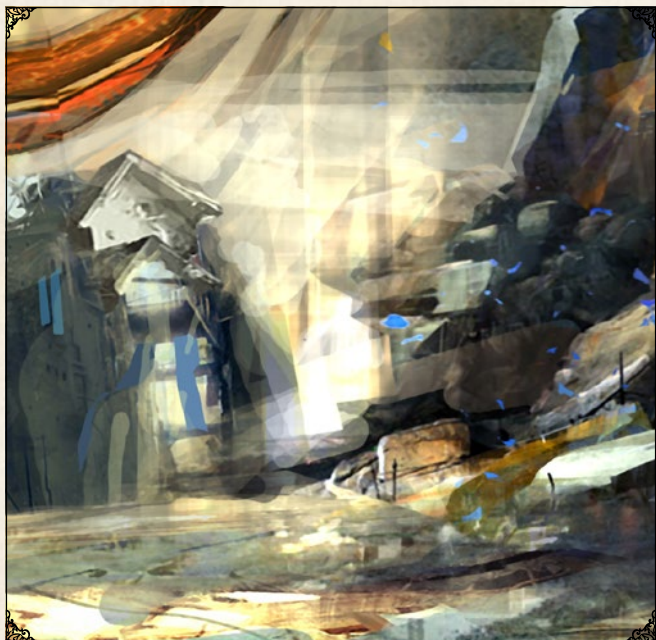
truth broke him a little more, nearly as much as the pain that had been inflicted upon him did. He lay in the foetal position weeping, cradling his stumps, too afraid to touch them, scared even of his dreams.

Finally, when he was brought to the room the next time, there was a new man waiting to talk to him. A familiar face.

They stood atop the landmark known as the Kingsbridge; a once magnificent structure of embossed brass, etched ironwork and lovingly carved wooden supports. A tribute to some forgotten monarch long since dead. During the Century Wars it had been stripped of all of its metals as the army had passed through; desperate for material to melt down and make into armour and weapons. Now it was a dark and imposing eyesore, a drab piece of wood and stone stained by the passage of time, its tempura murals long since faded beyond sight.

'Now you see Mssr Avarisse? Finally, we are getting somewhere. Indeed we are.' Greede was hidden in the shadows of one of the vast wooden beams. He preferred to do so if possible, deducing that people found him altogether more imposing that way. Not that there was any need for that kind of representation at present. The mark in question was already sufficiently terrified. Very much so.

Avarisse held their informant by his ankle at arm's length, over the edge of the bridge. Far below, the waters of the river Monde had dried up completely over the summer leaving a rocky riverbed, leaves and dust swirling violently between the columns and struts that supported the Kingsbridge. The wind whipped past Avarisse and Greede, their cloaks fanning out behind them like short capes. For the upside down man, it was as if the elements had decided to add to his despair, the gale plastering his shirt over his face suffocatingly and swinging him wildly around.



Muffled by his shirt and the buffering wind, he had been shouting something which the pair had ignored, preferring to draw the moment out before continuing their interrogation. If Avarisse felt any fatigue at his exertion, his face did not show it. In fact, he had the same stony expression that he nearly always wore. Greede chuckled, imagining that it was as if Avarisse had a single default that he constantly set himself to. At length, Avarisse relented and pulled his arm back closer to the edge.

‘Speak!’ Either one of them would have had to shout to be heard over the weather, but Greede suspected that Avarisse would have shouted in their victims face anyhow.

‘Please!’ The Fisherman’s Guild official was terrified, that much was obvious. ‘I’ll tell you anything! Anything!’

‘Good. Start with where Longshanks is. I tire of holding your weight up.’

‘The smoking man? The Lord Chamberlain has him, in the dungeons below the guild!’ He suddenly swung violently, although Greede couldn’t tell whether that was due to the wind or just Avarisse entertaining himself at the man’s expense.

‘Which Lord Chamberlain? Which house?!’ Back to bellowing again, Greede observed. Definitely for effect.

‘Lord Laurentis! In Rue Lejourre, Valentia!’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes! Yes! He is there. I watched them carry him down into his cell myself.’ A sudden realisation. ‘Wait, I didn’t touch him myself! It was not my idea, I only

followed the Lord Chamberlain's orders!

Greede grinned at Avarisse. They were done here. Avarisse's eyes narrowed.

'Too bad for you. If you'd at least hit the miserable bastard I might have liked you more.'

'What? Wai-' Avarisse dropped the man into the inky darkness below.

Laurentis laughed to see his new, twisted form, mutilated and crippled. Longhanks might have felt shame once, but now, all he knew was utter despair. The Lord Chamberlain by comparison looked extremely healthy. Likely, without the meddling of the Union, the Fisherman had been able to resume sleeping properly at last. Through milky eyes that could not focus properly any more, Laurentis looked to be some sort of saint, compared to what Longshanks conceded his appearance had to have become.

'My eye, is it punctured?' His voice was slow, quiet, cracked.

It was strange that his first words to his tormentor were not of defiance. In the first period of his captivity, he had practised this meeting over and over in his head, each time more aggressive than the last. But now that had all been beaten out of him. The second surprise was the sad realisation that he had accepted his fate and had made peace with himself in preparation for it.

'Your eye?' Laurentis looked confused. He peered

closer. 'Probably just dirt in it. Doesn't look like we've got as far as that with you yet. Don't worry, I intend to ensure that we will.' His tried to hide it behind a dignified and even tone, but his voice couldn't hide the sense of childlike glee inspired by Longshanks' suffering.

Longshanks nodded. Or at least, he tried to. His chin went down and then sagged into his chest, unable to rise again. How was he even standing? He didn't think that he would be able to any more. He was probably suspended on the wall he surmised, although turning his head to check seemed an exercise in wasting energy. Laurentis was talking to another figure, presumably the torturer.

'...ow much longe... hm..., ...you thi... a pity.' Longshanks could just about make out some of the words.

There was another slap, although this one was considerably weaker than the others had been. It had been Laurentis this time.

'It looks like you might not have as long a stay with us as I had anticipated after all. Those pathetic appendages of yours are most likely infected. Certainly your feet are. You can't even feel this, can you?'

Longshanks did look then, with growing horror, as Laurentis reached down to his foot and pulled off a chunk of his skin, the meat and gristle beneath peeling away with it. The Fisherman held it up to the light from a torch on the wall next to him. It was the end of one of his toes; Longshanks could still see the nail hanging off one side.

He hadn't felt it. That was a very bad sign.

'You stink. And this makes me disgusted. Even more than you used to when you smoked that disgusting pipe. Just completely steeped in filth.' For an all too brief moment Longshanks smiled; remembering the taste of the tobacco, rich and flavourful, imported from Sultar.

Another slap wiped that memory and the smile clean away. Laurentis was speaking again.

'But now? Now you will never be able to interfere with my guild, or Guild Ball again. I want you to realise in your last moments that I have won. I was going to throw you to the Butcher's Guild, but instead I think you can rot in the darkness, thinking about how the Union is broken once and for all.' Laurentis finished with a wide, self satisfied grin.

Longshanks was stunned. Amazed.

And then he started laughing. First deep down, in his chest, but soon rising up, into his mouth, forcing itself out of him. A relentless, unstoppable mirth that spilled out into the cell. It hurt his sore throat, his aching lungs, prevented him from breathing at all except in desperate gasps. Once it had begun, he couldn't stop it, any more than he could have broken free of his chains.

Laurentis' smug grin slipped off of his face completely and his expression turned hard again. Through tears that now accompanied the laughter, Longshanks saw that the Lord Chamberlain's eyes flashed dangerous

intent, but he didn't care. He had never feared this man, especially now.

'You think,' the laughter made speaking even harder. 'You think that I am the head of the... of the Union?' He broke into a hacking cough. 'I am not even a senior councillor. I am, I am one of many. I'm not.' More fits of laughter. 'I'm not even the only Longshanks!' That was all he could manage, before his merriment overtook him completely and he was incapable of any sort of words.

Ashen faced, Laurentis fled the room, Longshanks cackling ringing in his ears.

THE FINAL

The Final. The most important game of the year. The game that all the others had been building towards. The game that made all the others seem paltry, petty and insignificant. The Final! The day that you looked forward to more than your name day, more than the days of your Gods. Today even the eternal deities in their remote Heavens looked upon the world in anticipation, just as their mortal worshippers did. Solthecius, Aburr, the Erskirii Pantheon, the Lords of the Deep, the ancient and primal Lords of Nature all; look upon our teams and bless them with your divine touch that they might end the day victorious. The Final! The name passed from mouth to mouth, across gender, age and social boundaries. It echoed down the corridors of power, off the walls in the streets as the people streamed down them, every avenue filled with cheering, screaming people.

For today it was that day and the fates would choose one team alone to stand above all others, triumphant.

Honour had stood here before. Once in 14c, when she had been fresh herself, her *début* season. Then, she had listened and been inspired as the Old Man had given the speech. Punched the air with the rest, cheered and run out onto the field, to victory and the restitution of the Mason's Guild's power. That game had been simple. Just one of the crew, her eyes wide with the glory of it all. Stunned that this career might

actually work and she wouldn't have to go back to the uncertainty of mercenary contracts. That night she had toasted with them all as the crowd's deafening chanting still rang in her ears.

The next time was two years later, having missed the previous year's victory from being injured in the semi final. Again, she had watched them all as the Old Man spoke to his team. Bull, Chalky, Mallet, Castle and the rest. Each one proud, chests puffed out; the young ones starry eyed as she had been; the old veterans reserved, stoic. The Old Man had looked tired then, although she didn't say it. Worn down by too many years in the game. He hid it well and she had loved him so. Part of her had desperately wished that he could have found a way out, to sidestep and let one of the ascendant players take over. But he couldn't and they all knew that. The pressure to keep winning, to hold onto this fragile power, was too strong.

It broke him soon after. Honour remembered the bitter taste of defeat and then the acidic tears when the Old Man was forced out in ignominy days after. That double blow had been the end of the honeymoon with Guild Ball. Everything after that lost some of its shine, suddenly seemed hard edged, real rather than fairytale.

Again in 19c, after spending three years rebuilding the team. Her team now. Only Mallet left of the old guard that remembered those days. He had been sweet to her and told Honour (when the others were out of earshot) that she reminded him of the Old Man.

Honour couldn't have afforded to have any delusions about it, but it didn't stop her smiling. It had been her turn to give the speech then, to inspire them. She had used every word she knew, every ounce of saved up spirit and zeal, stared each of them in the eye the same way she had the men of her mercenary company when they were about to charge up and out of the trenches. Defeating the Mortician's Guild that day had been her reward and finally, as she proudly lifted the cup aloft, she allowed herself to accept the Old Man's mantle.

Now she stood in the dugout with her team and found that she had used up all of her words already. Is this how he had felt in 16c? Exhausted eyes, run dry of emotion and a mind searching for words that didn't sound an old cliché? Honour looked at the team, each individual.

Flint, sitting hunched over on a bench, feet evenly spaced. His elbows rested on his knees, hands clasped, head low, eyes closed. If she hadn't known him she'd have been worried, but this was just his typical pre-match routine, his mental preparation. She envied him, the ease with which he found it. Mallet stared at her expectantly, the same resolute face that he had worn every time she had been here before, waiting. No help from him either. Harmony looked bored already. As she ever did when faced with her little sister, Honour felt that same nervous concern that the girl would be injured on the field. But, like every other time, she forced herself to forget it. She couldn't allow that to interfere with any decisions she might make.

Brick and Tower talked quietly in one corner, whispering urgently. The huge blocker expectantly punched his fist into an open hand while he talked; his deep rumbling voice as carefully measured as always. Tower by comparison spoke quickly, excitedly, eyes darting around. He wore a grin as huge as ever, completely oblivious to any pressure at all. It was his first season and it had been a very good one, his place in the team easily cemented. To find himself in the Final was likely beyond his wildest dreams of how this might have played out.

Honour remembered herself the first time that she had been here watching him. And then suddenly, she knew what to say.

The crowd, simmering for some time already in the early afternoon, were loud already. They had long since reached the level that would have been expected of a normal game, each stand trying to outdo the other before any players had arrived out of the dugout or the game had begun. Flags and banners waving frantically, they shouted their heroes' names at the top of their lungs; defiantly daring the opposition to answer with their own names, only to be drowned out. The struggle carried on for nearly an hour, circles of spiralling noise eddying in the air. Musicians within the stands blared out a cacophony of sound, overlapping each other; none complimentary in the slightest, but joining the struggle to be loudest. Then came the pointing from both sides, as the first of the guild officials strode out upon the hallowed turf.

Both sides began to stamp their feet in unison, almost a military tattoo, or the breathing of a mighty, feral animal in anticipation of seeing its prey at last. As all voices died out, the final officials took up their position standing at the side of the pitch. Most wore determined or worried smiles. For both guilds, today would have profound consequences, but only one would see the culmination of their efforts result in total domination. For the other, shamefaced obscurity amongst their peers awaited. Next came the officials from the Physician's guild; marching out all in their traditional white, ghostly apparitions almost lost entirely through their anonymity. The stamping feet continued relentlessly, increasing in tempo on both sides, catching members of both stands unawares. For a faltering moment the stamping lost its cohesion before returning stronger, faster, and louder.

And then the first of the players ran out of the dugouts, hand held high in salute, the sun shining off of their armoured forms, a vision of when titans strode the land. The stands exploded with a deafening roar so great that it seemed that those down on the pitch might well be buffeted to their knees by its power; but those noble warriors stood their ground, basking in the exhalation.

'You never get used to this, no matter how many times the tides wash you up here.' Greyscales was shouting in Angel's ear, trying to make himself heard as best he could over the noise. She nodded, trying to

fight back tears, tears that she couldn't be sure were from fear, or happiness, or something else entirely. 'Don't bother, let them run. Blessings from the Lords o' the Deep girl.' Greyscales offered her a wry grin, having seen her watery eyes. Angel smiled back.

She had been the last out of the dugout, still tying her boots when Shark led the Fisherman's Guild onto the pitch. She hurried over to join the others in their half of the pitch, leaving Shark standing at the halfway line behind her with a Magister from the Fisherman's Guild, awaiting the approach of Honour and the Mason official for the coin toss.

None of them looked like they understood what she felt. Elation was probably the best word, but it didn't encompass the underlying concern she had if she couldn't pull her weight. The rest of the team seemed settled, accepting. She thought that she could see a nervousness in the way that Jac had reached down to pull at his left boot twice now, seemingly without realising he was doing it, but that was about it. Siren's icy stare from underneath her hood was unwavering and Kraken never seemed fazed by anything. Nearby Greyscales shared words with Jac, but he was an old hand at this. Angel doubted he ever felt nervous about a game. For the wily veteran it was probably all arrows and crosses marked on a chalk board somewhere.

'Time to get ready lass. They're starting.' Greyscales had finished with Jac and turned to face her. He nodded up the pitch at Shark, jogging back towards them.

Angel gave Shark one last look before running out wide where the Fishermen preferred her to play. From here, out on the flank, she could use her pace as an attacker, further forward than the rest. The Fisherman's Guild always favoured an aggressive stance and they planned on taking it to the Mason side today; to exploit their opponents' slower players and playbook. Jac, patrolling near their goal was the only line of defence initially. It would remain this way until the game started moving towards them when Kraken would also drop back to support. She knew where the rest of them would be by heart. Shark in the middle, marauding ahead of centre; Siren and Kraken to the left, almost mirroring her own position. Greyscales floated where he was needed but to start would be with her, until they knew where the Mason's Guild planned on playing Harmony. She was the wild card, the one to watch.

Everyone was at their marks for the kick off; Honour and Flint stood waiting by the ball. The former with her back to the Fishermen, the latter with his hands set to his hips making two small diamond shapes either side of him. Angel might have seen an unusual look in his eye, but she didn't know him well enough to be sure. The crowd still chanted their support, but quieter now, hushed, waiting. Almost time, any moment now. Sweat tickled its path down Angel's back beneath her heavy tunic. She heard Greyscales breathing next to her and readied her body to sprint.

A shrill whistle. Kick off. The stands roared their approval and the Fishermen started to run. Honour still had her back towards them but now hopped aside, turning and moving, leaving the ball alone. Angel heard Greyscales mutter something next to her but couldn't be sure what it might be.

And then was so surprised that she didn't think any more.

She saw Flint look toward their goal, one finger outstretched towards it, run forward and strike the ball with an almighty kick. It flew through the air as though ancient spirits had taken hold of it, blurry and indistinct. Angel was struck by an absurd wonder as she followed its path with her head; who was it that painted the leather ball white for the finals and why? It never was for any other games. Did they wash it off after the Final was over, after the crowd's cheering had died out? The wonderment didn't last very long, replaced as it was by growing apprehension. All eyes were on the sphere fizzing through the air towards the Fisherman goalpost, none of the players moving, the game at standstill. The drumming feet died out, the musicians stopped playing. Jac jumped in the air towards the ball, trident desperately raised to try and block its path; but to her horror Angel saw that he was tragically rooted, never even coming close. The ball soared past him and struck the Fisherman goal with a resounding whack that even Angel and Greyscales heard, furthest away. There was a stunned silence from every spectator, stretching the torment out. 'Never

seen anything like that before.' Greyscales managed to find his voice first, sound suddenly alien to Angel's ears. And then that same visceral, bludgeoning scream from the Mason stands. A worse start to a game even Greyscales couldn't think of.

One to nothing, Mason's Guild.

At last a bloodied Brick went down, but not without a fight. To Greyscales' eyes, it was a scene from the decks after a boarding action. Whatever it was, the Mason's Guild's pet ape mascot lay like a beached whale, unmoving. Damned thing had almost done for Greyscales. Kraken was probably out too, down to one knee and not looking too steady at that. Greyscales tried to help him up, Kraken's big mitt dwarfing his hand as he clasped it, but the other end was all dead weight. The big man's eyes couldn't focus properly, his movements slack. The old Fisherman let go and watched Kraken topple over sadly. No time to stop, had to get back in the game; this sort of trade wasn't the way to win.

They were still one goal down, but on the offence. Shark and Siren had paired together down the middle with Angel running ahead of them. Greyscales tracked Angel's movement. The remaining Masons marked up their men, Honour and the other girl shadowing Shark and Siren, Mallet moving in a hurry towards Angel. Somewhere out to one side Flint was trying to flank the centre, but Greyscales could see Jac drifting towards him.

See how he deals with that, the flash bastard. Greyscales couldn't reconcile it as anything other than a fluke goal, but it had put the pressure on the shoulders of the Fishermen to draw level in a hurry.

'Shark! To Angel!' Greyscales made his run across behind the two defending Masons, pointing to Angel. Shark looked up and found her; feinting one way and then turning his foot sideways to pass safely away from the legs of Harmony and towards Angel. Greyscales put on a burst of speed to beat Mallet to the action, as Angel collected the ball and brought it under control.

The rook, the one they called Tower, was moving off his mark now, slow to follow the unexpected change in direction. Greyscales had no intention of tackling a tough looking kid like that if he could avoid it, but might not have much choice. Then, short of breath, he found himself face to face with Mallet and couldn't look any more.

'So Greyscales, here we are again. Two old workhorses, should know better by now.'

'Maybe,' air, sweet air, trying to get it back into his body. 'Maybe not. You couldn't quit this any more than I could.'

'Aye, that's the kicker, isn't it?' The pair circled, Greyscales trying to keep between Angel and Mallet, pleased to hear the sound of her moving away, taking the ball with her. He hoped that his faith that she could shake off Tower was not misplaced, but he didn't intend to gamble on it.

Mallet had always been decent, one of the good'uns. But older, wiser sea birds knew other ways to fly and leave the landlubbers behind. Instead of answering, Greyscales sidestepped into a fighting crouch and made to jink his body left when Mallet came for him. The Mason, in all of his years had been nothing if not predictable. The attack came, barrelling forwards from the left as expected. Greyscales waited and at the right time slid down under, ducking the hammer swing, ready to slide away and join Angel.

The trip struck him right across his shins and sent him tumbling. He sprawled face down in the dirt, wind driven out him by the surprise as much as anything.

'What's the matter, forgotten your sea legs? Nothing personal, you old bastard.' Mallet was gentle as he could be with the blow to the side of Greyscales' head; just enough to knock him out before he could get back to his feet. A courtesy, from one professional to another.

Angel nervously approached Tower, taking in all of the details around her. The heft of his right hand, the angle at which he held the hammer. The strange icon embossed onto it. The shine of his armour in the sun. He looked jittery, like her. He might have been as nervous as she was. Both of them rookie players, new bloods, suddenly propelled into the Final for the biggest stakes possible in the game. Now they faced off, decisive pieces in a play the Fisherman's Guild desperately needed to succeed.

She cautiously made to kick the ball, drawing Tower

away from his mark, only to move it back to her side, which he followed. She noticed his eyes flickering uncertainly between her feet and her body, unsure of whether to attack her, or try to block a shot on goal. She realised that she could exploit this. Another sidestep, another feint. More of that nervous look from under a furrowed brow, glistening with sweat already in the early game.

Like Shark, he was ruggedly attractive. Why were all of the best ones impossible to catch? Either not swimming in the right ocean or just too big for her net, it seemed. Even then, if they had been suitable for her, she might have had to do something like this to them. Life was unfair.

Angel took two steps forward giving Tower both an opening and a challenge. He took the bait, eyes straying to her arms as she wielded her trident in a swooping arc behind her, making to strike at him. As soon as he did, Angel turned the toes on her right foot up and punted the ball through his legs, far too fast for him to block it by closing them, into the goal behind. It struck the hard stone gently, albeit enough that Tower heard it, although the guffawing mixed in with the cheering from the stands probably gave that away in any case.

Angel offered him an apologetic smile as she turned away to run back up the pitch, before he could see her get upset at his anguish. The look on Tower's face was pure devastation, the worst thing that could have ever

happened during any game, let alone the Final. But as much sympathy as she might have had, the poor guy was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Mason's Guild one, Fisherman's Guild one.

Whilst the ball was out of play, Honour took advantage of the pause and restored order as best she could. Brick and Marbles were out, but so were Greyscales and Kraken, levelling the field. She bellowed commands at the players around her.

'Tower, I thought you were made of sterner stuff! Suck it up man and get back in the game!' The inconsolable rookie seemed to snap out of it a little, which was good. The Masons needed their defender on top of his game and Honour feared the silly mistake would cost them more than an easy goal against. 'Mallet, nice work. I want another out of you now. Drop into Brick's sweeper position.' The veteran stroked his beard approvingly and jogged into place.

The ball was just being kicked out to them now. Flint received it on his chest and dropped it down at his feet. Already the Fishermen were advancing down the pitch, hungry, looking to keep the momentum.

'Harmony! About time you got your arse in gear and put in an appearance!' Honour spared her sister none of her harsh words. Harmony shot her a foul look from across the pitch, but followed the play, keeping up with Flint. They passed the ball casually between them, kicking it along at an easy jog, looking for an opening.

Honour saw that Shark and Angel were working

in tandem now, the pair blocking the forward path of Flint. Siren lurked on the right side, waiting for a mistake, looking to lure a player out onto the wing to have to deal with her. Either way, Honour reasoned that she would refuse that flank and join the others headlong down the middle. As long as Mallet remained their safety, Siren wouldn't be able to get under their feet and they could force a numerical advantage, especially with Jac keeping to the backfield.

The Fishermen were close now; Shark making a great show of swinging his spear around over his head in a great arc, then trailing it behind him as he ran towards the Mason players, head low. Angel was less aggressive but followed nonetheless, her Trident steady before her.

Flint stopped and moved the ball behind him with a deft touch where it trailed out to Honour. She held it, until she saw that Shark was following it and not committing to mark a player, before passing off to Harmony. The Fisherman captain surprised Honour by not chasing the ball or switching opponents. He left it for Angel to try and intercept and Honour barely managed to swing her hammer into the path of his spear's sharp blade as it snaked towards her.

Harmony kept the ball with her, dribbling it easily on her right foot and not wanting to give it up to Flint unless she had to. Angel approached, but seemed unsure of the best way to cover two players on her own. She kept back, wide steps retreating slowly but staying

between them both. The Fisherman's eyes betrayed that she was looking out for Siren, searching for some sort of support. Holding up a hand to signal the play to Flint, Harmony dodged left, kicking the ball right towards her vice- captain and removing any option that Angel had. The rookie chased the ball as expected but Flint, the much more experienced player, shook her off easily and kicked the ball loose. He passed back to Harmony who was pelting forwards; the sound of the crowd louder in her ears as they stamped their feet and cheered the sudden change in pace.

If Flint could score his miracle shot, so could she. Playing to the stand's adoration, Harmony clipped the ball with her left foot to halt its momentum and tried a volley at the Fisherman goal, instead of the safer option of bringing it under control. Her first touch set her poorly for the strike and the reckless kick span comically wide of the goal and out of play behind Jac, the opportunity wasted. Flint slowed his pace and started returning back, head shaking in disbelief. If he had words of reproach then they would have to wait as he was forced to mark Angel, their roles reversed as the young rookie put on a burst of speed and tried to shake him.

Her face flushed and head down in shame, Harmony kept going, trying to put pressure on Jac as an official booted the ball over to him. Luck was on her side this time as the poor kick from the faceless assistant was a few feet short of Jac; the burly seaman had to lumber

forward to close the gap as Harmony did likewise. He got there first and tried to clear it wildly away from goal, but Harmony leapt forwards and blocked the ball, stealing it. The crowd screamed her name and the young Mason basked in the glory as she put home an easy goal after all, Jac unable to prevent her. She offered the nearest stand a bow and a curtsy, hair dropping down over her face.

When she raised her eyes again she realised the crowd were gasping, some pointing behind her. Too slow, she couldn't escape as Jac's mailed fist kidney punched her and a heavy second blow sent her spinning through the air, down into darkness and out of the game.

Jac weathered the booing, jeering Fisherman stands. He smiled at them insolently, offering the finger. One more down, to make up for dropping behind on the scoreline.

Mason's Guild two, Fisherman's Guild one.

Brick's eyes flickered, once, twice. Then the eyelids slowly slid opened and he was awake. Head groggy, he lay flat on his back atop a wooden table. There was a whipping noise of canvas surrounding him and then from somewhere beyond that, a crowd cheered. Above him, he could see only white, the colour following him as he moved his head from side to side. A tent, a white one. He was in a tent? Thoughts still slow, Brick couldn't think of why he would be here.

A new noise. And a sharp spike of pain. Suddenly, as if a curse had been cast over him, he sensed a lot of pain. Numb aches and sharp needles. His hand

reached up to touch his forehead where it felt like a razor blade had been drawn across him, breaking the skin. His fingers returned back, slick red, stark against the clinical white background. Maybe one had.

The sound came again. It was from a figure all dressed in white, head to toe, with only a slit for their eyes to see out of. It held a strange metallic implement in its hands, delicate, elegant, but bloody and somehow barbaric at the same time. String seemed to run from the rear of it, off white to match the rest of colour of this bizarre scene.

‘Where am I?’ He wasn’t aware that he had spoken until the figure looked up.

‘Oh my. Really, you really are quite a remarkable specimen.’ The voice betrayed the individual as a woman.

‘Where am I? Who are you?’ Brick ignored whatever her words might have meant. He started struggling up.

‘No, you really must... that is, this is highly improper.’ The woman was backing away now, unusual device forgotten and still sticking out of his leg. She held up her hands as if to placate him. ‘You must wait for me to finish your treatment.’

Treatment? Brick didn’t care to know. He had a pressing memory somewhere just beyond reach, an urgency that he couldn’t quite place.

‘Where am I?’ He tried a third time, voice raised. He did not intend to ask again. ‘What is this thing in my leg?’

‘Listen to me.’ Her voice was nervous. High pitched, like nails on a chalkboard to his ears. ‘You were injured

during the game, knocked out, amongst a multitude of lacerations, punctures and other-'

The match. The Final! Brick half pushed, half fell from his perch on the edge of the table to shaky feet and stumbled forwards.

'Stitch me up, Sawbones. I have to get back to the game!' It was a roar, not his normal voice. The woman shrieked, recoiling, hands held to where her mouth should be. She turned and ran from the tent, leaving through the previously unnoticed entrance, canvas fluttering in the breeze. Bright light shone through on the other side. Brick reached down and tore the curious device from his leg, causing a spurt of bright blood to arc up and over the pristine white wall. Still unsteady, he staggered to the exit and followed her out into the sunlight.

He emerged to a roar from the crowd, all for him. He could hear his name chanted, over and over again; a multitude of voices from men, women and children, hammering the sound into his head. One hand held up next to his bloody forehead to stave off the blinding light of the sun whilst his eyes adjusted; he could do nothing for the moment except feel uncomfortable both in their adulation and in the heat of the sun. Impatient moments passed and then finally, as his eyes adjusted, he could see shapes. Unmistakable players on the pitch, just feet away from him. Uncertain footsteps became a run, as he threw himself back into the game.

Flint ducked the first attack as the blade whistled

through the air. He was not fast enough to avoid the backswing though; tired legs a fraction too slow, the flat of Shark's spear caught him under the jaw, taking him off of his feet. He fell backwards, landing awkwardly and hitting the back of his head on the hard ground. Flint tried to blink away the stars that cartwheeled across his vision.

Get up.

Get up. Now.

Everything was in slow motion. The faces staring at him from the crowd, blurry, mouths gaping open like ghouls. Around him, the movement of the boots stamping into the ground, each tiny piece of dirt jumping up high, little pebbles rolling. Particles of fine dust floating in the air and the giants above them swinging their fists, weapons, moving, always moving. A pair of dull brown eyes settled on him before being torn away to look at some threat.

Get up.

Flint agreed with the voice, but his body didn't seem to respond the way he wanted it to. Like moving your limbs but not feeling anything, feet unable to sit flat, fingers moving like they belonged to another person, detached from him. All the time, the dance of trampling feet around him. A ringing in his ears, like a blacksmith striking iron at his forge, the sound not fading.

Get up.

Enough!

He rolled over in the dirt, onto his front and pressed

down with his hands. Someone else's hands? No, his, he could start to feel them again. Pushed down and then suddenly he was kneeling on clumsy stumps, back pedalling hands with tufts of green grass in them. It was all starting to speed up again, the world returning to normal, as though it had been shaken and the sediment was settling. Up to his feet with a lurch of his hips and a drunkard's uneven stagger.

Now, win!

Flint looked for the ball. The ringing was that of a bell now, throbbing, pulsing in his temple; no longer the only sound, competing against the noise of the game. He couldn't see anything past the melee ahead. Honour and Shark, trading blows. Jac about to jump Honour from behind; trident raised and ready to slash downwards. He raised his voice to shout warning, tried to get his feet moving towards her, tripping over themselves.

More blurring of shapes and colours and sound. A big one; accompanied by a cheer so loud it blocked out the bells. Now Brick; all red and blue and silver, slammed into Jac like the steam driven fist of an angry god.

Brick smashed a heavy fist into Jac's jaw, the brutish Fisherman's head wrenched to the side. Keeping his feet, Jac turned the recoil into a lunging tackle to Brick's waist, arms hugging around and taking both men off balance and to the ground. Brick tried to throw the Fisherman off, but Jac let go of an arm to block the outstretched hand. With the other hand he swung back and down, a fist aimed at Brick's face. Brick

twisted his neck to one side and the punch impacted into the dirt beside him. His vision was red from the blood seeping out of the cut on his head, but he could ill afford the free hand to wipe his eyes.

'Don't give up, do you?' Jac's voice was strained as Brick's free hand grabbed his; they wrestled, each trying to overpower the other man.

'Never! Takes more than you boys ever had to stop me.' Brick was beginning to win the struggle, his superior strength pushing the Fisherman's wrists away. Jac reacted by pushing his hips up and striking a knee downwards, aimed between Brick's legs. It impacted with the boxed armour there, but lights still burst across Bricks vision.

'I'll fight however I need to bring down a big bastard like you.'

Brick couldn't answer other than grunting, desperately trying to find the strength in his arms again. The hips moved again ready for another knee, but Brick twisted his own and managed to throw Jac onto his side where the Mason had been. Straddling the Fisherman, Brick let go with his right hand and savagely tried a punch of his own at Jac. It connected, although not before he could properly close his fist. The brunt of the impact crunched into his middle knuckles, breaking something with a snapping sound and a tearing pain, but the unexpected blow to his cheekbone had dazed the Fisherman. Jac's left hand slackened its grip slightly and Brick eagerly threw

the freed arm back and then downwards. This time the contact was cleaner; hitting the Fisherman in the temple with a closed fist.

Jac's eyes went glassy, leaving Brick to cradle a broken hand.

'No! Go win the damned game!' Honour shouted at Flint as he approached her. Shark looked like he had other ideas, but Honour swung her hammer towards him, forcing his attention back to her with a hasty parry of his long polearm, the clash making both take step back.

Now win this thing.

The ball lay in the grass, to the side of the struggle, unattended. The Fisherman's Guild goal was clear, just the wind rattling a chain attached to it, long shadow stretching out behind it on the ground. No time to look and see whether any Fishermen were nearby, just time to take the shot. His shot. There was some shouting from behind him, but he didn't look. Concentrate on the ball, on the goal, on what had to happen now. Flint closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose. He had made this shot a thousand times, more, on the practice ground. Now was no different.

Time stood still.

And then it wrenched violently back into motion as he ran up, right foot, left foot and the right leg swinging downwards, ever faster, unstoppable, and struck the ball.

Clean. Like he had a thousand times before.

As good a touch as ever he could have asked for.

Majestically it rose into the air, blades of grass spraying up around it, over his boot. The ball soared forwards, reflecting the light from the overhead sun, all eyes upon it. In both stands, not one soul stood, hearts in their throats. If the Gods did indeed look upon this, then a priest might have likened the path to a spirit, flying free.

Out of the hands of mortals, left to the whims of fate.

Flint suddenly found that he could no longer look. He dropped to his knees, spent, face in his palms. An unbidden tear rolled from the corner of one eye. Whatever next, this would be etched into his mind for the rest of his days.

In later years, he would recall that he had seen enough to know and simply hadn't known what to do next.

Flint never missed. Not when it mattered.

A second later there was the loudest roar of all; as if mankind had torn open a rent in the universe and sound poured out into the world, uncontrollable, untamed and wild.

Three to One Mason's Guild.

Champions.

LAST STAND

Ox and Boar hurried through the empty streets, followed closely by a pair of hard looking Butcher's Guild thugs. Overhead the sparsely situated street lights, lit at dusk by the lamplighters, still burned low, giving each of the figures long shadows as they passed under them. The link boys had all long since retired to their beds, their only other companion was a harsh early winter wind, biting at their skin hidden under heavy cloaks. The skies had looked overcast all day, blocking out the stars and most of the moonlight now, the Gods having seen fit to bestow a chilling herald to an oncoming storm.

Ox looked around him at the buildings they passed, carefully noting them against the map of the city he'd memorised earlier. Not much further now to the docks, then past the fish market, the entrance to Pawnbroker Alley and finally down into the undercity. He kept a brisk pace despite the unfamiliar surroundings.

Ox had never been to Rue Lejourre in all of his travels but he supposed that all Valentian cities looked much like each other; all broken down buildings and rotting slums. It was unlikely that he was missing anything and they could ill afford to delay meeting with their contact. As always now, there was the urgency, vengeance consuming all of his thoughts.

Vincent de Laurentis and the Fisherman's Guild both would pay this dark night. Blood money for what they had done to Brisket.

Staring daggers at Ox's back, Snakeskin sweated inside the thick shawl that the Butchers wore this eve and served as her disguise. Unlike them, she was used to the hard nights, having spent many amongst the Erskirii, under bridges or huddled in alleys. The weather didn't bother her in the slightest.

Of more concern to her was the heavy cleaver at her side. The unfamiliar weight slowed her down and she would have to be careful to wield the cumbersome weapon discretely, lest one of the other Butchers see how uncomfortable she was fighting with it. She wasn't worried about her safety in a fight of course. She had several wickedly sharp stiletto blades concealed about her person if it came to that; much preferring the subtle assassin's tools to something as painfully primitive as the weaponry employed by the Butcher's Guild.

Snakeskin was mildly amused by the Master Butcher's vendetta. It seemed so wasteful, so pointless. Killing a worm like Laurentis would achieve nothing and certainly not provide any restitution for the injury done to Brisket. Nothing about this evening would bring her back from the brink of death. Snakeskin had always heard that Ox was hardnosed, pragmatic in his dealings.

Apparently not.

But the irony that Snakeskin should accompany the Butcher to enact his revenge on an innocent was delicious. A happy coincidence then that, courtesy of the information from the otherwise contemptible Avarisse and Greede, she could accomplish the rescue of Longshanks from beneath

the Fisherman's Guild at the same time.

She stalked on through the night amongst the Butchers.

Barely any of the light from the lamps in the street penetrated the shadows where they stood in an alley between two huge buildings. Ox could barely see the man in the darkness, only a vague silhouette outlined by what little illumination there was.

'You the one they call the Ox?' The stranger hissed at him in an urgent tone.

Ox nodded an affirmative. Behind him, he heard Boar grunt. Ox agreed with the big man. It had been a stupid question. Every bastard and his dog could recognise the Butcher's Guild Ball captain when he stood in front of them. But the Master Butcher knew well enough to let the stranger keep his pride for the moment, until he had done his part.

The man struck a flint and settled it into a lantern. He quickly dropped the shutters over the flame, leaving just the barest minimum of light to hasten their way. They set off, deeper into the alley, away from the outside world and into the undercity.

The alley seemed to curve to the left, then a definite sharp right at what might have been a crossroads of sorts. They continued. Another right, the ground feeling like it had taken a downwards slant, then straight. All the time it was deadly quiet, no noise other than that of their footsteps in the gravel. Although they were still in the open, no light came from overhead, leaving them in almost total blackness

other than their guide's lantern. It was as if the world was swallowing them whole as they descended into its innards, only to be spat back out in a totally new place. The sense was so complete it was all Ox could do not to place a hand on one of the walls around him, expecting to feel a pulse throbbing in the brickwork.

Suddenly, the man stopped dead in his tracks. Ox was following far enough behind not to collide with him, but Boar blundered into the back of the Master Butcher, causing Ox to overbalance and reach out an arm to the adjacent wall to keep his feet. There was a loud metallic clatter, which seemed to last for an eternity in the soundless dark, rebounding from wall to wall.

The lantern swung their way, its sudden brilliance making Ox blink and shield his eyes. 'Are you oafs done waking everyone up?' came the hissed rebuke.

Ox heard a growl from Boar behind him and readied himself to restrain the Beast from an explosive outburst, but to his surprise and relief, no other retort came. After listening for a moment to see whether they had alerted anyone, the contact seemed satisfied and motioned for them to stand still and wait. He took a couple of steps forward, gingerly casting the lantern around him at the walls, obviously looking for markers of a sort. Catching a faint murmur of the man muttering under his breath, Ox thought he made him out, stooping over the ground, and then definitely saw him place the lantern on the ground and kneel.

The Master Butcher could hear him scrabbling around in the dirt for a moment, his form hunched over by where the lantern had been placed on row of stone cobbles that circled a round drain. Next, the flicking sound of a concealed blade, a gentle rattle of a thief's tool set and a grunt as the stranger braced himself and shifted the heavy grate up and over.

'In there we go.' The man panted from the effort, trying to catch his breath and pointing in the poor light.

Snakeskin followed last, looking left and right to see whether the blundering idiots had alerted anyone with their noise. That had been inexcusable, lucky not to draw attention to them. She was reminded why it was she always insisted to Longshanks that she carry out this sort of work alone.

Her night vision was exemplary, not needing the lantern to see the outlines of the walls, or the clouds above. Standing dead still, she listened, trying to tune out the noises of the Butchers' ungainly descent into the sewers and focusing her attention on the alley. It was silent. Not even the wind penetrated past the tall walls around her.

Satisfied that the group had escaped detection, she took her last deep breath of clean, fresh air and stepped into the dark hole, thick with the stench of rot and waste.

It stank inside. A wretched mix of damp, urine and shit. As bad as Ox would have expected of a sewer, as much as he had hoped to be wrong. Replacing the

silence of the alley were the sounds of dripping water somewhere to their left and a steady trickle at their feet; like a man taking one long, never-ending piss. Finally, they were all inside and once the man had closed the heavy ironwork and opened the shutters on the lantern, Ox could inspect their guide properly.

He was a small man, with pinched features around the nose that reminded the Master Butcher of a rat, with its twitchy snout and small mouth. His eyes seemed huge on that face, bulging outwards as though he had just been kicked between the legs, and large ears that stuck out from a shaggy crop of dark brown hair. His skin was pale, hidden underneath a layer of dirt and grime. A ganger then maybe. Or just a gutter rat. The long, sharp knife at his belt suggested the former. Scum out to make a name for himself no doubt.

The little man gestured for them to follow.

'No need to be so quiet down here. No guards or hidden eyes. You follow me, but watch your step eh?' A pause. The man looked up at Boar, standing next to Ox, and smirked. 'There are sink holes which will swallow even a big man like you.' He turned and made to hurry away into the darkness, without bothering to look to see whether they would follow him.

Ox admired the stranger's stones at least, no matter how questionable his loyalties might be. He rounded on the Beast, hearing the inevitable retaliation before it even came, hurriedly pushing the big man backwards before he started throwing fists. He

clamped a gauntleted hand over the Beast's mouth and whispered urgently to him.

'You just soldier and keep your mouth shut!' Boar growled his displeasure. Ox continued, his tone less urgent. 'There will be plenty of them to take it out on later. For the moment, we need him. Don't make me regret bringing you.'

Boar stared at Ox, his eyes thick with murderous intent, the diminishing light making the big Butcher's expression ever more sinister. Finally, he nodded. If their other two companions thought anything of the altercation between the two, they wisely kept their opinions to themselves. Pleased to have kept Boar in line, Ox turned to follow after their guide and the light.

As they travelled, the pathway through the sewers descended; the trickle of water running in the recess along the centre becoming ankle deep and then deeper still. Up to the waist it forced them to walk on the edge of what seemed like a still stream, a stagnant ditch of waste.

The ceiling was low in places, causing the Butchers to have to duck; several pieces of stone had come adrift from the walls along the path, forcing them to watch their footing constantly in the poor light. Once, they had to leap a large cesspit which bisected their path, while their guide tried to give them as much illumination as he could. They almost lost one of the henchmen there, only a quick hand from his companion pulling him back to safety.

The walkway was not intended for a man of Ox's

size, let alone Boar's. The Master Butcher could hear the much larger man swearing behind him. They passed by several darkened junctions that all looked identical, the guide having some private knowledge as to which direction to take. Definitely a gutter rat, Ox decided. Whoever he was, it was obvious that they would be totally lost without him, even with the lantern to illuminate their way. There was no other source of light here.

By the Master Butcher's reckoning, they had been travelling for entirely too long through the shit and slime of the sewers before the path angled back upwards and they stopped once again. At this rate, he cynically wondered whether it would be daybreak when they emerged. The stranger seemed to read his mind.

'Not much further now at all, just around the corner.' He scuttled off at pace, the four Butchers following.

Waiting for them as promised was an old but solid looking iron ladder, its rungs set into the stone wall on one side of the corridor. The man directed his lantern upwards, revealing a small circular opening in the ceiling.

'Up there, about sixty steps, it will open into the courtyard next to the gardens. There is a heavy grille, which you should be able to push aside. There will not be any guards inside the walls this time of the night, don't worry about the noise. Across the yard and into the largest building should take you into the eastern passageway, which leads to his rooms.' The man leaned in closer, the lantern unintentionally casting a

haunting glow on the underside of his face. 'They may be some guards there, but I'm sure you know how to take care of yourselves.'

'You stay here like a stinking coward?' Boar raised an eyebrow.

'Please,' the man looked nervous. 'If I was to be found or seen, my life would be forfeit. My family... the guild is ruthless.'

'Huh. No backbone, little man. Where is that big mouth of yours now eh? Lost your stones down here?' Boar fought back laughter at his own joke. 'Maybe they ran down your trouser leg and away in the little river of piss at our feet.'

Their guide's face was crimson, his mouth working open and closed silently, his large eyes yellowy in the light, staring. For one moment Ox thought the smaller man would make a move, but he looked away, causing a snort from Boar.

'Enough.' Ox couldn't afford to waste time with this. 'You will wait for us here?' There was a deliberate finality to the question that implied that the man had no choice. The man nodded, trembling. Whether from rage or fear, Ox didn't much care.

'Good.' Ox struck one foot at the base of the ladder and tested a rung with a sharp pull of his hand. It didn't move, but a thin layer of rust dusted his glove a bright orange. Best not to climb too slowly he decided, slipping the gloves off to get a better purchase and began his ascent.

It was pitch black inside the tight crawlspace. All that there was in this claustrophobic world was the next rung, the next step. Mechanical, unthinking movements, like the peculiar team mascot in the Alchemist's Guild team. One after another, heavy breathing from the three men below him.

Too late now to wonder whether they were too loud, or whether he should have brought someone else instead of Boar. He didn't like the big man's attitude and Gods knew he was uncontrollable once his blood was up, but he was reliable, blunt force muscle. Of all his boys, Shank would have been better for sneaking around in the night, for slitting Laurentis' throat. But Ox didn't trust that one. Not yet, anyhow. Had to prove himself off of the pitch. Far better to hedge your bets on the big lad you knew from experience had your back.

The air had steadily grown lighter and the pestilential smell of the hole beneath them became increasingly distant as they climbed. The muscles in Ox's arms burned. It would have been hard on a man in the light, but in the dark, hanging uncertainly by three limbs whilst poking around trying to find the next rung with the other hand made it hell. The Master Butcher hoped that the others were keeping up. The echoes from beneath him at least seemed encouraging.

At last there seemed to be a small change in the light coming from above him. It was still dark, but he could at least make out the vague outlines of the rungs now.

He increased his pace and after a few more steps could see a small round patch, lighter than the surrounding walls, growing larger.

Finally, his hand punched into metal above him, grazing his knuckles. He stopped and hissed to the others beneath him to do likewise. Bracing his feet on the rungs, his back resting on the cold wall behind him, he reached up his hands and forced his calloused fingers into the holes in the grille. Then, teeth clenched together, he heaved upwards, his arms tightening underneath with the strain, closing his eyes in concentration. There was a grinding noise and dust showered down over his shoulders. He dared not stop or cough and pushed harder, a low grunt forcing itself out through exertion. This appeared not to have been moved for years, so heavily was it stuck in place. Ox began to wonder whether it was the wrong exit. Too late now though; he pushed harder, throwing as much weight into the lift as he could, given his precarious footing.

At last something broke or dislodged and his hands, still holding the grille, shot upwards in to open air. Breathing deeply into eager lungs, he carefully placed the grille down on the stone floor next to the opening, before hauling his body up into the courtyard.

There was more light now than the Butcher had seen in hours, each wall with a sconce set onto it, burning low now in the early hours. As their guide had said, Ox couldn't see any guards. He looked around for the building that the man had mentioned, as the others

pulled themselves up, and out of the tunnel.

Why did the Meatheads have to do things so slowly? That climb took far too long. Snakeskin's lip curled involuntarily in her distaste for the brutish, vulgar thugs. Once again she swore to herself that she continue to insist that Longshanks never played her in their guild. At least it was almost time to lose them and find her employer.

The sooner that this was over, the better.

The walls were a rough stone and chalky to the touch, not what the Master Butcher had expected at all. This house of the Fisherman's Guild evidentially was much older than it looked from outside. At their feet mosaic tiling ran along the floor in both directions, carefully arranged to show interweaving patterns that meant nothing to him.

They followed the passage eastwards as instructed; Ox taking the lead with one of his henchmen at the rear, watching for guards. Thankfully even Boar managed to be quiet, the only sounds their soft footsteps on the stone tiles, drowned out by the heavy wind and rain outside. The storm that had threatened to break all day had finally done so just after the group had gained access from the courtyard into the guild house itself. Every so often there was a roll of thunder and a bright burst of lightning that illuminated the skies, causing them all to hide in the shadows. Mercifully at least, there seemed to be few windows in the corridor, aiding their cautious advance.

The corridor turned sharp left ahead and Ox could see that whatever room lay beyond was lit by a warm orange glow seeping outwards along the walls and floor. He signalled to the others to ready their weapons, hearing a faint series of clicks and a slithering noise of steel on leather as they complied. As they approached, Ox detected a faint and not altogether unpleasant scent, like incense.

He didn't care for this sort of work at the best of times, much preferring a direct approach. But vengeance was in the hearts of the Butcher's Guild this night and they would take their due however they had to. Ox edged ever closer, flat against the wall, and chanced a quick look around the corner at the room beyond.

Two guards were inside, one sitting in a small alcove set into the wall, the other leaning heavily on a halberd. So much for professionals. That halberd, designed for military use on the field of battle, would be next to no use in the tight confines of the room where it couldn't be swung properly. The most use that it might see would be as a spear, still not ideal. Ox couldn't see what the second man was armed with. If he too carried one of the long polearms, then it was well hidden, which made the Master Butcher doubt he did. Neither wore too much by way of armour, just breastplates that shone dully in the half light and some sort of iron vambraces, shirt sleeves tucked into them.

Otherwise, the room was adorned with comfortable looking chairs and antique decorations. A reception

room. Grand doors in the back wall were embossed with gold and silver trout that leapt across their surface; these undoubtedly led to the Lord Chamberlain's living quarters. Ox knew that he would have to barrel past the guards and leave them to his boys, while he gained entry to Laurentis' rooms and murdered the bastard.

He leaned back and whispered what he had seen to the others. Boar grinned in the darkness. Ox didn't need to ask that the big man knew what to do.

They burst into the room from their hiding place, taking the two guards by surprise at the sudden activity. Looking up in shock, the one leaning on his halberd knocked it over with a sharp clatter. His companion fared slightly better, at least managing to make it to his feet and draw a wicked looking falchion before the Butchers got to him. Ox ignored them both as Boar smashed into the latter, axe upraised and swinging downwards as the other man was mobbed by the two henchmen. Ox planted a heavy kick into the doors, which swung open and he charged into the room beyond.

The Master Butcher found himself in the dark once again, the only light came from the room behind him and a low glow emanating from a doorway further inside the audience chamber. Even in the darkness, the outlines suggested to Ox that they were as opulently decorated as he had expected.

Reasoning that the glow came from the bedchambers, Ox stormed towards the opening and found himself

face to face with the Lord Chamberlain, come to see what the commotion was. Mouth slack, eyes wide and momentarily stunned by the appearance of Ox, in trembling fingers Laurentis held a small knife. The Master Butcher quickly chopped it away from him with his left hand and then with his right grabbed Laurentis by the throat, squeezing his fingers together.

He stared at the Lord Chamberlain of the Fisherman's Guild, knowing that he would long remember this moment. Laurentis was likely one of the most powerful individuals in the Empire of the Free Cities. Real power, not like the puppet nobles or monarchs that Ox had fought for in the past.

His left hand slid the dirk out of its hidden scabbard on his leg. He had claimed it during the Century Wars; stolen from a Raed officer that he had killed on a forgotten battleground somewhere. A murderer's weapon, fit for this murder.

Nails raking like claws at the Master Butcher's gloves, Laurentis was trying to speak, lips blue, eyes bulging. Ox didn't care. This was how the Butchers set an example, looked out for their own.

The knife snarled through the air as he thrust it into the Lord Chamberlain's stomach, viciously twisting it upwards to carve out the maximum amount of damage inside. Eyes never leaving Laurentis', Ox tore it out and repeated the brutal action twice more as blood spurted out all over them both, staining their clothes. Laurentis stopped struggling and his eyes began to flicker, their

reflection dim. The third slash accelerated the flow of blood from the Lord Chamberlain. It gushed all over Ox's legs, a slick crimson running down onto the floor and pooling at their feet . Keeping his tight grip around Laurentis' throat, Ox leaned forward. The man was close, very close, from blood loss and being strangled.

Ox spoke the last words that the Fisherman would ever hear.

'That was for Brisket.'

Snakeskin had slipped away from the rest during the fighting. She had no doubt that Laurentis was a dead man; Ox unwittingly serving the Union's justice for them. Time now to find Longshanks and beat a hasty retreat before the guards arrived.



The entrance to the Fisherman's Guild dungeon was an innocuous door at the end of an equally nondescript alley, adjacent to another building across the central compound. Snakeskin had carefully hidden herself, darting from shadow to shadow through the downpour as the guards rushed to investigate the noise made by the Butchers.

Snakeskin opened the door just enough and slipped out of sight.

The air was cooler in the passage than outside, the floor level descending immediately. The walls were old discoloured brick, lit by torches sparsely set some feet apart, the smell musty. She moved quickly, looking for cells of some kind. Initially there were no doors at all as the path spiralled down into the earth, until she reached what she supposed was below water level, where the musty scent was replaced by damp. Now, where the floor bottomed out, she found rooms and cells.

The first were empty, their iron bar doors wide open. They looked like they hadn't been used in years, the iron hinges stiff, rusted. Snakeskin didn't stop to check in the inky blackness for anybody. Next was a room with an open doorway, revealing rows and rows of shelves, all full with either wicked implements of torture, or jars and vials. Again, most looked disused, covered in a fine layer of dust. She kept moving.

Snakeskin was forced now to remove one of the torches from the wall, as the lighting abruptly stopped. Surrounding her were several barred wooden doors to

newer cells, each with tiny iron bar slots in them. Carefully, so as to try and not to make any noise, Snakeskin began checking each one in turn. Each metallic squeal as she opened them was deafening to her ears in the otherwise quiet dungeon, but no guards came.

She began to despair that she would ever find Longshanks as she methodically searched the empty cells. Any of them could have been used recently, from their relative cleanliness, but none had any sign of occupancy. All were totally devoid of even a hint of human life.

The last door stood apart from the rest; wooden with no lock, just a metal ring for a handle. With a growing sense of unease, Snakeskin opened it. Beyond lay a torture chamber, with racks of bloodstained devices that looked much more recently used than those in the alcove earlier. At the far end, naked and with his chin resting on his chest, Longshanks was shackled to the wall.

Snakeskin approached him quickly through the filthy room, carefully avoiding the large rack in the centre and the other large instruments, sure feet enabling her to step over the sticky blood smears on the stone tiles. Longshanks looked to be in a terrible condition, hands and feet smashed to a pulpy dirty red. His chest had crusty red and brown gouges running vertically along it, the surrounding skin inflamed a raw pink. He stank of infection, sweat and bile, his chest unmoving.

Snakeskin was satisfied that Longshanks was dead,

or close enough that he might as well be. There was no way she cared enough about the man to drag him back in this condition; there was little chance he would even survive the ordeal of being cut down.

Time to leave. The guards would already have alerted the whole house in the hunt for the Butchers by now, and she would have little darkness left with which to make her escape.

They ran, ruddy faced and out of breath, with no time to look around and see whether they were being followed. Stinking guards, who knew the Fisherman's Guild had so many? They couldn't get back to the sewers now, that much was certain. Too many lights in that direction, bobbing around in the darkness, moving towards the Lord Chamberlain's residence. Ox wore a cruel grin. Let them all see him, spit like a pig. The more that found him the better to bear witness to Butcher's Guild justice.

They were in a garden of some sort again, different from the last one, much more ornamental. Statues lined a central walkway, the outlines of flowerbeds and small hedges surrounding them, what little light there was from the shrouded moon reflecting off still ponds. No artificial light disturbed the scene. Ox skidded to a halt behind one of the statues, the other Butchers following suit. All was still and they were

alone, desperately trying to regain their breath without making too much noise. He counted their number.

‘What happened to Skinner?’ His eyes went to the remaining henchman first.

‘Haven’t seen her since, uh, we gutted those guards.’
‘Boar?’

Even as he asked, Ox could see the big man shrug. ‘I saw her, then I didn’t care anymore. I had meat to kill.’ It was obvious that was as much as could be expected from Boar.

Ox cursed that they had to leave a man behind, but they didn’t have the luxury of time to look out for her. They had to get out of the guild house, now. The Master Butcher looked around at the tall walls, keeping a wary eye on the little orange yellow dots that moved rapidly back and forth in the direction that they had just come from. Every so often, he glimpsed a weapon or armoured silhouette, a sinister reminder of the danger that they were in. Keeping his head down, he ran hunched over in the rain and the darkness to what he hoped was an outer wall. Long ivy grew upwards across its surface, hopefully to safety. The other two followed him.

Ox gave a sharp tug on a thick vine, making the plant rattle and spray droplets of water, the sound swallowed up by the storm. It seemed sturdy enough to support his weight, with a pinch of luck. But then, Ox didn’t believe in luck. It was too late to start now either, best just to get it over with. He would either make the climb or fail in the attempt. One hand

reaching up to snag a handful of the creeper, he began pulling himself up, tired muscles bunching together, one boot kicking to the wall for support, other arm ready to grasp the plant further along.

A dull wooden thud, where his steel toecap hit the wall.

Ox gave up his climb and hurriedly started brushing the leaves away, trying to clear away the growth to see what was on the other side. He was making a lot more noise now, but if this was an old door, then it was their escape. Boar helped, giant hands clumsily ripping vines and branches to the ground. The door was decayed, probably worn by the elements in the light, but it still felt solid. Its hinges were crusted with a thick layer of what had to be rust, peeling off in flakes. The bracing bar had either rotted right through or had just been lost at some time over the years, but the heavy lock still seemed formidable enough. 'Boss, they're coming this way!' The henchman's hiss sounded urgent. Ox could hear them too, the sound of angry voices; indistinct now, but getting closer. Two lights, flickering, wavering in the rain.

'Get out of my way. I'm not dying here to these pigs!' Boar's voice brooked no alternative. Ox weighed up his choices in an instant. They were out of time and out of options. They could climb in the dark, backs to the guards, hoping not to be seen; or smash their way through this door and hope that they could get through before the whole guild came down on top of them. Neither choice came with a guarantee.

One look at Boar told him enough. Ox stepped aside and the Beast threw himself at the door, cleaver raised, swinging with desperate power, cutting deep into the wood with a loud crunching sound. Snarling, Boar planted one foot on the wall and tore the cleaver out again, stepped back one pace and then swung again with no less force. Again, the cleaver hammered into the ancient door with an explosion of splinters, metal joints rattling in violent protest.

All pretence of silence was gone now; Ox saw the two nearest lights rush towards them much faster and another seven or eight further back all following. There was a slashing sound from a crossbow bolt in the air; the bastards were firing blindly at the source of the noise. Sounded like two of them, from the rate of fire he could hear.

‘Boy, are you ready?’ Silence.

Now that he looked, he realised the remaining henchman wouldn’t be coming with them. One of the missiles was embedded in his forehead, splitting his skull open like ripe fruit. A stupidly lucky shot. Glassy eyes stared at Ox, accusing him of causing their owner’s death, mocking him that his would match soon enough.

‘Screw you then. If you’d been better, it might have been worth remembering your name.’ The corpse didn’t reply.

Ox readied his own cleaver and dropping into a fighting stance. No sense in trying to duck the bolts

if they were getting lucky like that. In the darkness against the backdrop of the wall, he was as hidden as he ever could be. Behind him, the door continued to protest under the assault, Boar unrelenting and roaring incomprehensibly now as he struck it.

'My own piss poor pride, that's how.' Ox rumbled the answer to his own question, as he wondered how he had found himself here, right now, facing down maybe a dozen men on his own. Never one accustomed to sentimentality, the admission surprised him. He hadn't thought he had anything close to that left in him, worn down by years of bloody work for nameless faces.

He might have been infuriated at himself for how futile this all was if you'd asked him before Brisket had been gutted, out there in plain sight. Would have told you how stupid it all was. Even after he'd abandoned that kid, the one that reminded him of Jacques so much. But something inside had been pushed too far now, broken. The Master Butcher was tired of feeling like he was running from himself. He didn't run from any other fights. He might even welcome one last chance to leave this stinking existence behind on a bloody eve of retribution.

Finally, Boar smashed his way through, just as the guards were almost upon them. They might have been too, if Ox didn't suspect that they had slowed down to better let their comrades catch up. Damned cheap mercenaries, that's what you got, more invested in their own skin than playing hero.

The moment passed.

'Cowards.' He spat the word more than he spoke it, as he ducked through the wreckage of the door after Boar.

Snakeskin ran back up through the dungeons, past the cells, not caring about the noise she would make in the empty area. Opening the door carefully at the top, she looked around and not seeing any movement in the alley, quickly ducked out, head down.

The rain was much heavier now, low clouds overhead still masking much of the moonlight. The thunderous storm and wind drowned out the sound around her. In the distance she could still see the Fisherman's Guild soldiery, rushing through the yard, their bright lanterns making them easily visible.

Snakeskin watched for a moment and then sprinted across the gardens, past the ornamental ponds and through the muddy flowerbeds, scattering broken vegetation in her wake. Finally, she reached the short wall separating the courtyard, crouching on the other side. This would be the difficult part. The courtyard was open with no cover to hide in. Even with the drain being only ten feet or so away, it might as well have been miles. Fortunately at least, the escape route had yet to be found. If it had been, then the only other possibilities would have been to hide out until daylight and hope to slip out unnoticed, or scale the walls in the slippery rain. Neither seemed appealing.

Her choice was made much easier by some sudden

commotion behind her. At first, Snakeskin thought she had been seen, unsheathing one of her long knives and turning to strike suddenly, until she realised that whatever it was that had the guards' attention was somewhere back in the direction of Laurentis' residence. Snakeskin grinned, fortune on her side for once.

Pleased with herself, distracted by watching the guards, and with the storm muffling the sound around him, she didn't notice the man sneaking up on her position, sword in hand. Suddenly, Snakeskin was face to face with him. Instinctively, she struck out with her knife, managing to strike her assailant across his neck, under his mail. She was unable though to stop the sword slicing in at the same time. With a savage tearing motion, it cut deeply into her flank, the blade embedding itself just below Snakeskin's ribs.

Both of them went down hard. Snakeskin forced a fist into her mouth and screamed into her knuckles, other hand pressed to her wound, all bloody and warm against the rain. The guard's throat was torn open, lifeblood staining the flagstones. Snakeskin knew she had to get the blade out of her, that she had to get moving, couldn't stop no matter how badly the swine had shanked her. She took a deep, rasping breath.

With a sickening ripping noise and another sharp burst of raw, bright red pain across her eyes, Snakeskin tore the damned blade out of the soft meat of her body and tossed it away to clatter into the dark.

She lay motionless for a moment in the foetal position.

The darkness was comforting and she couldn't hear anyone coming. Unconsciousness threatened, but the part of her that desperately wanted to survive forced her to crawl towards the tunnel and a hazardous descent.

The sound of the frantic guards above her in the courtyard drove her deeper, faster.

The blood had nearly made it impossible. Where Snakeskin's hand had touched became too slippery to hold and by the time she had estimated that she was at least halfway down, her legs had started shaking. Whether from exertion or blood loss she couldn't tell, but twice she had lost hold of the rungs completely, falling for a few, brief, horrifying seconds, until a desperately flailing hand or boot managed to catch the ladder again. The first might have saved her life but had probably broken the little finger on her right hand. The second had twisted her ankle for sure. She couldn't put any real weight on it after that.

But she had made it.

The second her damaged ankle touched the stone of the sewer, she slithered off of the ladder in an undignified heap, too exhausted even to collapse. Once again as with before her climb, she lay there, feeling the pain that emanated from her flank, her face tickled by dirty sewer water instead of rain. She didn't care. She had to be alive down here, in this maze, where any pursuer would never be able to find her in the dark.

Her eyes opened. She didn't know how long she had lain there, unconscious. It was still pitch black.

Snakeskin rolled over onto her back and carefully, so very carefully, so as to not aggravate her injuries further, rose to lean against the wall. With stumbling steps and hands groping in the darkness, she began to follow it around the corner.

Two thoughts came to Snakeskin at once, urgently, like the bells that rang out when fire took hold in the city.

Where was the guide? He should been waiting by the ladder for the group. And where was the light ahead coming from? It had been pitch black down here before.

Her answers were not long in coming.

Avarisse leant insolently against the wall and watched her with disinterested eyes, suit straining to contain his bulk as it ever did. In his left hand he held a lantern; looped around the wrist of his right, his familiar cosh. He made no effort to help Snakeskin, watching his wounded comrade limp along.

'Why Madame Snakeskin, how fortuitous of us to find you down here.' As it echoed between the close walls, the curiously effeminate squeak of Greede sounded distorted, scaling up to many times the size of the diminutive figure.

Snakeskin looked around, but couldn't see the little shit. She immediately regretted the wasted effort as she lost her balance against the wall, slumping back down onto her arse. She was bleeding out everywhere now. Dimly, some part of her mind knew that was a bad thing. She tried to stand, but her legs didn't seem to want to work anymore.

‘I was just discussing a wager with Mssr Avarisse here that you would be along with the utmost expediency to see us and that pursuit would not be required.’ Snakeskin tried to answer, missed her cue and Greede continued his exasperating whining without waiting for a response. ‘It seems that he misjudged you and that my faith was not misplaced after all.’

Greede came into view now, his stunted form walking awkwardly, hopelessly bow-legged. Snakeskin laughed as she always did to see it, the sound emerging from her throat as a dry rattle. She needed a drink and wondered whether the waterway would poison her. Anything at this point seemed appetising.

‘But Madame Snakeskin, I must say, you are rather worse for wear. Even for one with such varied appearance as you. And I see that your perambulatory efficiency certainly seems to have suffered as a result. Perhaps this once, we could forgive your tardiness in this matter.’

Snakeskin spat a mouthful of blood onto her collar by way of reply.

‘And look here, making a mess of yourself. Why, I would have thought that you of all people would know that blood is hell to shift.’ While Greede had been speaking, he had been walking closer to Snakeskin. In the flickering lantern light, he cast an immense shadow along one wall. Avarisse finally rose from his slouch and joined them both.

Snakeskin looked up at Greede with lidded eyes. ‘Eno- enough. Ta-ta-take me away from... here.’

‘Oh no Madame Snakeskin, that would not do at all. Not at all. No, I’m afraid that our new employers have very specific ideas on how we are to continue to further the Union cause. Indeed, with you in particular, very specific.’

New employer? Snakeskin couldn’t think very clearly any more. ‘Longshanks is duh, de-dead,’ she offered helpfully. ‘Saw him.’

‘Indeed. We of course, would know. We carried out the deed at the behest of our employer earlier this evening.’ Greede’s voice sounded amused by the turn of events. He leaned forward, and just this once, his cultured voice disappeared and was replaced with something else, something entirely evil, rasping and spiteful. ‘There is a power struggle now in the cities, a new player in their game. You would have done well to have paid more attention. Perhaps you might have found yourself able to alter your loyalties to compensate for this, as we have.’

‘Ba-stard.’ Snakeskin coughed pink foam halfway through saying it. She looked up at Avarisse looming above her. ‘You... too.’

‘How impolite of you.’ The usual voice had returned now. ‘Mssr. Avarisse, if you please.’

Snakeskin watched the light from the lantern flickering crazily around the walls as Avarisse reached back with his maul and closed her eyes. She was almost thankful for the respite. The pain would stop very soon. She was tired, so tired.

She didn’t hear or feel the wet thud as it hit her head, caving in her skull.

The rain had abated at last, but not before they were soaked through, their clothes doing nothing now to fight back the cold air. There was no more running in any case. By all rights, they should have, likely they were still pursued. But some unspoken agreement had passed between the two men, they were both too tired to run now. Instead they strode through the alleys in silence, daring fate to catch them. The entrance to the undercity was close now in any case, secreted in the shadows of the huge cathedral.

Up close, the walls rose ominously upwards, still shrouded in darkness, even as daybreak edged closer. Huge stone pillars flanked large stained glass windows that were a cold, dead black in the low early morning light. The doors were open and inside bright light came from what seemed to be hundreds of candles all aligned on the floor, the warm glow a stark contrast to the natural grey light of the world.

If Boar thought anything of the scene, he kept his tongue in check. Most likely, he just saw the same way through the city that Ox did, on the other side of the grounds, ignoring the building's unusual appearance. Maybe the man didn't see anyone to fight and that was all he ever looked for. Dead tired, the pair walked alongside the fence that surrounded the churchyard, too lost in their own thoughts to make an effort to converse; their boots making scuffing noises as they walked atop the cobblestones.

Ox couldn't even have said what faith the cathedral

belonged to, having never paid any attention whatsoever to any of the myriad religions worshipped across the length and breadth of the Empire of the Free Cities. He supposed that this was Solthecian given its size and location. Whatever it was, the answer held very little interest for him. The expansive grounds were morbid behind the rails. Tall mausoleum spires surrounded by sepulchres pointed up to the heavens as testimony to the weakness of man and his servitude to the Gods. Weathered statues depicted saints smiting common man for his sins.

He remembered once when he had been a little boy that an elderly priest, all liver spots and wrinkled leather skin, had come to his village to preach to the children. He and Jacques had both been taken to the village hall by their father and told to listen. Even then, barely old enough to hold a skinning knife, the self righteous sermon had bored him. The tall tales of vainglorious sacrifice on the field of battle that so entertained the other boys held no appeal. Ever since then, Ox hadn't given two shits for holy men and their lies. If anything, living a life so frequently close to death had convinced him that if there were any Gods, they had little mercy, and worshipping them would in no way save a man from his fate when it came.

As they rounded the final corner of the grounds they saw the waiting man, standing unmoving between them and their destination. Attired in heavy clerical robes and ornate, lacquered armour, his hands were

pressed together as if in supplication. He was unmasked and watched the Butcher's approach through icy blue eyes. He said nothing as they drew closer, just staring until they were ten paces away.

'The Master Butcher himself.' His voice was accented and he spoke in slow, over pronounced Skaldic, as if it was not familiar to him. From the lilt to his voice, he was likely a native Valentian.

If he was expecting a response, Ox did not give him one, beyond a hard stare. He was not some lesser man, likely to be cowed by weak intimidation and his distaste for this sort of theatrics soured his mood even more than it was already. There was a rumble of thunder from above, the storm reminding all below that it was not yet over.

'I must have you at a disadvantage, for you do not strike me as one of our brothers.' The holy man cocked his head to one side. 'No matter. I am Michele Cesare de Corella, Knight Paladin of Divine Solthecius, praise be to his name and noble legacy, First High Priest and august Lord of the Valentian Church of the Solthecian Cult.

'And you are the Master Butcher. A worthless and spiteful hatchet man, lord and master of nothing.'

Ox snorted, tilting his head deliberately slowly and spitting on a religious symbol carved into one of the nearby tombstones. He smiled crookedly. Better to get this bullshit done and then carve their way through anyone that tried to deny them exit.

'Are you finished with your pointless titles, holy

man? A lot of names for a pathetic and spineless old corpse. I am lord and master of nothing? That may be. I have never claimed to have been either. But all I see here is the lord and master of a bunch of cowards hiding in the shadows and a miserable forest of stone.'

The pretence entirely spent, hidden figures around them stepped out. Some ten or so of them, armed with assorted weaponry, a light clinking noise betraying armour under their heavy robes. In truth, Ox hadn't been sure that they were there, but confirmation of so many and their armament was worse than he could have hoped.

'I see your impudence is as I feared after all. I had so hoped otherwise.'

'Enough talk. Gut the bastard boss, so we can throw down with the rest of them.' Boar was grinning ear to ear, his eyes bright and alive in the candlelight. He edged closer to the approaching men.

For once, Ox was inclined to agree with him.

'I pity you and your breed.' The Paladin's voice was disdainful. 'Such base creatures. No attempt to understand mankind's divine mission or purpose, happy as a pig in swill, indulging in the sins of the flesh.'

'Why am I here? I am tired of hearing your empty words.' Ox unsheathed his cleaver.

'Do you know what happens to a man's soul when he passes, Butcher? I am going to help you to understand, to illuminate you.'

Ox knew all too well what happened to man when he died. He had seen it firsthand altogether too many

times not to. There was no saviour for the men that he had left with their lifeblood spilling out over cobblestones, into the dirt, those left screaming as they tried to push organs from a split belly back into their bodies. Most often when a man expired, he bled everywhere, shat himself or puked and screamed futile curses at his enemy. Never did he meet death with the serene grace that the priests told their followers about.

Illumination was a very poor term indeed.

‘Piss on your illumination. I do not intend to die today.’

‘Such a pity.’ The Paladin’s voice betrayed no compassion at all.

‘But examples must be made. And you are the first.’

He turned his head to regard Boar. ‘You are the one that they call Boar? You may pass if you wish. My agenda is with the Master Butcher alone for the present.’

There was a moment of surprise. Eventually, Boar spoke, his tone brash and unimpressed. ‘What diablerie is this?’ He stared down the impassive faces surrounding him as he spoke.

‘Dablerie?’ This seemed to amuse the Paladin, his lip curled upwards at the edges of his mouth. ‘We are prelates of the Lord Solthecius. Our word is sacrosanct.’ He gestured with a gauntleted hand and three of the hooded men blocking their path nearest to Boar stepped aside. Boar looked at the strangers, sizing them up. Only the Paladin met his gaze without flinching. He chuckled, a dangerous predatory rumble promising nothing but carnage. He turned to Ox and for a long moment the

two men exchanged a frank, honest silence, the first that Ox had ever known the Beast to offer.

Vicious, crazed eyes, dark, bottomless, like death. Eyes that did not know mercy, compassion or friendship, only hatred and rage. He saw Boar for what he was at last, what he had always known what the Beast was, yet somehow forgotten.

A killer and not much else.

There seemed to be a moment when Ox might have hoped that the berserker fury might well take over as it had so many times, that baiting the Beast with bodies to fight would be enough. It stretched out for what felt like an age; the morning breaking somewhere but unable to pierce the foggy darkness they stood in. Everything was still and the world waited, its breath held.

But Ox was a pragmatist. He knew that this couldn't play out in his favour and how it would end.

Boar shrugged his shoulders.

'I think that about settles it then. You've got some stones Master Butcher, but this fight is not mine. Better live to kill another day than die fighting another man's battle.' He shouldered his way past the group. 'About time the Butcher's Guild was led by a new man. Only the strongest survive, only the strongest deserve to lead and I am stronger than all.'

Ox watched him pass, the figures that had let Boar past stepping back in line again, hiding him from view. The Master Butcher knew it would be the last time that he would ever see Boar.

That he would have to face this alone, unaided.

'Time to pray and beg pardon for your sins.' The Paladin reached behind him and drew a long, heavily decorated claymore from its scabbard, cold eyes never once leaving Ox. He heard the men around them form a circle behind him, cutting off any possibility of escape. It was of no matter. The Master Butcher had given up that possibility long ago.

The world shrank to just the two of them in the circle. Nothing else mattered, not now. Only the strongest survive, Boar had said. Simple, irrefutable logic, especially when staring death in the face. Ox didn't feel very strong any more. It had all been drained from him. He was tired. Tired from questioning himself, the weight of how he had spent his years suddenly pressing him down.

Ox took a weary breath, trying to roll his shoulders and ease some movement back into them after the long night. He thought of his life until now, all of the faces of the men and women that he had killed. He thought of Jacques and the family he had lost long ago. Remembered how he felt looking down at Brisket, and the Butchers' vengeance. Wondered whether he had found some measure of salvation for himself, in the last.

Probably not.

Sometimes, there is nothing a man can do but play the hand he is dealt. The Master Butcher boldly walked forward, accepting, towards his fate. Another crack of thunder from the storm overhead and once again, the rain began to fall.



THE RON ORIGINS



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THE OLD RAEDLANDER

The nightmare woke Theron as it always did, the sudden sense of terror no less potent than the memory of cold steel piercing his skin. The dream was as vivid as life, a huge brute from the Skaldic Imperial Guard holding Theron down, another approaching with his blade drawn and a haunting look in his eyes. It ended that way every time, leaving the infantryman startled awake and gasping for air, heart hammering in his chest.

As the fog and sense of desperate urgency began to fade, Theron took in his unfamiliar surroundings. Although his head couldn't have been down for long, after so many days on the roads all places had begun to blur into one, often leaving him disorientated when he first awoke.

This time Theron saw that he was holed up in an old barracks, sprawled out on a dirty cot. It was a clear night for once, autumnal clouds and storms absent, moonlight shining through the windows to bathe every surface with its ghostly hue.

He didn't need to look at himself to see that he was soaked through with sweat in spite of the chill in the air, thin tunic plastered to his skin. He shuddered involuntarily. The horrific memory haunting his dreams was as vivid as ever, forcing him to relive the trauma of the moment in every exacting detail.

At least he hadn't soiled himself this time.

There were two other men in the abandoned

barracks with him, both snoring. Theron didn't know their names, nor would he have cared to ask even if they had been awake. The men hadn't been here when he had laid his head down, and he was only thankful that neither appeared to have stolen anything from the meagre supplies in his pockets. They were just soldiers like he was, happy to have a roof over their heads whilst they slept.

Theron wondered if they ever dreamt as he did. The Century Wars had left him scarred, a mind filled with horrific sounds, the likes of which man should never know but could never forget. The clash of metal, the roar of cannon, the screams of the dying; all of these and more rose to the surface whenever the world grew quiet, grim reminders of the grisly battles he had endured. Every time the infantryman closed his eyes he would see a different face, pleading with him. Friend or foe, it was always the same, a lost soul begging for the pain to end.

Theron rolled off of the cot as quietly as he could, and started pulling his boots on. He knew from past experience he wouldn't manage any more sleep this eve.

When he looked up, he saw a reflection of himself staring back from the window glass. Even as a distorted image, a crack running over the surface and through his hairline, his face looked gaunt and tired. All of the miserable soldiers that shared his fate looked the same. Abandoned stragglers, survivors of decimated regiments, or simply lost and far from home; they

belonged to a forgotten generation of men and women without a place to return to in the aftermath of the wars. He was just another of their brotherhood, one more infantryman with no purpose in a time without conflict.

Infantryman. Even the name was a joke. It was an identity from a past life, meant to be over now. That's what the people safely ensconced in their cities and towns said, after all. The Century Wars had ended, so everyone could go home and live better, more comfortable lives.

Theron ran one hand through his hair, knotted and matted together after long days without being washed, the same dirty brown as his scraggly and unkempt beard. Once upon a time when he had belonged to the world, he had preferred to remain clean shaven. Days long passed.

He stared around at the barracks' state of disrepair. Cracks ran across the plaster of the walls and the roof had fallen in over one corner, the debris dusty and old. Green vines snaked through broken tiles underfoot, every surface discoloured by grime or dirt. Children had thrown stones through most of the windowpanes, and splinters of glass lay on the ground, covered in misty smudges. The unwashed stench of Theron and the other two men was masked by the thick odour of piss, and damp rot.

This was the real end to the wars, as experienced by the soldiers that fought in it, not the peasants that rejoiced in the streets, nor the nobles celebrating the accolades of peace.

It disgusted Theron, almost as much as it left him feeling betrayed.

‘Smash it! Smash it down!’ A gang of youths surrounded the large statue, several of them swinging long sledgehammers into the grey stone, their peers cheering every impact. Theron was too far way to see the likeness of the figure, but it looked like a memorial to one war hero or another, a vague shape of a man holding a long spear.

The adolescent group were akin to a pack of jackals surrounding their prey, cackling idiotically. Even at distance he could see a thin coat of white dust coating most of them. Their scrawny arms had so far been unable to strike with enough force to do anything but chip the surface of the statue, their efforts slowly eroding away the features and little else.

Theron rolled his eyes as he watched, wondering where the spiteful children had stolen the tools from. The heads of the mallets were dark iron, spotted with rust so bright it was still visible under the coat of detritus.

If they’d taken them from a Mason’s Guild yard, the children would more than likely be strung up by the afternoon. The Guilds did not permit such infractions, even from the young, and the state had no power to challenge the mighty mercantile institutions now they had ended the Century Wars.

‘Show them what we think of their precious general!’ Another dull impact, followed by the rattle of stone

hitting the ground.

At last the tide had turned, and the relentless assault had begun to fracture the statue, the mighty figure unable to continue weathering the storm of blows. Theron could see deep cracks had begun to snake across the figure, and as he watched, the group's efforts were finally rewarded, the fist holding the spear haft shattering from the main body.

It was an ignoble end for the unknown hero, and what they had stood for.

Theron had seen enough, and continued walking. Scenes like this were not unusual in his travels. The aftermath of the wars had brought anarchy in some of the cities and towns, and Valficio was no different. All the way on the road from Gacildra in the far south, there had been signs of the disaffected populace at best, outbreaks of violence at worst.

Vagrant soldiers represented the face of suffering that no one wanted to see; the murderers that had stolen their loved ones, the pathetic remnants of their national pride, and a harrowing reminder of the poverty and homelessness which plagued most of the Sovereign States. If they looked hard enough, a person could find whatever scapegoat they wanted in the men and women left walking the roads in the aftermath of the Century Wars.

There were plenty of stories of soldiers being attacked by packs of thugs and adolescents, unable to fight off their assailants in their weakened condition. Theron

had no desire to become one of those unfortunates, his final breath spent bloody as he died in an alley somewhere.

In years to come, if history remembered the end of the Century Wars as peaceful then it would be a monumental heap of bullshit. These were dangerous times.

'Hey, you! You're a soldier!' Theron didn't bother look in the direction of the elderly voice. 'Hey! Look at me! You are a soldier, right?' This time, the words were accompanied by an urgent tug of his sleeve. He wheeled around, one hand raised to cuff away the fingers grasping him, the blow paused in mid-air when he saw they belonged to a decrepit old crone.

'That's right, belt an old woman like me in the jaw, won't you?' The hag spat the words at him, enmity clear in her eyes. 'You thugs are all the same. Show some respect for the uniform you wear, and stop those damned brats from breaking up the monument over there!'

Theron offered her a despairing look as he swatted away her fingers from his coat. 'Do you even know what uniform this is, you old hag?' He pointed at the shield on his coat. 'I'm a Raedlander, not some Figeon footslogger from your piss poor armies. Your precious statue means little to me, even less than those in my homeland do, just a lump of stone covered in bird shit.'

'What difference does that make? We're all on the same side now, didn't you hear?' Her eyes were fierce. 'My Maurice would have stopped them, Solthecius watch his soul. But I suppose you wouldn't understand

that, would you? Just another craven coward, shaming his uniform like all the others.'

Theron knew that once he would have reacted to such an accusation. Similar insults had never failed to send fire shooting through his veins, and gotten him into vicious fights which only finished in blood. By now though, even that rage had been exhausted. Creating yet more misery for the world was no answer, only an endless circle threatening to drag him under once more, and return him to an existence he had vowed to break from.

Besides, he didn't even know whether he deserved to be called a soldier anymore, just as the name infantryman felt hollow. What was the worth of a man from a nation betrayed by rebellion? Not much, as far as Theron could tell.

His regiment had been one of the few Royal Raedlander divisions posted overseas with the rank and file infantry, the pinnacle of elite soldiery amongst their countrymen. The proud griffin rampant on their standard flew a head higher than any other supporter as the Raed armies marched across the land, and they shared the greatest camaraderie of any unit.

Yet with the advent of the military coup at home, the Royal Raedlanders had been abandoned by their commanders just the same as the other regiments, left to fight their way home with no support or supplies.

No matter their superior training and equipment, it hadn't taken long before their number had been

decimated. Casualties, disease, and even desertion, each took their bloody toll. Theron had been one of the fortunate few, the ever-diminishing handful of men and women that survived each engagement and simply tried to keep going, right up until the end of the war.

The conditions they had endured by the announcement of the armistice had been so brutal and bleak as to leave a taste in the mouth that would never be gone. Surrender was scant reward for their sacrifices, even less than betrayal had been.

Once infatuated by the prestige of being a Royal Raedlander, Theron didn't even know whether he wanted to be a soldier by the end. His sense of patriotism and valour were both dead in a ditch somewhere, along with most of his friends. All that had been left of his regiment was a bunch of hard-nosed bastards, tough as nails and desperate to survive at all costs, a far cry from the noble ideal they had previously represented.

Like the rest of them, as much as he might have started a proud soldier, in those dark days, Theron had been simply reduced to a man, trying to survive. It had been a bitter thing to admit, that all of his aspirations had turned to ashes.

He brushed away such thoughts. Looking back only led to nightmares, and he was haunted by those enough when he slept.

Theron shouldered his kit bag and pushed his way

past the old woman. It was time to leave Valficio behind, just as he had done so with all of the other cities. There would be no refuge for him here, any more than he had previously found in any other settlement throughout the rest of Figo. Behind him the crone's complaints turned into jeers, her voice slowly dying out as he kept walking, until eventually he ceased to be able to hear her at all.

It didn't matter that he knew ignoring the old woman and avoiding drawing attention to himself had been the best course of action. He still could recall the venom in her voice, and the spiteful words.

Just another craven coward, shaming his uniform like all the others.

He kept his head down as he walked his lonely path away from civilization once more. On the horizon, a dark line of trees and the distant peaks of mountains beckoned, the sun slowly rising above them.

REVEILLE

‘Aye, I’ve never known it as bad as this. Not by a long way.’ Mugger belched, red cheeks and nose flushing even brighter pink. His breath reeked of sour wine, the liquid in his wineskin more akin to vinegar than anything else.

Theron couldn’t help snorting. The drunk soldier’s words were laughable. None of them had ever known anything other than wartime until now, born during the conflict and signed up as boys. He doubted even the oldest man or woman in the world could remember a pre-war age.

There were seven of them in total, all huddled over around the fire. Each had wrapped themselves in whatever blankets they possessed to their name, trying to keep the cold at bay. Most were old army issue or hand-me-downs, rough sackcloth stained dark brown with the grime and dirt of a hundred campaigns.

Mugger’s had been dyed purple at some point, the colour now fading and worn bare in patches. It marked him as Valentian as much as his accent did. Once upon a time, the Kingdom of Valentia had boasted one of the proudest military traditions of all, even insisting on trivial details such as colouring their troops kit with state colours. They had been alone in such as pointless gesture, soon running out of coin to pay for such extravagances as the war dragged on.

In Theron’s experience, it was a display designed to

hide the simple fact that their armies were untrained boys and girls, scared and homesick. It was little wonder their country had been decimated by the conflict. The valiant knights were long gone from that land, in their place a cold and miserable peasantry ill prepared for fighting.

Mugger alone seemed talkative amongst the figures surrounding the campfire, his drunken voice drawling on regardless of whether anyone showed sign of listening. His words echoed through the silent forest, accompanied only by the crackling of the fire, and the occasional sound of an animal moving through the undergrowth. The rest of the sorry bunch were content to simply warm themselves at the fire, hoping to resist the harsh winter weather for a little bit longer.

Theron knew one of them, the young lad sitting apart from the rest, wouldn't survive the night. He was a scrawny wretch, no meat on his bones, skeletal frame visible where his ill-fitting clothes were a size too small. Unlike the rest, he had no blanket or shawl to cover himself, and lay on the frozen ground in the foetal position, passed out. The stench of death was thick about him, the sour milk smell of rot mixed in with the scent of dried sweat and grime they all wore.

Theron didn't even know the lad's name. Mugger had called the boy Blondie, on account of his straw-coloured hair, and it suited well enough. None of the others, Theron included, would have given the boy bedding or clothes of their own, even if they weren't

already wearing every layer they owned just to keep the bitter cold at bay. It was survival of the fittest, each looking out only for themselves even amongst friends – and none of the men and women here now shared that camaraderie besides.

Leftovers from their regiments, deserters, or criminals, each had their own story as to how they got to be sheltering in the woods. They had banded together this evening for survival only, a group of them more easily able to gather wood for the fire, and to fight off bandits or predators overnight. Come morning, they would most likely part ways again. They were not alone. Scores of soldiers existed this way, severed from the world by the Century Wars, and wandering aimlessly. Theron knew from experience that after the evening was over he would be unlikely to see any of the faces currently around the fire again. There were just too many people out there, and too many campfires.

Not to mention the hazards which claimed their lives in between.

He had lost count of the number of frozen corpses he'd passed on the road, starving stragglers who had no choice but to try and bed down and wait for morning in the darkness, alone. Such desperation was tantamount to suicide.

'It was the fault of the bloody Castellyians, this war. You know that? Its why things have gone to shit now.' The outburst drew Theron's attention back to the

group, waking him up from his quiet musing.

‘Them and their bloody pride. They’ve always been trying to take that which doesn’t belong to them. The whole country, stinking thieves, rapists and murderers. For years, they’ve wanted nothing but to ruin the rest of us.’ The sharp voice belonged to Ferro, a small Pigeon man with fierce eyes, sitting to Mugger’s right.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Nationalism like this was rife in the fledgling Empire of the Free Cities, especially amongst the old soldiery. A life spent fighting enemies from other states couldn’t so easily be put behind a man. All sorts of vile slurs, accusations and warnings had been scrawled over walls throughout every Sovereign State, etched in chalk or daubed in paint.

Once, Theron would have admitted that he held some sympathy for the viewpoint. Like many, he had struggled during the war with not demonising the enemy, and remembering that they were just men, flesh and blood as he was.

In the times after the war, when he had met those same men and women, and seen how closely they resembled the people he’d served with, Theron had begun to put any such thoughts behind him.

It hadn’t been overnight though.

To his shame, Theron had his fair share of stories of violent brawls in and outside of taverns, beating men bloody just for the sake of a flag that no longer meant anything. The first days after the armistice had been dark ones he’d rather forget, and one of the reasons

why Theron preferred to walk the long road alone, forgoing companionship. Leave that bond for those that deserved it, and not a man such as Theron had once been, or Ferro still was.

He kept quiet, the reaction of a coward, a snake that didn't want to draw attention to itself.

'Easy there, Ferro. No need for that kind of talk.' Mugger tried to salvage the moment, the heavysset Valentian's tone uneasy despite his friendly words. He smiled under the bristles of his moustache. 'We're all friends here.'

'Friends? Since when have I ever wanted anything to do with Valentian scum like you?' Ferro spat his retort at the larger man, eyes blazing with a fiery intensity that belied the frosty temperature around him.

'You didn't seem to mind sharing his stew earlier, Ferro.' Another voice, this time belonging to a hulking Skaldic cavalryman still wearing his crested doublet, proud eagles emblazoned over his chest. The rest of them laughed in response to the words.

Ferro shot the cavalryman a filthy look. For a moment, it looked like he would open his mouth and reply, before he clearly thought better of it. With easily a foot over the Ferro, the cavalryman was a brute, and his present smile looked like it could very well turn down at the edges in an instant.

The tips of his ears turned beetroot red, Ferro swore under his breath and leapt to his feet, leaving the group for the darkness. Theron watched him go. Vile little

men like Ferro didn't deserve to share the fire with the rest. More than anything, the men and women here were all united by their shared experiences. It didn't matter who they had once fought for.

A hard life on the roads, and wandering through the country with plenty of time to think had soon taught Theron who was to blame for the war, and its atrocities. He would never forgive the nobles for their hubris in starting the conflict, blithely sending hundreds of thousands to their deaths, nor the generals for betraying their men and standing mutely by. The soldiers were only victims following orders, that was all. The only difference across all of the Sovereign States was their accent.

It was difficult for a man of any intelligence to hate a reflection of himself.

Dawn came, the sun melting the snow on the branches of the trees as it crested the horizon. Theron had sheltered under such a tree for the night, icy water now dripping over his blanket and the exposed skin of his face, waking him with a start. Cursing, he sat up and blinked away the residue that covered his eyes, trying to shield them with his hand as they adjusted to the light.

Morning had arrived, and with it the aftermath of last night's events was laid bare. Where Blondie had laid was only a messy vermilion stain discolouring the pristine white snow, brighter red trails leading away in

all directions. It looked as though the predators of the forest had taken their fill last night, the boy reduced to meat for their ravenous appetites.

Theron wondered if the boy had woken at all since he stumbled over to the group, and collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut. There had been little ceremony to his ungainly fall, but those might have been more humane final moments than waking to find that he was under attack by wolves.

The others were still asleep, but for the cavalryman. Eyes glazed over and staring directly forwards, the Skaldic man's skin was pale from the cold, his lips blue. His throat had been slit during the night, the wound a thin red line painted over icy skin, blood staining his tunic crimson. It had been half torn, half cut open in a struggle, right through the heraldic eagle stitched into it. From where Theron sat across the smouldering fire, it looked like the bird itself had been killed, along with the man.

If the animals hadn't taken him, it couldn't have been long before dawn that the murder had taken place.

Theron wasn't surprised to see that Ferro was gone, along with his bedding. There was little doubt he had had committed the crime in an act of spiteful vengeance. The roads knew no justice and the murder would go unpunished now Ferro had fled, as long as he was careful enough to not cross these paths again.

It was time for Theron to move on as well. The words of last night had reminded him of his own shame,

and that he didn't feel either welcome or a sense of camaraderie here either.

Before he left, Theron was careful to gently close the cavalryman's eyes, fingertips brushing over cold skin. It looked like Ferro had already looted through the man's possessions, leaving nothing of worth behind, not that Theron would have taken anything if it had been here.

He had that pride left to him, at least.

Theron stood, and resumed his path northwards, one frozen foot after another through the snow. He got about twenty paces away from the rough camp, the faint smell of the embers lost behind him, before a voice hailed him.

'Hey! Hey there! You, Raedlander!' Theron stopped in his tracks. The voice belonged to one of the women, the pitch higher than a man's tone, although no less powerful.

He turned to face the woman as she caught up with him, breath streaming out from her mouth and into the frosty air as small clouds. She wore the uniform of a Figeon officer, tan leather brigandine still dark, leggings replaced with rough wool trousers. Her tawny hair was tied up in a messy knot, an errant bang having escaped to fall across her forehead.

She smiled at him, the gesture oddly gentle for the harsh world which they lived in. She was pretty in an understated way, a mischievous glint to her eyes that reached her lips, now Theron had seen it.

'I saw what you did back there, for poor Günther.'

Theron nodded. The act didn't need words put to it. He had just paid an honest decency in the face of yet another injustice on the roads, to go with a hundred more.

'You always walk alone, right? You're one of those types? A lone wolf?' She stared into his eyes, her own coloured soft hazel, and welcoming.

'I am. Don't much care for company.'

'Me either. So, that suits us both fine. Where are you headed?' She cocked an eyebrow, inquisitively.

'North, up past Rue Aliano, along the old pilgrim path.' Theron jerked a thumb behind him, in the direction of his travels.

'Getting towards Erskirad? What's up in that blasted wasteland? Even colder up there than it is here, all the year around.'

Theron shrugged. 'Never been up that way before, that's all. If it doesn't fit, I'll catch a boat to Eisnor, or back to Raedland, maybe.' In truth, the last thing on his mind was returning home, but the woman didn't have to know that.

'Sounds as good a place as any to me. Let's get going.' The woman walked past him, the hypnotic sway of her hips visible, even under her thick winter clothing. Theron watched for a moment, until she turned around to look at him.

'Aren't you coming then?' Theron hesitated. It had been a long time since he had known company. Yet, there was something disarming about this woman, a kindness that he had hoped remained in the world,

even in his darkest hours. Forcing himself to smile back, he nodded to her and started forward.

‘Name’s Athena, by the way.’

‘Theron.’ He wondered if the woman truly was an officer, or had merely looted the uniform from some unfortunate. She had an easy-going air to her that didn’t match it very well.

‘Well met, Theron.’ Athena smiled at him again. ‘So, tell me a story about how you got here...’

Side by side they walked over the snow, as a light breeze brought a fresh shower of the thin white dust, quickly concealing their footprints behind them.

ATHENA

The screams of the dying surrounded him. Agonised wailing, voices drawn into incoherent screams from the pain, unintelligible and raw. Skewered on the spear of an enemy, or belly slit open by the swipe of a sword, no man or woman died quietly. Not even the poor souls hit by cannon fire were safe, their bodies carved into pieces by the chain shot but their mouths streaming gibberish as their minds tried to process such massive trauma.

Worse still were those who managed words, their final messages somehow all the more haunting. In voices trembling from fear or pain, they begged for the forgiveness of loved ones or offered prayers to whichever deity they recognised, their passion and heartbreak plain to hear. Both outnumbered those that cursed the world and their enemies. When death cast a shadow over the battlefield, those that felt its touch seldom had the strength to waste on hatred, only regrets.

Theron was yet far from surrendering to death's embrace and knew only anger, bellowing at the uncaring gods in their darkened skies as the carnage enveloped him. No creature worth devotion would allow such bloodshed to be visited upon their faithful flock.

The man holding him down by the shoulders belted him across the face, dazing Theron, and silencing him for a moment. Theron tasted blood in his mouth, sharp and coppery, warmer than any broth he had eaten in months. Through blurry eyes Theron watched another

soldier approach, his heavy green jacket like a deathly shroud. Something metallic shone in his hand, sharp and terrifying, for all that Theron couldn't make it out clearly.

Closer, and Theron could see the blade at last, a long rapier. Its sharp edge matched the cruel smile of the infantryman holding it, a cold line bereft of any warmth. Theron's anguish was abruptly replaced by fear and he began pleading, struggling harder against his unseen captor, bucking against their grip. Still the smiling face came closer, only inches from Theron's own, the breath sweet on his skin, gentle and soft-

Theron lurched forward, waking suddenly to see Athena smiling at him. One hand was on his shoulder, where she had been gently shaking him.

'Same dream?'

Theron nodded dumbly, a coarse hand brushing scraggly locks away from his eyes. He was panting heavily, and his forehead was clammy to the touch, a thin layer of sweat across the flesh.

'You were talking again. Something about the Greens. I didn't know that Raedland had much cause to fight the Old Skaldic Empire during the wars. I thought that your lads were all stationed in Valentia and Figo.'

The softness in her voice was soothing, helping to calm his racing pulse and relax his breathing.

'We were in the end, those of us that were left. But at the start, we were all over. Raedland used to have colonies in just about every corner of the world. When

the civil war happened at home most of us were cut off, and had to try and make it on our own.' He paused, remembering the sorry remnants of his regiment by the time they'd reached Valentia. They had been unrecognisable from the men and women they once had been.

'The garrisons in Figo and Valentia were made up of stragglers that made it back. When we got there, we discovered most of the rest had already fled from the mainland. By then, most of us had spent so long trying to get to safety, the final betrayal was just too much. We simply gave up on seeing Raedland again, and reinforced the few men left behind.'

'Why not just surrender? Live out your lives in the safety of a prison cell somewhere, instead of fighting?' Athena looked into the distance. 'The fighting was hell. Too many good men and women lost, for no good reason that I could tell you.'

'Because we don't do that.' The answer was automatic, said without thinking. Theron wondered how long the sentiment would remain, when so much of the rest of his identity as a soldier had already slipped away behind him. The sudden thought tugged at his mind until he pushed it away again.

Athena was frowning, and he smiled sadly. 'We didn't do that, I mean. Not the Royal Raedlander regiments. Our creed was built on pride, on courage in the face of overwhelming odds.' The words sounded hollow even as he said them, false and from another time when

they hadn't truly been tested under fire.

'Didn't do you any favours, I see. You were left to die in your trenches and on the field by the men and women commanding you, and bull like that kept you there.' Athena got up, and dusted herself down. 'Come on, time to get moving, Raedlander.'

As they had passed along the roads heading northwards, the scenery had changed as dramatically as the weather. At last the blasted winter had begun to thaw and reveal green grass beneath the frost, and the sun rose earlier, spending more time overhead, warming their tired bodies for longer. It was a blessed respite. The road was no place to be during the winter, the pair having spent long nights frozen through, huddled together for any warmth they could take.

Athena had fast become as close a friend as Theron ever had known. Her quick wit and sharp tongue often kept his mood at bay when faced with adversity, or led him to laughter in easier times. She was easygoing and kind, yet assertive and dependable. Having a conversational partner had reminded Theron of the camaraderie shared by his brothers and sisters, the other men and women stationed with him during his time as an infantryman. In both instances, the adversity of circumstance had bred a strong and unbreakable bond.

Having someone dependable to stand watch whilst sleeping was enough of a boon on its own, affording

peace of mind from bandits, or worse. When his turn came, Theron would steal glances at Athena as she slept, and wonder at her past. She remained a mystery he could not fathom, regardless of what she had told him. An officer in the Figeon state militia, only mobilised in the final months of the Century Wars, she still seemed to have plenty of stories from much earlier in the conflict, of battlefields and sieges which a simple auxiliary militia had likely never seen.

Pretty in her own unconventional way, her features were unblemished by scars or the nervous twitch some soldiers failed to shake after seeing friends taken in the most horrific circumstance. Theron couldn't imagine she had known the war which she spoke of, but the details were rich enough he didn't doubt her word.

Theron had no idea why such a woman would choose the life of a vagabond. She was no lost soul like he was, or any of the other unfortunates consigned to a life walking the roads for that matter.

They had been walking for most of the morning, the sun almost at its zenith before Athena's eye picked out a silhouette on the horizon. She pointed off away from them in the direction they were headed, her features lit up with excitement. 'Hey! That place up ahead could be perfect to rest for a couple of days, Raedlander.'

She seemed to have a better eye than he did, and it took several minutes before it came into his own sight, a dark square against a backdrop of trees, partially hidden from sight.

Although their days had become easier, it was obvious to both of them that they remained exhausted. They had survived the winter, but barely, clothes loose on their bodies from lack of sustenance. Hunting and foraging for food in the unforgiving cold had been difficult, forcing them to survive on the paltry scraps Theron had saved from the summer beforehand.

A day or two of rest under a closed roof, and with a little luck, a warm meal, would go a long way to restoring both of them. He didn't need to ask Athena to know that she would agree with him. Both had familiarity enough of their hard life for it to be obvious.

As they grew closer, Theron saw that the building was a rough stone shack, with a dark thatched roof still drying out after being soaked through by snow. Fortunately, it looked abandoned. No smoke issued forth from the chimney, and weeds had grown around the walls, white mounds still piled up against them as the remnants of the snow melted.

It promised infinitely better rest than the cold ground.

Inside was unfurnished, but for a fireplace covered in dusty soot, and a broken wooden cupboard in one corner, bare of contents. Opposite was a set of rickety wooden steps, leading downwards into a cellar of sorts, a tiny space that reeked of mould and spoiled meat. Whomever had made their home here had long since departed, taking all of their possessions with them.

It would do marvellously.

The flames ravenously devoured the logs which Theron had thrown on the fire, as though it too was famished from starvation. As he watched the bark blackened and peeled back, flames licking at the surface, the ends smouldering embers. Underneath, the softer wood darkened, more resistant, but already its surface catching.

He had stared at a similar sight every time they had made campfire over the long weeks, hypnotised by the way the orange light moved. This was the first he had been afforded the luxury of doing so without the biting wind whipping at him, or twisting the flames unnaturally at its whim. The fire almost seemed relaxed, a calm, soothed beast left to slumber contently.

Next to him Athena stirred, stretching her legs and arms, and moaning slightly. Theron smiled at her. The half-light complimented her features well, a strong jaw softened by the shadows, skin glowing with an umber tan to mask the pale freckles he knew.

She caught his eyes, and chuckled. 'Draw a picture. It will last for longer, Raedlander.'

Theron quickly turned his body away. Both of them had taken the opportunity to strip off their soaked and stained outer clothes to hang by the fireplace, and now lay on their bedding wearing only breeches and light tunic. Seeing more of Athena's flesh and feminine curves than he was used to had caused a stirring sensation Theron had thought forgotten long since.

She laughed even more heartily at his reaction, the tone good natured and friendly. 'Gods, Theron, I'm hardly a maid. You look as hungry as a wolf!'

Theron shook his head, shaggy hair moving from side to side. 'Sorry.'

'Don't be. Precious little else to stare at in here, I'm not so proud as to ignore the compliment.' She shot him a deliberately lecherous look of her own. 'Besides, you're not half bad to look at either.'

Theron offered her a lopsided smile as she shuffled over onto her belly and looked him up and down, eyes glittering in the light. She was beautiful, the bleak surroundings fading away.

'Where did you come from, Athena?'

She grinned. 'That's an odd question to ask a lass at a moment like this. I think the time for clever lines to bait your lure has passed.'

'Just... just, I thought to ask is all. I know nothing of you, really.' Theron thought he detected a hint of annoyance cross her eyes for a moment, before it passed.

'That's because there isn't much to know.' She shook her head. 'I grew up in a little village near Talfallore, which was annexed by Castellya not long after my first bleeding. We fled to the city with the rest of the people dispossessed by the invading armies. All along the way, I listened to the stories the soldiers escorting us would tell of the wars, enough to know that it wasn't going well. As soon as we reached the city, I signed up for the militia.'

Athena broke for a moment, her features hardening. 'It took the Castellyians over a year to commit to a siege, but when the war finally came to our gates again, I fought as hard as any. We couldn't defend our poor little village, not even with walls around it. But there was no way that I was going to stand by and let the bastards into Talfallore.' She closed her eyes, clearly remembering different, and harder times. 'I saw enough horrors standing on those walls to last me a lifetime.'

Theron found her hand, warm to the touch, and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

'Worst were the great war engines.' When Talfallore fell, it was one of those fucking machines that did it.' Athena shot Theron a dark look. 'Don't ever let some pompous cretin tell you otherwise. Bravery was always on the defender's side, with us, no matter how many fell from the cannon fire or gave their lives repelling the siege towers from the walls.'

'But we couldn't stop the Rat Catcher, and his gasses. You ever see those poison clouds, Raedlander?'

Theron shook his head.

'Be glad that you haven't. The gas was thick, mustard yellow, hanging in the air like mist in the early morning. It stank of garlic, and that was usually the only warning you had before it was on you. Then you just had to abandon your position and run.' Tears shone in Athena's eyes. 'That's how they took the city. Poisoned themselves doing it, just as much as they did us. When we were marched out of our homes, I saw

as many Castellyian corpses all bloated and covered in sores from the gas as I did our own, their final moments spent in just as much agony.'

'What does it say for man, when he's prepared to unleash hell like that on his own kin? Even the most bloodthirsty animals wouldn't go that far. Part of me died in the final day, never to return.'

She shook quietly, her piece finally said, a terrible secret no longer now it had been let loose into the world.

Theron leant forward, free hand reaching towards her. Athena flinched away at first, eyes wary of him like cattle watching an approaching predator, before she gave in and let him pull her close. For a moment, it crossed Theron's mind her nervousness might be from fear of rejection now she had shared her dark memories, as though he would suddenly be repelled by her, or push her away.

He could understand that. No one had survived the Century Wars intact, each of them harbouring a host of irrational doubts and fears not present before. He kissed her forehead, rough fingers brushing away an errant strand of hair away from her cheek, coloured copper in the light.

He intended to prove he would not abandon her, and that her fears would not be realised.

They spent the rest of the evening without speaking again, Athena trembling in his arms as she remembered the horrors which she had survived, and the faces of those fallen in such bleak times.

UNDER THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

Theron's eyes opened slowly, his first thoughts docile, and his breathing and pulse relaxed. It was a welcome respite not to be shaken back to consciousness by his nightmare for once. Light flooded all around him to cast a golden veil over the world, and for a moment he simply lay where he was, trying to savour the moment.

It was no use. Serenity had escaped him long since, left behind in times past, before he had been forced to grow harder and forget such contentment existed.

He rose onto one elbow, taking in his surroundings. The fire from the previous night had burned out completely, leaving only charred remains of the wood he'd thrown into the brazier, stained sooty black. The remnants lent a soft and strangely homely scent of charcoal to the room, permeating even through the damp mould and his own sorry stench. He was alone, the only sign of Athena the broken dust over the floor where she had bedded down next to him, her blankets now absent.

Theron rolled over, and pushed himself up to his knees. Where the pair had hung their clothes to dry last night he could see only his own coat and threadbare trousers. Rubbing the mist from his eyes with one hand, the other pulling his hair into a ponytail and away from his face, he shook off the last vestiges of slumber before rising to his feet to go in search of his companion.

It was quiet outside, the only sound the faint rustling of the nearby trees as an early springtime wind tickled their leaves. The sun was even brighter, richly bathing the scene and warm on his skin. During the bleak times of the Century Wars he might have considered this peace a paradise, as far from the misery and bloodshed as could be.

Athena was still nowhere to be seen, her absence unusual and disconcerting. Throughout their time together on the roads, Theron had rarely awoken after her, his nightmares tearing him from a tormented slumber most nights. In his experience, she had never gone to forage or scout the land in the early morning.

Walking around the perimeter of the dilapidated building, eyes scanning the horizon in all directions, Theron could feel his heart sinking. Placing his hands around his mouth like a funnel, he tilted his head back and called her name, turning to face a different direction each time he repeated it. The name was elongated by his elevated voice, turning the final syllable into a drawn-out note which cut through the silence.

His only answer was from a falcon far overhead, which offered him a piercing shriek before banking to fly swiftly southwards.

Theron continued his path, still shouting. By the time he had made his way back to the door, it was the voice of a man keening for a loved one, body wracked with grief.

Just as he had been betrayed before, so he had been again.

His first reaction was to give in to anger, seizing a rusty axe he saw half buried in the dirt, and taking it to a nearby tree. He fiercely hammered the iron blade over and over into the bark until his arms ached and sweat drenched his clothes, the aged tool's blunt edge denting and splintering the wood instead of cutting cleanly.

Eventually, even the mighty oak could sustain his assault no longer, and it mercifully toppled away from him, not crushing the shack by luck more than any judgement. As he stood next to the stump, breath ragged from screaming and exertion both, and his ears ringing from the sound of the dull metal cutting into the tree, Theron felt hopelessly impotent. He had run out of the yard, and attacked the tree like a child venting its anger for a broken toy, not a grown man.

The realisation stole his fury and reduced him to his knees, crying at the unjustness of the world and what might have been.

In days that followed, Theron worked through his sorrow in isolation, choosing to remain at the shack rather than returning to the road. Initially, he was content to lie to himself and ignore the dread feeling in his gut, hoping against all odds Athena would return and by staying he was simply waiting for her. Yet, as time wore on, even that voice was silenced by cold, hard, reality.

Athena was gone, and with her the final chance for some kind of acceptance in the new world.

She had been the only other soul he had encountered who had experienced the horrors of the wars, and had somehow avoided being turned into a heartless monster, the same as all of the others. The men and women in his regiment, the Skaldic cavalryman, a score of other faces he had seen on the roads, even Mugger. All of them had been changed by the wars, made harder, and dispassionate. Some even worse, turned hateful and callous, like Ferro.

Each of them had left Theron cold. He wasn't like them, his humanity drained to the point of being lost altogether. He couldn't be. It was all keeping him going, and meeting Athena had given him hope he had at last found a kindred spirit.

Yet, he realised Athena's revelation of her past had broken her. Some trauma a person buried so deep as never to be seen, because even speaking of it was gouging a bloody hole in the world, reopening an old wound which should be left well alone.

That had been why she left.

Facing Theron after he had learned her past would have been too hard, knowing he would look at her with sympathy, or even worse, pity. Pity at what she had experienced and understanding, when in reality, Athena likely bore the burden of survivor's guilt and a destructive self-loathing born from it. Why had she survived, when so many of her comrades had succumbed to the Rat Catcher's vile gasses? Had she fled from the walls and left them behind too soon, or just been lucky

enough to trap enough clean air in her bolt hole, whilst the others choked on poisonous fumes?

Having someone look at you kindly was an insult to the memory of the dead, and hopelessly infuriating both. Athena left because she didn't want to lash out at Theron, and come to despise him for trying to reach her, nor have to try and articulate her frustration or grief.

As much as her leaving had broken his heart, Theron found that he could respect that. He had his own memories, his own horrors to contend with.

It was always easier to run than it was face them.

A sudden noise outside woke Theron up, dragging him back to alertness. He sprang to his feet, already reaching for his belt where it lay on the floor next to his trousers. He had a moment in the near darkness to find his bearings, before the wood around the latch on the aged front door splintered as it was kicked in. A tall man burst through, followed by a bulkier figure, their faces difficult to make out now the fire had burnt close to embers. Behind them, Theron could see there was at least one more bandit, waiting.

'Well, what do we have here then, eh? An old soldier?' The taller man spoke, his reedy voice spiteful and mocking.

There was a sharp metallic slither as Theron drew his blade from its sheath, a long knife with a serrated edge on one side. Its size was masked by the gloom, giving

him at least one advantage against three assailants. He could see that both of the men inside the shack were armed, their shadows unable to hide the silhouette of their weapons, the third man still a mystery. Theron stepped a pace backwards as the first man advanced, increasing the distance to the figures blocking the light from the doorway.

Suddenly the tall man shrieked a battle cry and launched himself at Theron, both hands holding the hilt of his sword over his head. His raised blade caught the moonlight as he passed a window, reflecting the light and showing its surface to be lousy with spots of rust. Knowing that he couldn't possibly parry the weapon with his own, Theron reacted quickly and threw his body forward, underneath the bandits raised arms so that he was too close to be hit.

He collided with his attacker, the point of his knife easily piercing the man's woollen shirt, and into the flesh beneath. Unlike his opponent, Theron had been diligent in the upkeep of his weapon, keeping it clean and well oiled, and the blade sharp and deadly. As it punctured the skin, warm blood began to flood out over Theron's hand and the floor, the veteran snarling as he twisted the knife and wrenched upwards, cutting an even larger wound. The tall man let loose a bloodcurdling scream, and his sword clattered to the ground. Attack forgotten, he dropped to his knees as Theron tore the knife from his body, hands clasped together over his belly but unable to stop blood welling

up between them all the same.

With their accomplice sprawled out on the ground and whimpering pathetically, the other two men eyed Theron cautiously.

‘Poor old Patches. Never liked him much anyways. About time we had to stop sharing loot with the bastard.’ The sturdy man spoke in crude Valentian, his cruel tone matching his words and the long dagger in his hand. ‘You might have saved me a job, soldier.’

Now the final man had stepped into the shack, the moonlight from the doorway lit the scene slightly brighter, revealing him at last. Slight of stature, his face was covered in a wrap which obscured his jawline and hair and lent him a similar appearance to a Sult bandit. He held a short hatchet in his right hand, and stood with a lazy arrogance which betrayed a lack of fighting experience.

Theron knew he might need to exploit that inexperience if he were to survive the night. A tool more suited to cutting wood than fighting could still be deadly, even in the hands of fool.

Slowly the pair advanced on him, their steps moving them as far apart as the small space would allow until they flanked Theron either side, and he couldn’t keep his eye on both.

He didn’t wait for them to press their advantage, pouncing towards the shorter brigand. His boot went low, aiming a savage kick to the groin which took the inexperienced man by surprise and dropped him on

contact, before Theron whirled turned to face his other assailant. His attention returned just in time, the larger man's blade slashing sideways towards Theron. Diving away and in the same direction as the attack, Theron crashed in a heap as he tripped over his first opponent, the man now still and unmoving on the floor.

He made his feet back in time to see the large man stepping over his ally, lips locked into a spiteful grin and eyes full of malice. The bandit kicked at a shape by his foot, and Theron realised he had dropped his knife when he tripped, the weapon now scattering across the floor and into a wall.

Theron could sense the tide turning against him, and changed tact. 'Why are you doing this? I don't have anything for you to steal, look around you!'

'Who said I was a thief, come to steal your precious coppers, soldier? Maybe I just don't like your type. I don't care for heroes.'

'I'm no hero. All I want is to be left alone.'

'Too bad for you then. No state funeral.'

'You want me to leave? So you can have this place for yourself? Is that all scum like you want?' Theron could hear the groaning sounds of the shorter man from behind his assailant. If the brigand intended to attack again, Theron knew he had to goad him into it now, before it became two against one again.

The man laughed. 'All I want is to gut you, soldier.'

He lunged forward, the dagger's point glinting pale

silver. Theron stepped out of its path and to the left, fingers on his right hand grasping the man's wrist and twisting violently, whilst his free hand struck upwards with as much force as he could manage. As his open palm hit the larger man's extended elbow, there was a loud snapping sound and the thug yelped, his voice surprisingly high pitched.

Staggering away from Theron on uncertain feet, all resistance fled the bandit, his face pale as he clutched his ruined limb. 'You broke my arm, you bastard!'

His answer was a boot to the chest, driving him backwards into a corner and over the open stairwell leading to the cellar. Arms flailing, the thug overbalanced and disappeared from view, his descent accompanied by splintering sounds as he broke through the steps, and then a sickening and final thud.

Theron barely turned to face the shorter man before the flat head of the hatchet struck him across the jaw, and knocked him sprawling. Face numb, Theron didn't have time to be thankful his opponent had missed with the sharp edge, before he was kicked in the ribs with enough force to be driven backwards across the floor.

Theron rolled with the momentum, avoiding a second kick which sailed through empty air, and allowing him to grab his attacker's leg and drag him to the ground. Before his opponent could retaliate, Theron raised a fist into the air and brought it down into the man's concealed face, striking him across the nose. He was rewarded by seeing his opponent

momentarily dazed, and Theron risked scrambling away, reaching for his knife. He didn't know where the hatchet had gone in the darkness, and the close proximity made it poorly suited for the fight regardless.

As his fingers tightened around the soft leather grip, he felt the air driven from his lungs as the man crashed into him with a roar, sending them both down onto the dusty floor once more.

Dirty fingers with broken nails pushed painfully into Theron's swollen jaw, whilst the other hand pinned down his knife hand. Looking up, he saw the lower half of the wrap around his assailant's head had fallen away, revealing his face. A light stubble did little to hide an animalistic sneer stretched over pale skin, eyes glaring balefully from sunken sockets. As Theron stared, the man lunged forward, teeth snapping at him and trying to bite his exposed skin, spittle showering over his neck.

Horror and outrage lent Theron strength, and he tore his knife hand free from the savage's grip, driving the blade into the side of the man's torso in the same movement. As his adversary howled like a dog, Theron stabled again and again, brutally cutting into the meat, and feeling his body warm from the blood gushing over him.

Finally, the man stopped struggling and was still. His fate joined that of the tall bandit, life fled from both bodies in a wet stain on the floor.

Coughing up spit and gasping for air, a breathless

Theron struggled to rise to his feet. Slowly he staggered to the stairwell, leaning over to look at the second thug. Past broken wooden slats he lay at the bottom, body twisted at an unnatural angle. His broken neck looked strange and inhuman in the light, a strange expression forever etched over his features.

Theron grimaced, staring around him.

The world he had fought so hard to surround himself with, one without the violence and carnage of the wars had been destroyed. This bloody encounter had reminded him once more of what he had been, and still was, as much as he tried to hide it. Fighting the bandits had been practiced and automatic, too easy to have truly been born of desperate survival. Theron knew better than to lie to himself.

He looked at the last man, the ghoulish figure who had tried to sink his teeth into Theron, one flank now reduced to a bloody pulp. Theron felt as much a monster as his assailant. In the end, he was just the same as all of the others on the roads, those figures he so despised, and denied fraternity with.

It was for the best that Athena had left. He couldn't have stood her seeing him this way.

His breathing now calm, Theron walked to the doorway. Outside, the night was quiet and still, the ascendant moon bathing the land in a ghostly hue. Perhaps out somewhere beyond the fringes of man was the peace which he had lost in this place.

That would be the next path he walked.

Before he left the bloody scene behind him, Theron looked back at the corpses. They had been cowards, unfit to prey upon the strong, and no brothers to him. He found he couldn't help offering them a feral grin as he crossed the threshold, and stepped into the wilderness once more.

— THE LAST POST —

Sunlight filtered through the branches, painting the forest floor dappled brown and yellow. Theron strolled over the bed of rich, earthy soil and grass, carefully avoiding snagging his boots where roots had grown out from the ground. The great forest was filled with sounds besides his steps; birdsong, water gurgling from somewhere ahead, and a gentle wind sweeping between the trees. None of them seemed out of place or uninviting, only strangely calming to his ragged senses.

It was a haven as far away from the violence and torment of his past as could be. No matter the machinations of man, this place had stood for time immemorial, a bastion where the universe defied the destructive touch of humanity and its petty rivalries. Theron wasn't sure if he had escaped civilisation and found this hallowed ground by his own accord, or had been drawn here somehow by a strange and otherworldly design.

He didn't care.

At last, he was blissfully alone. Here he would suffer no condemnation, and no prejudice. This world simply offered acceptance. Even the nightmares had stopped since had entered the great forest, this primordial world releasing him from their torment at last.

Theron journeyed ever deeper into the depths, embracing them and leaving the roads and their struggles far behind.

As Theron grew closer, he saw that the break in the trees ahead was actually the edge of a cliff face, the ground dropping away to reveal a grand horizon of treetops. At the far side from where he stood, a fast-flowing stream ran over the edge, a beautiful waterfall cascading over the rocks as a fine mist.

A man waited for him in the clearing, watching Theron through eyes shrouded under a hood of leather and furs. As he approached, Theron was careful to present himself to this sentinel as unthreateningly as possible. The last thing he wanted was to make himself unwelcome in this sanctuary.

He was surprised to see a holster containing an iron at the stranger's belt. The weapons were a rare and dangerous creation from the tail-end of the Century Wars, employed only by gunners from specialist regiments. Theron had only encountered them once before, when the trenches at Flount had been overrun. They were deadly in such close confines, their buckshot capable of peppering multiple targets at once, or simply reducing a man to messy pulp at extreme proximity.

How one had managed to find its way into this sacred place could remain a mystery. Like most soldiers that had witnessed their deadly potency, Theron wanted nothing to do with such firearms. Its presence here was an unwelcome reminder of a dark barbarity better forgotten.

The stranger considered him for a moment longer before speaking. 'I know your kind. Desperate men with bloody pasts. Thieves, poachers, and vagrants.' He frowned. 'Why are you here, soldier?'

Theron shrugged. 'I have to be somewhere.'

The stranger's frown deepened in the following silence, and Theron felt displeasure emanating from the eyes beneath the hood.

'Try again.'

Theron sighed at his own folly. There were no secrets here, their place in the world behind him.

'I am running, fleeing my past.'

'Good. Your second answer is better. Don't repeat the mistake and try to hide the truth, especially from the Scion.' The hint of a Mald accent lent a hard edge to the stranger's warning.

'The Scion? Is that your name?'

The man's lips curled upwards at the edges, his smile visible even underneath his bristles. 'No lad, I'm not the Scion, far from it.' He walked towards the edge of the cliff, beckoning Theron to follow. 'The Scion is the warden for all you see before you, from the trees and the mountains, to the creatures that live betwixt. He is the voice of the Father, and first among his people.'

'Is the Scion why I am here?' Theron raised his voice, competing with the sound of water crashing noisily onto the rocks below.

He thought he saw a break in the stranger's hostility for a moment, a softening to his smile.

'I see why Hearne wanted me to meet you, Theron. Perhaps there may be something to you after all.'

The man turned his back, and began walking towards the forest, their conversation run its course. Theron watched him go. Just as he had not questioned how stranger knew his name, he also understood that the time of their meeting was past.

Before he reached the treeline, the man stopped and gave him one last look. 'The Scion will come to you this eve, in the hours after the Father has fallen from the skies. Make a hearthfire to honour both him, and the dead which you mourn.'

He stepped forward and disappeared between the trees, their foliage enveloping him until he was completely concealed from sight.

Theron stared into the flames, watching them dance. How many times had he done this? Sat at the fire, and been lost amongst memories of the dead? Far too many, he decided. There were always faces and names pulling at him, trying to grasp his attention. More lost souls than any one man deserved to remember or to countenance, even to his own conscience.

Theron hadn't lust after the war, nor had he wanted to fight and spill blood. He had been full of pomp and patriotism; filled with an unshakable pride in his homeland, standing ready to protect her borders, but

he had never once had he wanted to kill enemy soldiers. Stealing territory and subjugating the populace was the province of the enemy, not the noble Raed.

He remembered all too clearly the first time he had taken a life. His victim had only been a young lad, fresh faced and barely able to fill out his armour, not many moons older than Theron himself. He had watched his target for only a moment before smoothly drawing his bow and staring down the sight. The shot had been instinctual and automatic, a snapshot honed by months of work in the training yards.

When the boy had fallen, clutching desperately at his neck in a futile attempt to save himself, the realisation of what he had done had hit Theron hard. No matter how the others from his unit had patted his back and offered him words such as honour and valour, the deed had been murder.

In times to come, Theron found himself wishing that he had at least hesitated in the slightest before he cast his innocence aside, never to return. But once the door had opened, it was too late.

That day he became not only a soldier proper, but a murderer, and a monster.

Ever since, each life had felt the same, adding yet more weight to his shoulders. It didn't end with the enemy; somehow even the death of his friends increased his burden, the same as if he had taken their lives with his own hands. By then end of the fighting, the sheer pressure of the death toll had been defeating,

dragging him down into the depths of despair.

When the armistice had been announced, Theron had thought he would at last find respite. He had been hopelessly wrong. Death waited still in the aftermath, on bleak and desolate roads where outlaws and murderers roamed unpunished.

And so, the war continued.

Theron could never surrender, never give in to defeat. Cowardice wasn't part of the creed of the Royal Raedlanders. If he relented, it would be an insult to the good men and women that had given their lives for the regiment, and what their code had stood for.

Theron looked at the brocade sash tied to his belt, the firelight revealing the places where it had torn and been splattered with mud. As far as he knew, it was the last remaining piece of his proud regimental standard. He'd come across it as he was forced to retreat from the field, his unit devastated by casualties as they tried to hold ground around Fiscerano.

Russet had been the regiments standard bearer, an old veteran from countless engagements, worldly-wise and always possessed of a kindly smile for the men and women sharing his fellowship. He had been dead when Theron accidentally stumbled into the ditch, the venerable soldier apparently cut down during a cavalry charge, the gaping wound in his chest obviously from a sabre. Theron saw Russet's last breath had escaped in bloody bubbles only, thin trails of pink spit staining his tunic, an ignoble end for the haughty officer.

The only thing left had been to salvage as much of the ruined standard as Theron could, to take with him. Frantically he had cut a section away, the cleanest part he could find not lost to arcs of crimson or dirty brown mud, and tied it to his belt before resuming his withdrawal. It was the only way to keep proud Russet's spirit alive, and that of the Royal Raedlanders.

Theron had never untied the standard since. The other survivors of that bloody day hadn't chosen to make comment, most too jaded to care, only a handful even recognising it. But Theron remembered. He alone respected what it stood for, and why it had been too important to leave on that forsaken patch of ground.

It was his identity now, all that was left of him, and why he always sat vigil for the dead.

Hearne simply appeared out of the gloom, standing across from Theron as he sat at the fire, lost to his thoughts. He towered over Theron, his shoulders broad and stature powerful, radiating vitality into the world around him. Even the flames seemed to react to his presence, bending closer to the priest, bright hues illuminating him as though he stood in the sun.

'I am Hearne, Scion of the Father.' His voice matched his appearance, deep and momentous enough to move mountains.

Theron nodded, blinking away his reverie to stare at the Hearne. Somehow, a sense of inevitability pervaded through him, that he had reached the end of a journey.

‘Why have you come to the great forests, Theron?’

Theron recalled the stranger’s advice. ‘I am escaping from the world, and leaving a bloody life behind me.’

The Scion regarded him. ‘I do not think that true. You lie to yourself; no matter where you run, your burden yet remains, your memories bound so tight around your throat as to strangle you. They are truly what you must be freed of.’

‘If I abandon them then I am a coward, no better than those who threw down their weapons on the field, or the betrayers that fled back across the seas to Raedland. I cannot condemn the memories of the fallen so.’ Theron returned his eyes to the fire, and the comfort of the flames.

‘Did you ever consider that by refusing to confront their deaths, you are even more craven still? Why do you honour those who passed on by lamenting them alone? Where are the words of their glory, of their noble sacrifice?’

‘There was no noble sacrifice. No glory, and no heroic deed.’ Theron shook his head sadly. ‘Only death. Death, and rotting misery, our endless march towards our demise. I watched the best of us fall alongside the worst, and all of those in-between. There was no ceremony for any of them, even the heroes, just shallow and unmarked graves. They are only commemorated by their memories. I cannot deny them that.’

‘And what of your enemies? Do you salute their souls with your nightmares?’

Theron could feel Hearne's intense stare boring into his soul, the hairs on his arms standing.

'The guardsman? Aye. That was the worst of me, in the worst of times.'

Hearne nodded, waiting patiently.

'You're here to judge me, I suppose? That's fair. His death has haunted me for months, ever since the truce.' Theron's head dropped, weariness creeping into his voice. 'In my dreams, I am the victim. But that's not true. That day, I held the rapier, and ran him through.'

Theron could still remember how the weapon had felt in his hand, the unusual design alien to the swords he was used to, made for piercing rather than slashing. He had found it on the ground after losing his own sword in the heat of battle, wicked steel glinting in the sunlight despite the blood staining its edge.

'It was during the last days of the war, when the Skald mounted their last attacks on us. Only a handful of us left by then, the rest we'd been forced to leave behind, to rot in ditches. We were cold, hungry, and damned miserable. For weeks, we'd been dug in around this shitty little town I don't even remember the name of.'

'It all felt so futile. Ever since we'd discovered the bastard politicians had abandoned us, everything had. Yet still we fought on through that hell. It was all we had, the only thing keeping us going.'

Theron stopped and threw another stick on the fire. When he spoke again, his voice had shrunk to barely more than a whisper.

‘It was dirty work, that day. The Greens looked been pretty beaten themselves, probably fresh from a scrap somewhere. By then, skirmishes were everywhere, and no real battle lines were left. You’d be fighting in a tiny pocket, the whole world reduced to a tiny patch of mud.’

‘Old Jackdaw held the big bastard down, but gods he was strong as an ox, with plenty of fight left in him. I had to gut him fast. As the blade slid between his ribs, he swore at us in all languages, died looking right at me, lips cursing the whole time. Not at Jack holding him down – at me, the monster that murdered him.’

Theron realised that his eyes were watery, and wiped them on his sleeve. The next words emerged in a stark and moribund tone, the final piece of the admission. ‘I lost my will to fight after that. It was just one death too many, one blasted man too much for me. The next morning, before the rest woke, I stole as many rations as I could, and fled. Left the cutthroat survivors and their tarnished honour behind me, and headed south.’

‘I had to get away. Had to prove to myself that I was no monster like they had become, that humanity remained somewhere within me. It seemed the only answer. Those men and women, they weren’t Royal Raedlanders anymore. It was a disgrace to the memory, to the standard at my belt.’

His eyes met Hearne’s. The priest didn’t seem moved at how red Theron’s eyes had grown, or his story.

‘It doesn’t change that I deserted that day. I was a coward with no stones left in me, and fled like some

mangy mutt with my tail between my legs. All I am now is an empty shell, the man inside hiding behind a pretence of keeping a memory alive.'

The confession was a sob, Theron's eyes running freely now that the dam had burst. He slumped forward, still recalling the moment which had finally broken him and forced him to where he was now, alone and ashamed.

Hearne had held his silence throughout, listening. Gently, he pressed a large hand onto Theron's shoulder. It was reassuringly warm, unnatural power resonating through his flesh.

'I don't truly offer judgement, Theron. The only one who you must answer to is yourself; and you alone must live with this pain.' Hearne smiled, his next words softer, and oddly paternal. 'But know that you have been chosen for a purpose. Here in the great forests, you might be resurrected again, rise as the avatar of the Father does each day.'

Theron looked up, a question at his lips that Hearne quickly waved down.

'I know that you opened fresh wounds when you killed those men that attacked you. Yet I have watched you for a long time, and I do not think that you will disappoint me. That eve, you felt the touch of the Goddess upon you, for all that you did not recognise it.'

Hearne frowned and stared off into the distance, some unknown omen suddenly made clear to him by his next words.

‘All of us are close to both the Sun and the Moon, and her temptation is ever strong. But I have faith that the man still within you is stronger than the devil she would drag from his broken shell. That is not something I could say for many.’

His smile returned. ‘If you choose to serve, and refuse the calling of the Moon, then I will teach you, and give you reason to be proud once more. I will help you leave the existence of shame and pity from your past.’

The words were soothing, promising salvation.

Theron thought back to the horrors of the Century Wars, and then the cold months on the road, forgotten, ashamed, living without purpose or honour. He remembered the countless faces, the men and women that had been taken too soon. He thought of the roads and the fate of the cavalryman, cut open for the sin of trying to make peace; of Athena, out there somewhere, alone again with only her trauma as company.

All of them had deserved better.

Yet, it would never come to them. They had been taken in such horrific events they had become vengeful spirits that chased his every action, poisonous and crippling unless he finally made peace. And now Theron alone, the man that broke and least worthy of all, had a chance to be reborn again, to become a soul guided by a higher purpose.

He didn’t deserve this boon. But in spite of that, he owed it to all of the others to accept this resurrection, and finally lay their memories to rest.

Theron wiped the remnants of the tears from his eyes. Carefully, he untied the standard from his belt, folding it as neatly he could. The thick weave carried the weight of lost generations, the broken virtue of a betrayed nation, and the failure of the old world.

Theron held it in his hands, just feeling the burden it carried through the cloth, and mentally saluting the fallen. Not just the Royal Raedlanders, but those men and women of all nations, who had their given their lives in such futility.

‘Let go. It is for the best.’ Hearne’s voice was kind, and grandfatherly. He patted Theron’s shoulder.

Theron paused for one last moment, lip trembling, before he reverently sacrificed the last emblem of the Royal Raedlanders to the flames, and watched the past burn away forever.



SEASON 2
COLLECTED STORY



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UNLEASH THE HUNTER

Calculus watched the pair of narwhal as they crashed in and out of the water, completely at ease with their surroundings. The odd looking creatures completely ignored the caravel she and her Alchemist Guild teammates rode on. Even at a distance, she could see the fine spray of water that burst into the air every time they broke the surface or plunged into the waves again. Sparkling droplets of water coated the massive creature's leathery grey skin and the current reacted to their movements, creating a foamy white lather that crested the dashed waves.

Idly, she wondered at the creatures' activity. Presumably this was mating behaviour, with one animal courting the other; or possibly a case of one male attempting to establish its dominance over another. She was no Apothecarium Scholar with an interest in studying them or their behaviour; her scientific concerns lay elsewhere. The animals mattered little to her beyond a source of diversion to break the tedium of the long, blue horizon. It was a beautiful, cloudless day, and Calculus had awoken early; she'd been prowling the deck restlessly since dawn. Surrounding her, the ocean stretched endlessly into the distance, the sunlight making jagged, white shapes on the water's surface.

At the ship's prow, Vitriol nestled lazily in a crook made by the caravel's hard, stained wood figurehead

and the raised timber decking. The sun's glare shone brightly from the woman's fiery red hair, near as bright as the blinding light from the water far below. Calculus was surprised by how at peace her comrade looked; the predictable tortured stare that generally marked Vitriol's features was entirely absent for once.

In a rare moment of compassion and understanding, Calculus decided to leave Vitriol to her peace.

The whipping of the wind in the sails above was the only sound that cut through the relentless drum of the waves, and the ship's creaking as it bludgeoned its way through them. The handful of crewmen who were visible were quiet as they went about their duties. Most were, by now, content to leave the Guild Ball team alone. When the Alchemists first came aboard there had been a mad press from the sailors to meet their heroes. The throng had been quickly forced back by Mercury, who had threatened to set the ship alight unless they were allowed about their business. Terrified, and crossing themselves with signs of warding, the crew had complied, although those threats seemed empty now. Mercury had been struck by crippling sea sickness almost as soon as the ship left port in Delenni, and he was quickly a subject of ridicule for the entire crew.

As if to underscore this thought, Calculus heard stirring in the hold below. Mercury would soon be making his way up to the deck to resume his daily routine of hurling his guts into the sea. Unlike the

others, Calculus found no mirth in the situation; his illness could easily take him off of active duty. Such an outcome would put their team at a distinct disadvantage. It was hopelessly naïve of the other players to ignore this possibility and, not for the first time, she wondered how such brilliant scientific minds could be so short-sighted. With a frustrated sigh, she returned to gazing out over the ocean, and contemplating the path that lay before them on their northward travels.

They were embarked for the Frontier's Cup, a two week tournament on the edges of civilisation. Every Guild was invited to compete. The tournament was at the end of the summer, but before the elements could become too prohibitive and the days too short. It was a hard, often brutal tournament in a harsh and unrelenting land, with little obvious material gain. The land was sparsely settled this far north, especially in remote Eisnor. The entire population of the Sovereign State barely exceeded that of some of the larger southern cities. To an outside observer it was a costly, useless and pointless exercise. However those within the Guilds knew what was really being played for.

Power.

Power, reputation, and a statement of intent to their rivals. Early on in the calendar, the Frontier's Cup was a new beginning or a means to continue an established dominance. For years, each of the Guilds had invested just as much time, money, and personnel in the event

as they would for any of the other tournaments and exhibitions on the calendar and, on occasion, more. And of course, for some Guilds, the event had broken them for the rest of the season. The Blacksmith's Guild and the Messenger's Guild were two examples from Calculus' playing lifetime, but an old veteran like Mallet or Greyscales could likely remember many more.

This year, the Alchemist's Guild had decided to invest far more heavily than their rivals in a bid to gain an early foothold as an established team, something that had eluded them so far. The team was travelling up early in preparation, almost immediately after their last game of the pre-season exhibitions, and had gone to considerable lengths to conceal this fact from their rivals. The ship they travelled on was chartered to a private Ethraynnian shipwright, and the craft sailed far off the coast of Raedland; far enough as to be almost absurd by Calculus' estimation. However, she could not fault the logic behind the bid, nor the advantage afforded to the Guild by allowing their team to acclimatise and prepare ahead of schedule.

And then there was Hemlocke.

Calculus was not alone in her loathing for the eldritch woman. Her damned witchcraft was fundamentally opposed to the very principles the Alchemist's Guild was founded upon. Even more than the absurd superstitions of the sailors aboard this ship, Calculus found the empty wisdom and haphazard approach of the Union woman's work contemptible.

Without proper recording, each of Hemlocke's potions and vials were as variable and as risky as the last, and they afforded no logical progression whatsoever. And these feelings were engendered before even talking to the woman.

Hemlocke was, in all scientific probability, quite literally insane. She was happy to ramble extensively about the old gods of long forgotten pantheons, societies, and cultures that had been destroyed by the ravages of war. Her lengthy diatribes about obscure minor deities of extremely dubious existence left Calculus filled with seething fury. Half patronising lecturer, half overly verbose preacher, Hemlocke stared at the world with yellowed eyes that could only hint at the madness within.

Calculus found no worth in Hemlocke's potential contribution. She found herself wondering for somewhere near the thousandth time how someone within the Guild's High Council had won the argument for hiring the woman.

'Look at the blessings of the Deep, woman!' Hemlocke had silently slithered her way across the deck to stand next to Calculus, surprising the Alchemist, and causing Calculus to lose her train of thought. 'We are sent a sign by the children!' Hemlocke thrust out a grubby hand with an outstretched finger, capped by a ragged, talon-like nail, towards the two narwhal still playing in the sun.

Calculus turned to regard her companion, upper lip

and eyebrow twitching in disgust. Hemlocke's face was painted with a thick layer of chalky, off-white dust. The woman had coated herself with the stuff each morning of the voyage thus far, and would likely continue to do so for the remainder of their time at sea.

'Why do you daub yourself in that?' Calculus ignored Hemlocke's nonsense words, directly addressing the Union woman instead. Hemlocke turned her manic gaze directly to Calculus.

'You know nothing of the old ways or the North, do you, child?' When Hemlocke spoke, the dust around her mouth cracked and showered onto her shirt, staining the already dirty material cream. 'I don the salt to show fealty to the Deep. We are only permitted passage by the good graces of the Old Ones.' Hemlocke leaned in conspiratorially close. 'No matter how proud you are of this ship, the bones of the land's children are not meant to form a vessel for passage. We are not meant to be here.'

Calculus snorted. Hemlocke's breath stank of old vegetables, and her words were empty ranting. 'Have you ever seen a storm at sea, child? When the lords of air decide to speak, to walk across the water, and the Deep rises up to greet them? Then men can only watch fearfully until they are dragged below, claimed by the Deep.'

Calculus waved a dismissive hand. The extent of the woman's delusions were quite inspired. Hemlocke continued on, unabashed.

‘I can feel the old ones stirring, child. We are travelling to a place where the space between our realm and theirs is gossamer thin. They can reach through much, much more easily, child.’ Hemlocke shook her arms around her in an exaggerated sweep. ‘Can you feel it too? They are all around us! Their energy pervades our souls this day!’

A sullen Calculus returned her gaze to the horizon. Nonsense, all of it. The elements were an easily understood natural phenomena, nothing more.

There was definitely something different about this place. Off the age-old beaten mud track, the trees of the dark forest loomed tall, their forms menacing and sinister, swaying threateningly as though they were sentient. Not for the first time, Silence vowed to himself not to leave the path or the relative safety of the carriage train. He was reminded of an old map he had once seen with ‘Here be dragons’ scrawled at the edges. An old term for the unknown, for those unsafe places from which men were unlikely to return. Silence did not think the description should be limited to the ocean.

It was the same every year when the Mortician’s Guild travelled north for the Frontier’s Cup. If any of the others shared his perspective, they remained quiet, as usual. That fact alone made Silence consider

the wisdom of his observations' in the face of their blind stupidity. Even Obulus seemed content, although Silence had as much faith in his captain as he did in Casket's ability to engage in a meaningful conversation.

She was proof, anyways. The woman, that feral savage someone had named Minx.

Where she came from was a complete mystery, but Silence had his suspicions. She knew those places where the dragons were, the places unknown to civilised man. Even now, he watched her as she hunched, knuckles clenched tight around the iron bars of her cage, staring into the gloom of the tree line. At night she screeched while she thought the Morticians surrounding her slept. The sound was harrowing, a banshee wail that called to something primal, something old that watched them all. Minx called all through the night, over and over, desperate, hoping for release. None of the others noticed, somehow sleeping through her cries.

But Silence knew. Very little escaped his attention. It was another reason why he deserved to be above Obulus, commanding the team, a champion of his Guild. He awoke each morning bleary from lack of sleep, and swore that once he took power from the Ferryman, he would execute the howling bitch if it was ever within his power to do so.

For now, however, Minx was beyond Silence's reach. She was caged and captive, but under Obulus'

protection. Silence was at least content that when they reached their destination, her Union handlers would ensure the Mortician's Guild would be able to exploit the woman to gain an advantage. Otherwise, Silence cared little for her involvement or actions.

Of more pressing interest was their guide.

Every morning when they awoke he was standing nearby, at the edge of camp, watching silently as they broke their fasts and readied themselves for the day ahead. The man was of enormous height and bulky build, large enough to rival Ghast or Casket. His appearance was almost entirely nondescript. He wore the same flowing dark robes each day, covering him almost entirely from head to toe. His thick moustache was shot with grey and white streaks, yet the man somehow radiated vitality. He carried himself with the air of one much younger than his appearance would suggest.

The man never spoke when Obulus approached him, at least not that Silence ever heard. His only interaction with the Mortician was to nod intently once Obulus passed a coin to him, and to gesture ever northwards. As the caravan passed him, Silence would openly stare at the figure only to be met with an impassive stare back. An irritatingly superior aura of serenity permanently emanated from the huge man.

Today, as the last of the carriages rumbled by, the man remained still, watching them on their way. Silence knew he would do so, the Mortician looking back at the man, as he did every day, until eventually

distance or darkness claimed the figure.

Yet each morning, and later at crossings or where the path split, the man would once again be waiting in front of them, ready to direct them. He certainly never once passed them on the road, and clearly knew of a more direct route, one which he kept secret from the Morticians. Silence could not abide secrets, other than his own. It was frustrating that this agonisingly long journey could apparently be both considerably faster and more direct, but Silence held his tongue. Long experience of the inner workings of the Mortician's Guild had taught him that he would learn more through observation than by direct action.

The backwards Norfolk kept their petty secrets well, and had done so for years during this pointless charade. Silence could wait. And oddly enough, one day, it was Minx who gave Silence his next piece of information.

It was a morning like any of the others, the tree tops bending in the wind, their rustling branches foreboding. They looked like jagged ribs on a skeleton, stark against the sky. On the horizon, the sun's first light had begun to paint the trees in dirty shades of green and grey. It was growing considerably colder this close to Eisnor, where temperatures at the height of summer rarely reached that of the cool autumn in the south. The path did not look familiar, but to be fair, it never once had, across all the years Silence had made this journey. It was as though the unwelcoming forest warped and altered with each passing year.

Silence slid his robes around him closer, one hand clutching at the heavy, recently appropriated furs draped across his shoulders. Quietly, ears straining to hear any potential exchange, he stared at Obulus and the masked man. As usual, there was a brief, dull sparkle of reflected sunlight as the Ferryman handed over a large silver coin. It was the same sight he had witnessed a hundred times before.

Suddenly, there was a familiar screech. The scathing, keening note of rage torn from Minx's throat, the same one Silence had to listen to each night. He glanced quickly at the caged woman and was surprised to see her standing almost at full height, head scraping the top of her prison. She normally crouched onto all fours or curled up when exposed to the sun's light, but now she stood tall and proud. She howled again as he looked at her; another long, screeching note that tore uncomfortably at his ears.

Their guide's calm had suddenly broken, and he was approaching Minx with a sense of urgency, his pact with Obulus quite forgotten. His long, smooth strides made him glide across the uneven ground with ease, a gaggle of Mortician's Guild officials following him, awkwardly trying to look dignified as they barely kept pace. Obulus himself followed, although at some distance, as if he too awaited what exchange might happen next.

When the man reached the cage he stopped so close that he could reach up to touch Minx. He did

so, fearlessly snaking a hand towards her through the bars. The caged woman leapt backwards.

‘Maggot!’ She spat, viciously.

The masked man slowly shook his head from side to side, humming under his breath. The sound was a low, deep rumble that Silence would not have heard but for his close proximity, only a handful of paces from the cart. The man’s hand remained inside the cage, reaching out to Minx. A Union official, a woman in a long grey coat and an Erskirii cap, made to step



forward. She was stopped in her tracks by one look from the large man, his tranquil eyes now somehow sinister and threatening.

Minx's eyes narrowed. 'Not Maggot.' Cautiously, she shuffled over to the offered hand, sniffing the air. When she finally reached it, she gently stroked their guide's bare fingers as though offering fealty. After a moment the man withdrew his hand, satisfied, and his expression returned to something more neutral. From within her prison, Minx waited, gazing at him.

Silence suddenly realised he'd been holding his breath and gulped in some air, earning a condescending smirk from Obulus, who had finally reached the carriage.

'What do you want for this one's release, Ghost Man?' The voice was a deep rumble as from the depths of the earth. It was rich and powerful, not, as Silence had expected, the halting rasp of one unused to speaking. The accent was unfamiliar, elongating the middle of some words, and flattening the ends of others. It was unlike any accent Silence had heard before.

By way of reply, Obulus stroked his beard, head cocked to one side. The same Union official made to step forward once again in protest, before the Ferryman waved her back. At a barely perceptible nod, she was led away by the towering Ghastr, his large hand firmly planted on her right shoulder. Silence couldn't suppress a chuckle. To cross the Ferryman in such a manner was foolish; likely she'd be banished to the forgotten crypts of an obscure Guild House for the

rest of her days. She must be new, to have made such an error.

‘It would be a gesture of some goodwill if we could count on your Guild’s support in the coming trials.’ Obulus paused, playing his pantomime. ‘It might be a gesture that would merit the release of your sister, Hearne.’

Hearne? So, the masked man had a name at last. Silence decided that it suited him. An anonymous, bland name for a man who lived deep in the shadows of the forest. And he belonged to a Guild? Silence wondered at which one, and once again where this man was from. The only clues did not point to any of the Sovereign States or Guilds that he could name. It would have to be a poor Guild, Silence decided. The man’s rough brown robes and furs, stained with dark dirt, were just as unremarkable as the man wearing them. There was no sense of affluence here.

Hearne’s unreadable expression betrayed none of the thoughts that might be playing through his mind. He slowly closed his eyes and tilted his head back, as though in communion with something. He seemed to listen raptly for a moment, before opening his eyes again. He turned to regard Minx, smiled soothingly at her, and then returned his gaze to the Mortician’s captain.

‘Very well. We shall enter an agreement with you, as has been willed by the Sun Father. But be aware, my brothers and sisters will still likely seek recompense for this act of imprisonment.’

Silence bristled. To his ears, the man had just made

a barefaced threat, undisguised and cold. But Obulus merely chuckled, as though he had just won a small wager. Whoever this new Guild was, they obviously were of little direct threat to the Ferryman. For the time being, at least.

‘Very well, Hearne.’ Obulus’ eyes found Silence. With a raised eyebrow, he nodded at the feral Minx, coiled inside her cage as though ready to pounce.

‘Unleash the Hunter.’



— ALL TOO EASY —

Large, irregular snowflakes circled lazily past Obulus' field of vision from underneath the rickety stand. It was different to the newer types of stand in the southern States; just an arched triangular roof pointing upwards with posts driven into the ground as support. The sides were completely open and allowed for no shelter from the elements; errant grey flakes constantly drifted under the protective ceiling. The wooden beams that supported the stand were ancient and looked dangerously brittle. Age had discoloured them to a dull, lifeless grey, as though all colour had been bleached out of them. Even so, the few spectators in attendance huddled together under the four matching stands, each as grim as this one.

Obulus and the Butcher stood far to the side, as far apart as was possible from the nearest group of fans. They were almost out from under the paltry protection of the stand; one of the Butcher's boots was slowly being covered in a thin layer of snow. They had watched the game in silence thus far, neither willing to break the soundless calm until the crowd made enough noise to mask the conversation.

Out on the pitch, the snow was rapidly becoming slush as the players ran over it, their footsteps skidding through the increasingly treacherous mess. The slush was getting pushed into small piles at the edges of the field of play, or forming isolated pockets of dense

whiteness. As the pair followed the progress of the game, it became evident that the lacklustre crowd would not be forthcoming without either an injury or a goal to cheer for. Eventually, the Butcher could bear the silence no longer and spoke in a soft voice.

‘This weather is unexpected. I mean to say, that is, the snow was not meant to fall here for another few weeks at least.’

Obulus, a man unaccustomed to indulging in small



talk, looked around and raised an eyebrow by way of response. The Butcher continued unabashed.

‘It’s miserable. And these people care nothing for us.’ The last word was laced with venom. ‘Why are any of us even here in this desolate wasteland? Honestly, this piss poor cup really means nothing to anyone.’

Obulus kept his thoughts quiet and looked back to the game, leaving the man to continue his rant.

‘I know there is no money here, for a certainty! No wealth! No purpose for the expenditure of coin travelling here, no power to be gained by any party! The whole thing is entirely pointless! What is a battered old piece of dented tin worth to anyone?’

Obulus didn’t need to look to know that some of those near them would be staring by now, angered by the Butcher’s ridiculous outburst. The Ferryman kept his gaze straight ahead, watching the state of play. The Brewers would score soon, that much was obvious. They were building impressive momentum; at least two of the Butcher players were flat on their backs that he could see, and the others were all heavily marked.

‘You are a fool, Lundt.’ Although his expression remained passive, Obulus’ stern tone caused the Butcher to flinch nonetheless. ‘I am loathe to admit that I agree with Abendroth on anything, but he is right at least regarding you. You are a cretin, a child who plays in a world you do not understand.’

Out on the pitch the Brewer girl, Friday, easily skipped past the last defender and hammered the

ball into the Butcher's goal. The crowd cheered her as she ran back up the pitch, one delicate hand held aloft in salute. The Brewer's Guild was one of the most popular teams amongst the northern peasantry, and the crowd raised a reasonably impressive cheer considering their small numbers. This finally afforded Obulus an opportunity to speak and not be overheard.

He turned to glare at his companion, the full force of his dissatisfaction cowing the magister. 'I am not here to educate you or make small talk. I can make you a rich man, Lundt, if you can guarantee that the Butcher's Guild will not proceed into the finals today. That is my only interest in meeting with you.'

He turned his attention back to the game. The ball had been kicked back into play, and the new Butcher captain, Fillet, was trying to marshal her side back into position. The Mortician's experienced eye could see the divisions within the team. While Shank and Tenderiser seemed attentive to the captain's orders, Brisket and Boar both ignored the slight woman and jogged away on an entirely different play. The bloody pig, Truffles, grunted contentedly and followed Tenderiser's lead, but the team was clearly working against itself. Fillet shook her head, staring at her feet for a second, before lifting it again and barking out fresh instructions to those players who would listen.

That was interesting. Perhaps the current Butcher side was not as formidable as Obulus had previously thought. By comparison, the Brewer's Guild looked

hungry, and they appeared quite at home in this wintery weather. They were keen, sharp, ready to overturn the drive and press their advantage. Already Hooper and the hulking Mash were sprinting forward, closing the gap with their adversaries.

‘Don’t worry.’ Lundt’s voice was quiet, suitably chastised. ‘The division within will prevent the team from advancing farther along the campaign trail. Our pact will be an easy one to uphold.’

Underscoring his point, a bewildered Shank suddenly found himself facing off against both Hooper and Mash. Boar was following his own mad urges and bearing down on Stave, totally out of position from where he could have offered protection for his teammate. Shank was one of the lither and more nimble players on his team, but even so he was quickly tripped and felled by a forceful swing of Hooper’s staff. With savage finality, Mash swung his own weapon round in a brutal arc and brought it down heavily onto the downed Butcher. The impact was so forceful that even at this distance Obulus heard the crunch, followed by Shank’s screams as he clutched his ribs in agony. Spigot and Friday skipped past, easily collecting the ball and pushing forward. Fillet’s voice was raised as she viciously spat orders at her team, desperately trying to reorganise her players into a defensive line. The ones that would listen, at least.

‘Good.’ Obulus was pleased. His initial concern had been that Lundt would not be able to see to

Obulus' request, and would lack the initiative to take it to a more capable individual. From what he could see before him however, it was obvious that the team would fail without need for the Magister's intervention. Additionally, the Mortician's Guild could likely buy Lundt off to keep him quiet about this meeting, forgoing the need to offer their rivals a bond of debt. Finally, if the rift caused by the Master Butcher's disappearance ran as deeply as it seemed, then the Butcher's Guild would likely cease to be a threat for some time. Although the latter was not a direct part of his immediate plans, it was a satisfying turn of events. It was something the Mortician's Guild, and more importantly, Obulus himself, could capitalise on.

He smoothly turned to face Lundt, taking a step into the shadows towards the Magister, and shook the pitiful man's hand. Obulus gripped the man's hand in an unflinching grasp as the Butcher's pale digits trembled from the cold. The Ferryman's eyes bored into the Butcher's, conveying a warning more viscerally than any words could. Lundt nervously nodded once. Obulus released his grip and in doing so, discretely palmed a coin into the Butcher's hand.

'You know what this means?' His voice was even, measured, asking two questions at once.

Magister Lundt nodded again. Obulus detected fear at the edges of the Butcher's eyes and in the tremble of his lip, and allowed himself to feel a measure of satisfaction.

‘Excellent. Your obedience is noted. Enjoy the rest of the game, Magister. Ensure that your team begins the long trip homewards immediately after it concludes.’

Venin had decided, not for the first time, that Midas was nothing but a self-centred fool. It was the only conclusion he could reach whenever the young Alchemist turned his thoughts to his team captain. Even to his own inexperienced eye, it was obvious that the strands of power and influence which held Midas in place were beginning to unravel. Calculus had gained significant influence recently, and the rumour was that Smoke was already being considered as Midas’ replacement. Venin didn’t care much for Smoke either, but at least she seemed aware of the machinations taking place.

Guild life was all about politics. Midas had initially lost some of his control over the team when it was announced that Compound was joining the side. Although he had to admit, the large man’s identity and why this caused the laughably named ‘Chosen One’ so much consternation was a mystery to Venin. Midas’ reaction was to have promoted Venin to the team, although this in itself seemed folly. If Midas hoped to gain a young apprentice or support from within, then he would be sadly disappointed. Venin’s own politics and motivations were his own. He did not care at all

for Midas and his oblivious self involvement, watching the Alchemist's Guild captaincy slip away from the man entirely impassively. Venin was out for himself, the same as he had always been. His instincts had been forged and shaped by a hard life in the slums; other people were at best a distraction and at worst a threat. He might have respected that same selfish motivation in Midas, but for the fact Midas had been born into privilege. Midas had possessed everything – a position within the nobility, a title, inherited wealth, an education... and the man had thrown it all away. Such a life was beyond the means of most and especially beyond the dreams of an insignificant orphan child like Venin. And so, he could only ever think of Midas as a fool. A fool who gave away the world for the life of a commoner.

Venin closed his eyes and let the sounds of the world outside the covered cart wash over him, trying to reclaim his composure. It was raining, a light early morning drizzle making the canvas vibrate as the water hit the tanned cloth above. The wheels slowly splashed their way forward through puddles or crunched as they ground the dirt into trenches on either side of them. Ahead, there were shouts between the men and women who led the supply caravans northward. Friendly greetings were hollered to other travellers, and drawn out conversations were bellowed across the length and breadth of the convoy.

Inside the cart, in a large sack next to where Venin sat,

Naja hissed its dissatisfaction. Absent-mindedly and without opening his eyes, Venin raised his hand and petted the creature. It had been necessary to smuggle the snake onto the cart this way, to avoid spooking the horses. Naja was just about the only constant in Venin's life. Their connection was not one born of affection though, despite the petting. Rather than the bond that usually grew between a master and his pet, their relationship was one of mutual convenience. They regarded each other with a wary respect, each understanding the boundaries of the pact. Naja was afforded regular feeding, and careful maintenance via Venin. In turn, Venin used Naja's poison as a base to create his many vials of lethal acids and alchemical salves.

One such vial was the true reason that he was travelling to the Frontier's Cup. It was not love of the game that brought Venin; leave that to the simpletons who thought Guild Ball was anything beyond a means to control the masses.

No, Venin travelled north to complete a contract with his nameless benefactor.

The individual kept his identity secret, but he was likely a high ranking official from a rival Guild, Venin had long established potentially a chamberlain or magister looking to make a name for themselves. It mattered little. Venin had long since moved past self-satisfaction that his underworld contacts were finally known outside of his peers. He had begun his mission.

He reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew

the concoction, turning it between his fingers as he watched it flow. It seemed so innocent behind the glass, a pale, milky mixture that shone in the low light.

Looks could be deceiving.

Venin felt no compassion for Katalyst, the victim in this scheme. The man was another imbecile. He was on the cusp of creating an elixir that could cure any illness, enhance the body permanently to near superhuman levels, and even hint at immortality. And instead of researching it properly, Katalyst had let his need for recognition and his lust for fame overtake his sense. His arrogance meant he had damaged his own body by consuming the imperfect mixture in large doses, thereby stalling any further development of his research.

The entire project, as far as Venin could tell, had stagnated.

Venin's poison would advance it, at least from a certain point of view. The chemicals he had combined would attack Katalyst's blood and infect his organs with their peculiar stain. Once imbibed it would lurk forever in Katalyst's body, never to be passed out like a lesser infection or poison. Yet, it was also not directly lethal enough to kill the host either. As soon as it came into contact with Katalyst's elixir, however, the results would be... well, Venin was immensely looking forward to observing the exact results. He suspected at the very least that the meeting of the two would result in widespread mutations and rejections throughout his fellow Alchemist's system. What would be of more interest would be the brain's reaction at a

cortical level. Likely, the poison would send Katalyst irredeemably insane. Possibly it would render him incapable of discerning friend from foe; or even burn his mind entirely blank. Certainly, the request that his intervention would disrupt the Alchemist's Guild and remove Katalyst from active duty would be achieved.

In spite of himself, the rebellious young Alchemist grinned at his own genius. Once he arrived and found the team, it would be relatively simple to sneak into the dugout ahead of the game and administer the poison to Katalyst's elixir canisters; it would be all too easy for an Alchemist to achieve, especially for a rookie who most of the team barely paid any attention to.

Word had reached him that, so far, the Alchemist's Guild was tipped to win the cup. Excited Guild officials had been talking of the early round victories against the Farmer's Guild, and even the Fisherman's Guild, for the entire journey. Their next scheduled match was against the Engineer's Guild. Rumour had it the Engineers had entered into a treaty, and they would allow the Alchemists to advance further in the tournament without much difficulty.

Venin might have been proud or pleased to hear about his team's chances. He certainly would have been if he'd cared, or indeed, if he'd held any sort of emotional investment in Guild Ball at all. But as with most things, his only interest was in using the game as a vehicle for his own advancement. Pretending at interest was as far as he ever went, and even that was

only to better manipulate events and circumstances to his own benefit. Faking enthusiasm for the next few days, much like the poisoning of Katalyst, would be simplicity itself.

All too easy, he thought to himself, sickly smile growing ever larger in the low light.

All too easy.

CHEMICAL REACTION

The dirty grey skies seemed huge and empty above, even the shrill wind unable to shift the overlapping walls of cloud that blocked all trace of the sun. The people standing around the pitch wore tired, sullen expressions as they huddled together against the bitter cold, wrapped tightly in the huge animal pelts they all wore. There were no stands or stalls here, the only markings were age-old, crusty dirt stains to demarcate the edge of the pitch. The tundra underneath their feet stretched on as far as the eye could see, frozen and hard, the flat plains continuing unbroken into the distance. Looming behind the opposition end of the pitch a vast mountain range blocked the horizon, the peaks lost amidst the dreary, murky skyline.

It was a bleak place, and it matched Calculus' state of mind.

She didn't know where it had all gone wrong. Their erstwhile allies of convenience, the Engineer's Guild, were supposed to throw this match. Their captain, Ballista, had been extensively briefed about the arrangement. She and her backers within the High Council had called in every favour at their disposal, had made every overture possible to placate and compensate the Engineers for the loss of face during the game.

So why were they being so aggressive? Why were they playing such a tight game, surgically taking down the Alchemist players from afar with their ranged

weapons? Why were they constantly pushing the play downfield, forcing the Alchemists onto the defensive?

She had been told that Ballista had understood the agreement. That he would follow the plan.

So what had gone wrong?

Calculus forced her thoughts aside as, to her left, Katalyst convulsed and screamed, his whole body shaking. While such things were not a rare occurrence for the man, the alarming frequency and severity of the attacks was of concern to her. This was an unusual variable, an unknown element. He had been unable to focus at all during the game, lashing out wildly while failing to follow instructions or plays at all.



Calculus could not abide the unknown, random, or unpredictable. They led to failure.

Ahead of her there was another deep throated roar of cogs grinding together, followed by the percussive thump of iron shod feet puncturing the earth as the Colossus charged forward again. The driver was pushing the engine to its limits, looking to build up ramming momentum in an effort to force Midas and Calculus back down the pitch. Behind the relative safety of the Colossus' massive frame, Salvo and Ballista jogged forward, bows loaded and ready.

Salvo quickly ducked out and fired a snapshot from his left glaive at Katalyst, who was just clambering back to his feet after being knocked down by one of Ballista's heavy bolts. Salvo's shot took the big man in the shoulder, forcing him back down on one knee. A moment later Katalyst toppled onto his back again, a violent spasm causing him to slip on the frost.

Punching his other hand forward, Salvo quickly fired a second bolt. The agile Engineer didn't wait to see the result, already dodging back alongside his captain.

The steel tipped arrowhead struck one of the many tubes that crisscrossed Katalyst's skin, tearing it open in a gout of amber. Katalyst roared into his mask, teeth biting savagely into his tongue, tearing the end of it clean off. His mouthfilled with thick coppery blood and, for a moment, he couldn't breathe. Thrashing violently, tearing at his mask, broken nails drawing red welts over the inflamed skin of his neck, the large Alchemist tried

desperately to free his face from the hood's confines. Finally, he tore it free and spat a crimson stream of blood onto the pitch, nostrils flaring as his body sought to draw in as much precious, life sustaining air as it could.

Katalyst's body was suddenly wracked by a wild, explosive spasm; his eyes rolled back in his head and his limbs splayed out unbidden from his body. He collapsed into the pool of congealing blood he had just spewed, and was still.

Midas joined the fray, leaping forward, right arm already sheathed in a dull beaten metal, shot with glowing red veins. He watched for his moment, hoping to slip in under the guard of the Colossus' pilot, where the bludgeoning arms couldn't effectively swing towards him. Axel saw the advance, and parried with a lazy swing of his arms, the alchemical metal striking the metal banding on the guard with a sharp chime. He mistimed the sidestep, however, and Midas dodged underneath the outstretched limbs. Sucking in a quick breath, the Alchemist Guild captain delivered a solid left hand haymaker to the Engineer, connecting firmly with Axel's bearded jaw. The Colossus reared back, legs tottering unsteadily as its pilot recoiled, before slamming forward again, Midas' blow unable to halt the crushing drive. Midas was dragged underneath the machine and trampled as the Colossus ran roughshod over him. The Alchemist's Guild captain was left lying in a crumpled heap in the machine's wake.

Calculus reacted faster, diving to the side. She

took advantage of the Engineer's distraction to toss a bubbling vial of corrosive acid at his exposed torso. Axel bellowed as the vial struck and instantly shattered, shards of glass gouging lines through his flesh, leaving thin red ribbons of blood. Where the corrosive acid sprayed onto his skin it immediately began to scorch him. The acid caused a terrible burning smell, painfully akin to cooking meat, making the Engineer to scream in agony. The Colossus swung a wild left arm after the retreating Alchemist, but Calculus had already dodged away. She sprinted to safety, away towards where Velocity dribbled the ball forwards, unmarked. As she ran on, Calculus tried to fathom just how this game had turned into the disaster it had rapidly become. She didn't dare look back at Midas' mangled form, or where Katalyst lay in a heap of twisted limbs.

Behind the engine's bulk, Ballista stopped to fire a hasty bolt in her direction, looking to keep the momentum. At a nod from his captain, Salvo ducked his head and stalked after her, eyes fixed on her retreating back.

The generally moribund crowd roused and gave a ragged, uncharacteristic cheer as Mercury leapt into a tackle against Velocity. The nimble automaton leapt out of the path of his steel-capped boot and dragged the ball with it, although it could not dodge the spray of fire that the wily Ethraynnian launched after it. There was a chorus of jeers from the spectators as the creature caught light, flames hungrily lapping at the

soft and already charring wood.

Velocity didn't stop, despite the blaze that was consuming it, instead sprinting forward obliviously. Soon, blackened embers and thin ash fell to the pitch below as it moved. Where they struck the turf, they snuffed out immediately, but terrible damage was wrought on the automaton as the flames spread unchecked.

Calculus skidded into the burning figure from its right, toes outstretched for the ball, shielding her face from the flames that leapt from the rapidly blackening Engineer. Legs creaking, Velocity kept control initially, but couldn't prevent the Alchemist from deftly tackling it again. Calculus dodged backwards and the creature turned to follow, but it stumbled as a cracking noise came from one leg. Velocity tripped as a second crack echoed out across the pitch, and then, suddenly, fell. There was an explosion of darkened metal gears, cogs, and splinters of burning wood as the creature dropped, flailing arms unable to halt the heavy impact.

An anguished howl was torn from the throat of the approaching Salvo, who ignored Calculus as she skipped away with the ball, and ran towards the effigy of his lost sister. He knelt beside Velocity's remains, desperate to cradle the automaton in his arms, but unable to do so without being burnt. Eyes reddened and tearful from a combination of smoke and anguish, he wailed a keening note as his sister was torn away from him again.

Even the most hardened members of the crowd

stared dumbfounded as the young Engineer rose on unsteady feet, eyes once again fixed on Calculus. She was sprinting back up the pitch towards the Engineer goal, keeping the ball rolling out before her.

The ball ricocheted off of the Engineer goal, a tall clockwork column which belched smoke into the air as it revolved around a central gear shaft. If it damaged any of the robust looking cogs or dials, it certainly didn't show. To be fair, behind the wreath of smog, Calculus couldn't see anything much of the goal at all beyond a rough silhouette. As she turned about face and began to jog back up the pitch, she conceded that the idea of a goal that could protect itself was a good one. Of course, that led her to wondering just how far the laws of the game might go towards prohibiting the practice.

The miserable locals were cheering for a change. Unusual, that. They'd been quiet for both of the goals prior to hers and had only shown some glimmer of interest when violence erupted. It took Calculus about a second too long to process what that meant.

Suddenly, her whole frame shook from the impact of a blow to her lower back. A crossbow bolt easily pierced her shirt and the skin beneath, hammering a flash of pain up her spine. She was staggering, her legs were faltering, tripping, and then she was falling facedown towards the cold pitch. Calculus' head bounced and her vision went hazy; the hard packed, frozen earth didn't cushion her fall in the slightest.

A smirking Salvo bounded over, long smock trailing

behind him, eyes still red and full of murderous intent. He leapt, both boots smashing his full weight onto the lithe Alchemist's back, driving the air from her lungs. She gasped and desperately tried to draw breath, but he pressed his advantage, rabbit punching her as she struggled to throw him off her back.

'Time to die, bitch!' Salvo spat the words, his voice emerging as a bestial growl. He slammed a hard knee into her back, driving out any precious air she'd managed to grab, before clambering to his feet. He clamped one fist in her hair, hooked the other underneath her arm, and dragged her towards a nearby dirty puddle.

'This is for Quistis!' The boy's words were an anguished cry, barely coherent.

Calculus' eyes grew wide as she realised that the bastard meant to drown her. He broke the ice on top of the puddle with a sharp crack of his boot, and dragged her close. Arms waving frantically for purchase, she managed to take in a single gulp of air before Salvo pushed her face first into the icy cold water. Calculus was stunned by the sharp cold, stunned too badly to even panic. She tasted fine grains of dirt in her mouth, and she could see nothing in the murky water. Another blow struck her, this time in the temple, disorientating her even more. She felt another punch hit her side, but that was distant, far away, unimportant compared to the throbbing agony in her lungs.

In a horrifying moment of clarity, she knew that she

was about to die. All her plans, schemes and visions ended with her being drowned like a rat in this desolate tundra. She screamed, a raw, naked, instinctive action which only rewarded her with another mouthful of dirty water. The pressure of Salvo's hand holding her head in the water increased, pushing downwards with terrible finality. She tried with the last of her strength to rise up and free herself, lungs blazing, but her head was growing foggy.

There was muffled shouting from somewhere above her. She couldn't make it out, her mind beginning to shut down. It sounded like Salvo's voice, triumphant.

Half blinded eyes streaming dirty vermillion blood down his stained shirt, Katalyst staggered to his feet, one muscled arm clutched to his ribs. He squeezed as though the pressure would somehow stop the agonising spears of pain stabbing through him. Animalistic instinct drove him forwards; a powerful urge to forge a path that his blank mind could no longer even attempt to rationalise. With each step, another dial on his apparatus redlined. The needles were spinning wildly in circles, or just twisting and snapping off. Cables and tubes burst free from his veins, spewing the elixir that gave him life and power in a slick, wasted trail behind him.

His mouth gaped open, jaw slack, heavy drool running over his chin. Katalyst let loose one final, pathetic sob, strangled and twisted, before he crashed broken into the mud below, a puppet with its strings

cut. Silence spread around his still carcass. The onlookers watched in perverse fascination, even the apothecaries that had been keeping a safe distance were rooted to the spot. A child wept openly at the horrific sight, and was quickly and mercifully ushered away by their concerned parent.

There was little doubt among those present that they had witnessed the death of Katalyst.

The body twitched. A muscle somewhere beneath the mountain of exposed, raw flesh moved of its own accord.

Then again, another movement, where there should have been only stillness.

The Physicians slowly began to tiptoe towards Katalyst, unsure of how to proceed. The closest of them reached out one trembling hand towards the body.

A bone-spike shot out of Katalyst's back, covered in gore. Three feet long, with an impaled lump of stretched muscle, the spike was grotesquely inhuman; an image torn from the pages of Soltheician scriptures portraying devils. The terrified apothecaries took to their heels and ran for the side-line as another spike burst free from Katalyst's shoulder. Then another, this one from between his shoulder blades. A horrific brownish-reddish liquid bled out over the tundra below, staining the frost into a dark mush.

An explosion of fresh purple skin grew out of Katalyst's chest, forcing him to his knees. His chest, heaving with deep, rasping breaths was revealed; shards of bone and hardened tendons jutting forth like broken

teeth. His head rolled uncontrollably to one side and a monstrous tongue forced his jaw open, writhing as it fought its way clear of the Alchemist's mouth.

The necrotic, blistered flesh on his back shook with rippling movement as slowly, with horrific certainty, this new, terrible form of Katalyst stood. It was hunched over like a ghou, a faerytale demon of legend, as it lurched its first faltering step forward. All trace of humanity lost, the thing that had once been Katalyst let loose a titanic bellow, and began running, sprinting, towards the enemy.

Salvo.

The boy heard the thunderous steps, felt the ground shake, saw the stones around him jump into the air. He looked up just in time to see the monster bearing down on him. He scrambled away on his knees, letting Calculus go as he fled in terror to escape the beast.

He wasn't quick enough; one of Katalyst's huge, flailing hands caught him, snapping his head back and knocking the Engineer unconscious.

The Colossus came out of nowhere, slamming whatever Katalyst had become away, even as one massive, mutated hand swept down at the unconscious Salvo. The machine was obviously damaged from its earlier acid bath, but it clearly still held significant power in its central drive. Sadly, its fractured arm could no longer take as much punishment; there was a loud crack, and one mechanical limb shattered upon impact with Katalyst. Splinters rained around the two

figures as they collided.

The creature clawed at Axel, forcing him to parry with his remaining arm. The Engineer was only able to ineffectually strike back at his assailant with the machine's forelegs. He knew that this was a losing battle. Already, the protective wooden frame had been ripped away from one limb, and the rest of the machine was starting to shatter under the ferocious assault. Katalyst's new form battered the Colossus with a terrible fury unlike any Axel had witnessed before. Behind him, he could hear gears grinding under the strain, and mechanical whirring as teeth on the cogs bent out of place. The Colossus was seconds away from spluttering and failing under this mad, impossible, inhuman assault.

Katalyst's new claws wrapped around the remaining arm and tore it mercilessly from the Colossus, breaking the leather straps and harnesses. The monstrosity grinned at Axel with a mouth full of jagged, feral teeth as it carelessly threw the limb behind it with a casual flick of its wrist. It reached back one meaty arm for a killing blow, one which Axel knew he was powerless to prevent. The strength was staggering, too immense, too colossal, too inhuman. The engineer closed his eyes, unable to free himself from the Colossus in time.

Katalyst suddenly staggered backwards, relinquishing his grip as he was once again overcome by spasms. Shrinking, diminishing, failing, his system rejected his resurrection and his body returned to a more human

form. For a brief moment, the Alchemist looked as he had before he had begun administering his serum, many years previously. Scrawny and weeping, he looked up through milky eyes at the battered Colossus' towering form, before Axel delivered a vicious kick to his head. The Alchemist was knocked unconscious, his body already beginning to mutate again and take on a new form, now forever in a state of flux.

Suddenly, the pressure stopped. Calculus lifted herself, barely, with numb limbs that felt like a stranger's. Her ears didn't work correctly, the surrounding sounds hazy, as if she were still underwater. Rolling over onto her side, Calculus opened her mouth, gagging on a stream of muddy slime, before desperately gulping a deep lung full of air. The air burned in her chest, painful but sweet.

Panting, vulnerable, she lay for an eternity trying to regain her strength, spitting out dirty water between sharp, ragged breaths. As her eyesight slowly improved from a hazy, unfocused stare, she pushed herself painfully up on one forearm and saw the game had left her struggle behind. She and Salvo were alone; the young Engineer laid out unconscious on the other side of the puddle.

She was, she realised, in no condition to carry on. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to slump back down onto the ground.

The Alchemist's Guild's hopes for the Frontier's Cup faded alongside her consciousness; her heavy eyes

unable to focus on the white-robed apothecaries from the Physician's Guild sprinting towards her. Calculus had time for one last, clear thought before darkness claimed her, the same thought which had plagued her throughout the game.

Where had it all gone wrong?



SACRIFICE

The forgotten gods of this forsaken place raged; a heavy rain was battering down from the immense storm clouds darkening the sky. The clouds were murky, bottomless, slate grey. Snow left on the pitch from the previous day was rapidly melting into a slimy mush, and the hard dirt was quickly turning into a thin layer of slippery mud. The Morticians were carefully watching their step, lest they lose their footing and crash down onto the sludge. If the Hunters even noticed the treacherous ground beneath their feet, it didn't show. Each of them glided across the pitch with easy, smooth, confident steps, expertly picking a path regardless of the howling rain and mud.

Something new had been unleashed, something which changed the rules of Guild Ball entirely. Power was already beginning to shift as this new team made their mark. In Guild houses across the Empire of the Free Cities, Chamberlains and Magisters huddled together to discuss how best to both exploit this new entity and how to avoid retribution for that exploitation.

The Hunter's Guild didn't play the game like any other team. Other players and teams had long since developed established playbooks, and their movements and positions were dictated by years of experience and training. The Hunters, by comparison, had never undergone such indoctrination. Instead, they stalked their opponents across the pitch, the game itself yet

a curiosity to them. Those observers of their games in the Frontier's Cup so far were thoroughly weary of their idiosyncratic playstyle.

Ghast was already listing heavily, a huge hand clasped to one flank, white knuckled fingers clasped tightly to the soft skin just below his ribcage. Rich crimson blood stained his pale skin as it ran from the deep wound beneath, the initial bright liquid now replaced by a much darker colour, betraying the severity of his injury. Clumsy, unsteady on his feet, the Mortician looked around himself sluggishly as he tried to detect further threat.

The first blow, received in a brutal exchange with the one they called Jaecar, had been enough to force him off the pitch and into the apothecaries' waiting



hands. The sawbones had frantically worked to stitch his skin back together and halt the bleeding from the deep puncture wound, but the Hunters pressed the player advantage viciously. They scored their first goal to equalise at 1-1 while Ghast was still being sewn back together.

They scored again just as Ghast limped back onto the pitch, this time the lithe girl and her shadowy lynx outpacing both Cosset and Graves. The Spooks were unable to do anything but vent their frustration in angry howls as the ball hit home, and the Mortician's Guild found themselves trailing their opponents 2-1. Since then, the game had been a delicate dance of parry and thrust, the Morticians cautious and attempting to keep possession, unwilling to give up the game. It was not long before the assassin returned to Ghast once more to prey on the weakened Mortician.

As thunder rolled above and huge drops of rain lashed the pitch, Jaecar's wicked knives flashed back and forth, each strike rebounding from Ghast's hurried parries. The pair of them circled each other in the centre of the pitch, the game quite forgotten. A sense of foreboding hung heavily over the scene, and the spectators watched keenly, squinting through the murky darkness. Jaecar thrust forwards, left knife aimed in a lethal strike at Ghast's uninjured side. His blow was deflected by a heavy swing of the saw, which drew blood as it bit shallowly into the assassin's fingers. Jaecar skipped back in two smooth steps, out of reach

of the larger man. A wicked, feral smile split his face, betraying the darkness behind it.

'I was always told to never underestimate a wounded animal, Spook.'

Ghast maintained his silence, as ever, eyes fixed on the assassin.

'I've never known that to be the truth though.' Jaecar flexed the fingers on his damaged hand, the tanned leather on that knife's grip sticky with blood. The smile never left his face, a grim line of pinched skin that held no humour, only the promise of pain.

'Even now, you're bleeding inside, Spook. You can feel the cut my knives made, feel the pain ebbing and pulsing with each heartbeat. You know you're damaged inside, that you need to be laid up by the sawbones.'

Behind his expressionless mask, Ghast's eyes narrowed, the only reply he would offer.

'Did you think I wouldn't poison my knives, Spook? That I would be like the rest? Hunting clean? I am not like the rest of them. I have no delusions about their Sun Father or their Moon Goddess, about the purity of the world and its cycle.'

Jaecar's body tensed, ready to strike, his voice dropping to a sinister, snakelike hiss.

'I bring down my mark however I can. I know murder for what it is.'

Jaecar lunged forwards, left hand held out and trailing. Ghast's eyes followed the movement, unsure of where the attack might come from. The larger

Mortician shuffled backwards, conceding ground, making extra space between the combatants.

Jaecar's strike was from the knife in his right hand, held downwards, a swift slash at Ghast's lower belly. The Mortician reacted quickly, both hands sweeping his own weapon down to block the attack, knife blade skidding across the flat steel of the saw. Ghast was prepared for the other knife, too; as it swept in towards him, he drove a heavy boot into Jaecar's gut, kicking the Hunter backwards.

Quickly reversing the attack, Ghast dropped low into a fighting stance and barrelled forwards, ignoring his wounds. He held the saw one-handed now, and attacked in a long whistling sweep through the air. It struck the dazed Hunter on one vambrace, slashing a chunk of the boiled leather free and crushing the bone underneath with a sickening crack. Jaecar yelped and dropped his knife as the momentum of the blow drove him into the mud.

Ghast stepped backwards, trying to move his exposed legs away from where the Hunter had fallen, but was too slow. Jaecar, far from finished, struck once again with his good hand, tearing a ragged hole in Ghast's trousers, drawing blood. The sharp flash of pain staggered Ghast, who slipped and fell to one knee.

Jaecar slithered towards him, half standing, half crouching, teeth pulled back in that murderer's smile as he propelled himself forwards. This time, Ghast was unable to parry a thrust from the skinning knife into

the same place as before, right beneath the ribs. He roared as agony lanced through him, but swept his hand up, grabbed Jaecar by the throat and delivered a brutal headbutt in retaliation. The impact of his mask into the Hunter's face buckled the metal even as it knocked out a spray of teeth, saliva, and blood from Jaecar's mouth. Both men toppled in a heap, wounds bleeding, breathing ragged.

Time passed. The game wore on around them.

Ghast opened his eyes. Or at least, he tried to. The mask had dented so severely at the point of impact that it forced one eye shut, a shard of thin metal pressing into his eyelid. The other eye was shot with blood, rendering his vision a crimson blur. There was a dull, aching throb in his skull, and Ghast was aware of sharp, stinging pains lancing through his body, betraying his other injuries. Without moving from his crumpled position on top of Jaecar, he slowly reached around his head with a trembling hand. He felt matted, wet hair, and slowly untied the clasps that kept his mask in place. The rain made the task nearly impossible as his uncertain, trembling fingers slipped over the buckles, but eventually the mask slid off, falling down across his chest.

Ghast felt rain upon his face. It plastered stray hair to his skin, washed away the blood on his face, and stung as it fell into a cut on his forehead. He didn't dare open his eyes properly. It had been a long time since he had felt the rain on his face. Somewhere

within, some bitter, angry spark of rage began to flare. Ghast tried to push it down, drive it away, as he always did. The rage gnawed at him, whispering to him over and over, telling him that the others would laugh at his face, would spit, tease, point.

Point and laugh at the ugly, damaged face of the orphan child.

Ghast tried desperately to force away the images that came unbidden, the flames, the screaming, and the smell; gods, the smell! The sickly, revolting stench of his family burning. He tried to breathe deeply, tried to fight it down, to swallow the fear, the angst, the flashes of baleful, spiteful thoughts. Anything, anything would do. Anything he could focus on to avoid the rage again, the darkness that he could not control.

The world shrank around him until there was nothing except his battle with himself.

The pain washing through him was immense now, tearing at him, pulsing through his veins with every ragged breath. Ghast kept his right hand clamped over the wound in his side as though squeezing it might force the pain out. His left hand tried unsuccessfully to cover his face. He bellowed into his own skin, the sound muffled.

The rain washed all away. Unrelentingly it pummelled him, heavier now that it had been earlier, cleansing Ghast as though the gods willed it. His mind quieted, his breathing slowed down, became more regular. The sensation of the water on his body

replaced all but the dull agony embedded in his side. For several long moments, he relished the feeling of calm, of inner peace; something which he had long thought unattainable.

Ghast knew enough to thank the old gods of this place for delivering him from his turmoil. The weakling deities men now worshipped in the south held no power beyond pomp and circumstance, but something else dwelled here. Ancient mysticism, deep rooted into man's core.

Ghast forced his eyes open at last, a man freed from himself. Opened them truly, for the first time in years, since the fires. He had never been able to fight the rage before. With this revelation, he could be free. Free to escape from his shadow, from his own mind, the prison which had held him for most of his life. Free!

His eyes, revealed as a rich, deep blue, focused on what was standing in front of him, and his hope turned to ash.

Before him stood an avatar of the old gods. The great bear, a creature of feral, indomitable nature, a symbol of strength, and primordial hostility. Behind the creature, a fresh peal of thunder rumbled across the skies as the gods' mirth tumbled forth into the world.

Storm raging around her, Scalpel crept towards the bear from behind, her cautious approach disguised by the thunder and slashing rain. After having being

forced to watch Ghast's struggle from afar, she'd finally managed to down the redheaded Hunter girl and come to Ghast's aid. According to the Ferryman's instructions, she had purposefully left the play to the less capable members of her team, those she knew the Hunter's Guild would easily take the ball from and end the game.

Quietly, with as much stealth as she could muster, she began to intone the enchantment to summon the spirits. They would enable her to restrain the great bear long enough for her to slit its throat, and be done with the beast. Before her, the creature remained oblivious, pawing at the ground as it readied itself to charge Ghast. The bloodletting of the day had made the spirits hungry, and they came across the ether easily. The spirits of this primal land were different and more powerful than their southern counterparts, they surged forward eagerly at her command.

A moment later, the necessary supplication rites performed, Scalpel gestured towards the creature and wisp-like, ethereal tendrils from beyond the mortal realm reached for the bear. They entangled themselves around the bear's limbs and throat, strangling and binding it just as the creature began to charge at Ghast. The large Mortician, oddly unmasked, struggled to rise to his feet, hindered by the shattering injuries he'd taken.

Something stopped her even as she readied a vicious hooked knife in one hand, ready to slip it through the

thick fur on the animal's neck and spill its lifeblood. Scalpel looked around her as the ravenous spirits bayed and howled their frustration at the delay to their feast.

She saw him then, the Ferryman. She had known that he would be watching, ever vigilant, ensuring his will was enacted. He stood apart from all others, his silhouette somehow darker and more foreboding than all around him; darker than the storm itself. Not even the spirits held such an ominous aura as Obulus.

He stared, his eyes boring into hers even at that distance.

For a second, Scalpel was confused, before she broke eye contact and looked around. Against all the odds she saw Cosset and Silence had managed to get the ball, escape from the Hunters, and were heading towards the opposition goal. A strange, fleeting sense of pride filled her before, almost involuntarily, she turned her eyes back to the Ferryman.

Slowly he shook his head. Scalpel understood. She tore her eyes away from Obulus, and back to the bear, straining and snarling at its supernatural captivity.

Scalpel released the control she held over the summoned spirits.

With a deafening, bestial roar which for a second blocked out the thunder, the creature lurched forwards, free from the restraining spell. Ghast, broken, shattered, didn't run. He stood, proud and alone in the pounding rain as death approached. Scalpel forced herself to watch as the animal smashed into the Mortician, huge claws gouging his torso,

releasing a tide of blood. Ghast made a single, defiant strike, his saw smashing into the bear's side before he went down, but the creature barely reacted. The spirits surrounding Scalpel shrieked with glee and flooded towards Ghast as his vitality spilled over the ground. The great bear roared then, its savage snarl illuminated by a strike of lightning, revealing the bloody slaver within its maw. The beast clamped down on Ghast's throat, sharp teeth breaking the skin and tearing a great chunk of meat away with a fine red spray. Ghast died instantly. There was a loud sigh as the spirits rushed to the most potent source of life: his released essence. She felt him burst free from his mortal restraint, the connection of body and spirit severed entirely and irrevocably.

Scalpel made the sign of banishing before the spirits could drink too deeply of Ghast as his soul departed. She might not have cared for him particularly, but none deserved such a fate. Even as she did so, she heard the horn blow that signified the end of the match; a long, deep note that seemed more appropriate now than ever for its mournful tone. The Ferryman's will had been satisfied and, as he had instructed her to ensure, the Hunter's Guild would advance to the finals.

As though summoned, the bear ceased feeding on the mutilated body and padded away to rejoin its teammates.

Scalpel walked over and stood above Ghast's corpse, watching what little colour there was to the pale man's skin quickly draining away. He was utterly still, not

even the wind moving his hair, clamped to his skin as it was by the slick rain and gore. His eyes, wide open, were a deep, radiant blue, something Scalpel had never noticed before. She knew that in years to come, when people remembered Ghast, it would be told that his eyes betrayed the truth. That he had found peace, had at last defeated his demons at the moment of his death.

Scalpel knew otherwise. The weak, excitable peasants liked to weave stories that told of great humanity and hope. Let them, for all the difference it made to her. She was here, now, and she knew that Ghast died as he had lived. Bloodily, violently, and ultimately pointlessly. She, at least, would not forget this sacrifice for what it was.

The crowds and officials began to disperse, leaving her alone with the mutilated body. Scalpel could only hope that whatever puppet strings Obulus was pulling, the outcome was worth the events of this dark day.

SUNSET

Staring around himself at the subdued, sparse wilderness, Flint wondered at the change that a few weeks and miles made. This was the final of the Frontier's Cup; the biggest, most important match of the campaign and the culmination of all their efforts. The veteran Mason couldn't help but compare it to the finals he had played in just a few months earlier.

The difference couldn't have been more marked. Gone were the bright, vibrant colours in the stands, the cacophony of instruments, cheers, and stamping feet; gone too was the raw urgency of the crowd. The skyline back then had been dominated by heavy flags fluttering in the wind, huge pavilions by the pitchside, immense stone towers and monuments from the city behind. All of that had been replaced by a cold, hard, grey sky and murky shapes in the distance that were foreboding mountains or jagged trees, dark and sinister.

As he ran out, boots crunching over the early frost, breath bursting free from his mouth in tiny clouds, he held one hand aloft; the same salutary gesture he had made on a thousand other pitches.

The reaction might well have been the worst he had ever seen.

Their Hunter's Guild opponents had already assembled and taken their positions, showing a striking efficiency that startled Flint. For a Guild which had barely sponsored a team, and which should have seen

its hopes dashed in the early stages of the event, the Hunters seemed to possess a fearsomely ruthless and practised line-up. While the Guild itself was a source of some impolite amusement to some, it seemed the team was not. Experienced players like Flint had already begun, over the short space of time of the Frontier's Cup, to adopt a wary respect for the newcomers.

Flint didn't know why they had suddenly chosen to enter the sport for the first time or what their intentions were; he didn't even know whether they intended to remain in Guild Ball after the Frontier's Cup was over. But what he did know for damn sure was to be careful around the newly unchained beast.

Hidden by his disguise, Obulus watched from the sidelines as the Mason team slowly made their way onto the pitch. Most of them played the fool, waving to an uncaring, despondent crowd that cared little. They tried to treat this crowd as they would those who followed them from game to game in more familiar lands - the simpletons. Only Mallet and Honour stayed their hands, faces showing steely resolve rather than the simpering smiles of jesters.

If he'd cared enough to break his reserved mask, he might have laughed at how pathetic they seemed. But to the Ferryman, loathing was as distasteful as any other emotion. He had charged the Hunter's Guild with their task through cold, simple logic; the same logic with which he had pursued every other plot, gambit and intrigue in his life. This match was the

culmination of the current phase of his plans. It had to progress smoothly under any circumstances.

There was no bad feeling or undue sentiment at work here, just the calm, steady progression of his schemes. He could leave the emotions to simpletons like Silence. Now was the time for the Hunter's Guild to fulfil the final part of his arrangement with them, and Obulus had chosen to disguise himself to oversee the event personally.

Standing where he was on the sidelines of the Hunter's Guild half of the pitch, Obulus could easily make out each of the Hunters and the sense of determination emanating from them. Possibly Hearne may not have told the rest of his team the precise details of the pact with the Mortician's Guild. Possibly he would have preferred to keep them unaware of their part in this. Whether he had told them or not was of little importance to Obulus, but he admitted a vague curiosity as to what kind of man Hearne was.

Somewhere to Obulus' left, the match official charged with beginning, scoring and ending the match lifted his instrument to his lips and blew a solitary, keening note. It echoed dismally around the desolate space, more akin to a funeral dirge than the proud fanfare the players were used to.

The game began.

Immediately off their marks, the Hunter's Guild kicked the ball up, just narrowly getting it across the dirty white halfway line etched into the tundra, itself

almost lost beneath a layer of frost. It was a barely legal kick, but Obulus allowed himself a measure of admiration for the capabilities of the kicker. The ball rolled to a gradual stop under the watchful eyes of a match official, only inches into the Mason half. On the same side of the pitch, a smaller woman with an unusual, feral appearance leapt forwards in what seemed more like animalistic bounds than a human sprint. The woman used the momentum of her arms to help propel her forward, almost hunched on all fours. Her pet lynx followed stealthily, a hungry glare promising danger for any who tried to halt their advance. They would quickly collect the ball and forcibly turn what should have been a Mason's drive into a Hunter's advantage.

On the opposite side, Honour was responding, calmly ordering her players to change position accordingly. At her words, Mallet dropped into a sweeper position, and Tower advanced only slightly forwards. Harmony, her hair shining copper in the light, jogged into step with Honour, although there was little trace of familial love towards her sister in her body language. Honour approached the ball, hammer in hand, ready to react to the next Hunter play. Flint stood closer to Obulus, looking to avoid being man-marked by the Hunters. He was clearly trying to keep clear of the pack and hover where he might steal a pass once the lines had met.

The Hunters' side, by comparison, operated like

a wolf pack, the rest racing forward to protect their sister who had run up to gather the ball. Unlike any other team, they were largely silent, Theron making constant subtle hand gestures to his team. Each one was quickly picked up on and smoothly responded to, the Hunters stalking towards the opposition with almost military discipline.

Obulus nodded in silent appreciation.

With only one team issuing vocal commands, and the spectators deathly silent, the game descended into an eerie calm. The Masons suddenly became extremely conscious of the quiet, and seemed unwilling to break the silence; only the bear had no such concern, bellowing a bestial challenge at Brick as the heavy set Mason approached the centre of the pitch. Obulus saw the huge oaf smiling in response, surely the most absurd reaction possible from someone who would soon find themselves trying to fend off that ferocious creature. Doubtless word of Ghaſt's death had made it to the thick-skulled Mason, making his response even more bewildering.

The Mortician considered Hearne's position in relation to Honour and Harmony. He wondered whether the Hunter would try to eliminate his mark early, then press the advantage to tip the scales of the game in his team's favour, or if he would wait more patiently for his moment. Obulus did not doubt the outcome either way, but the methodology of the Hunter was fascinating to study, so far removed was

he from the typical Guild Ball player.

Obulus continued to watch in silence as the two teams met in the middle of the pitch. Behind the facile game taking place, the predator stalked its prey.

The caravan rocked gently from side to side, a soothing rhythm to ease aching legs, still shaking from mixed exhaustion and excitement. Tower looked down at the heavy bronze and iron trophy in his hands. Harmony had called it an ugly thing; time-dulled and age-pitted, barely shining in the fading light that broke through the opening in the rear of the canvas. Tower couldn't see why. It wasn't about fine looks or craftsmanship, although he could see that the trophy had once been formed by loving artistry. It was a stamp of power, of dominance. It was a symbol, a sign, and a warning to others who might seek to contest the Mason's Guild's hold over the sport.

He tore his eyes away from the trophy and looked across at Mallet, slouched opposite him. The old soldier had one wiry, muscular arm lazily draped over the edge of the cart and the other holding a long pipe to his bearded lips. Surely the grizzled veteran would understand. Sure enough he detected a sparkle in those worldly eyes, their soft, wrinkled skin wrinkling even further as he winked at the rookie.

'Well done, lad. You would've made your father proud today.' The kind words were as unexpected as the twitch of the eye. Tower hoped he might even have seen the older man's lips curl into the ghost of a smile.

‘One day soon, you’ll be replacing me lad. I can tell.’ The elder Mason lazily waved away Tower’s stuttered protests. ‘Nah, nah, nah, boy. Learn when to listen, and when to speak. That much will get you far in this life, trust an old hand like me.’

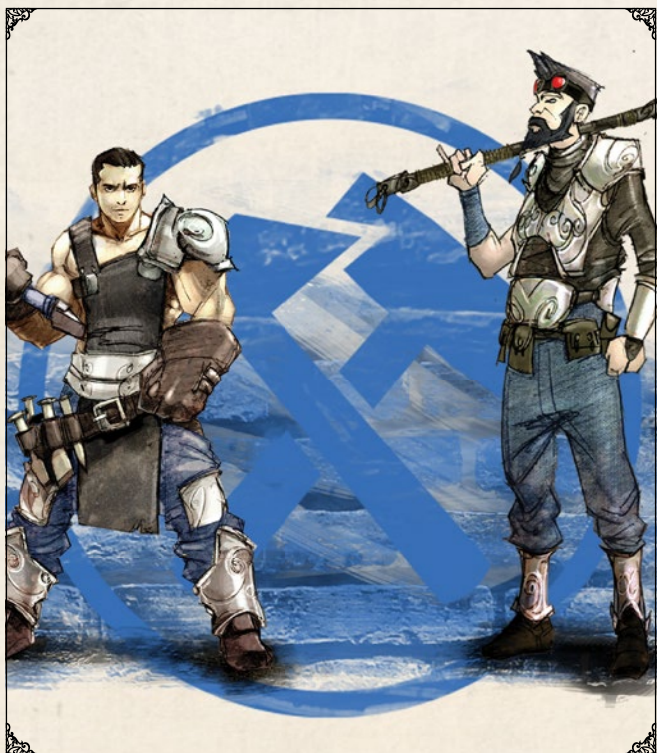
Mallet’s eyes held a far off look for a moment as he took a particularly long draw on his pipe. It was a tawny old wooden thing, pitted and scratched from time and use. He exhaled loudly, a stream of smoke puffing out between the two Masons. Tower tried his best to maintain eye contact despite the obscuring clouds and the magnetic draw of the hard metallic icon in his hands.

‘Mark my words lad. One day you’ll be the head of this crew, be more than I ever was. Oh, I know it seems impossible now, but it’ll come to pass. The others will never manage it. Flint hasn’t got it in him. Too much the loner, too much water under that bridge a long time ago. Oh, they love him alright, for now, but sooner or later he’ll get laid up, slow down. And then he’ll be forgotten for the next lad who can wow the crowd. Brick? He’s a soldier, just like me. Big, strong, tough as an ox...’ Mallet chuckled, a deep rumble that elicited yet more smoke. ‘And just as obstinate.’

Tower had to wonder why he was getting this speech now, even as he knew he would remember every word. Hell, he’d probably lay in his bunk at night and dream that Mallet’s words might come true.

‘I won’t even bother with her. That callous bitch

wouldn't surprise me if she upped and left first thing tomorrow.' From the scowl, it was obvious that Mallet was talking about Harmony. 'But you, my lad? I can see something of the Old Man in you. He was before your time, but he was a fine captain, just like Honour. It's the curse of our lives that we must see a great many things pass.' A look of sadness passed across the veteran's eyes, a momentary shadowy cast, quickly replaced.



Tower remained quiet, unwilling to ruin the moment of genuine camaraderie and acceptance. He'd never known the like with Mallet before. The pipe fumes hung heavily in the air, unable to escape, making the young rookie grow light-headed. After a moment he could no longer resist and looked down to stare at the trophy, tenderly passing it from one calloused hand to another, marvelling at it all over again.

The caravan slowly rumbled on, the dark forests that separated the fringes of Eisnor from the lands of the Erskirii looming ever closer. Unknowingly true to Mallet's words, Flint sat astride his own horse, some distance away from the others. The man seemed lost in thought and only moved to nudge the animal with his knees when it needed direction. In another cart, Brick and Marbles both slumbered after the exertions of the day. It seemed the unusual potency of Eisnoran mead had proven too much even for Brick's massive frame and constitution.

Harmony had left earlier, spurring her horse and riding south almost as soon as the match ended, only a handful of Guild officials in tow as guides and guards both. Mallet had cursed her retreating form, while the others had mostly looked on, confused. Flint knew very well why the girl rode south with such speed and who she rushed to meet with her news. He was deeply troubled by the development, truth be told. Already he could feel the threads of the team being pulled apart from one another. If he had believed, he might

have offered a prayer to Solthecius that they might somehow bind themselves back together again.

But Flint harboured no such delusions. The shift in the team's dynamic had already begun, and the best he could hope for was to ride it out. The dark pines of the forest, jagged edges of blackness silhouetted against the sky, grew ever closer as they slowly made their way back to civilization.

A heavy, bloated sun dipped in the skies, shotthrough with streaks of murder red against the murky orange. A single, lonely figure remained, now the crowds and Guild officials had departed. The figure sat watching the setting sun, waiting for the world to be swallowed by night. It was as though the elements sensed the day was ending and the lawlessness of twilight was near, the wind had begun to pick up. Over the tundra, it whipped the sporadic tufts of pale green and muted brown grass back and forth. Errant strands of hair stuck to the woman's face, plastering themselves to her skin. That skin was cool to the touch, despite the fading, tanned glow of a hard summer spent in the practice yards.

She cradled her twisted and mauled left knee to her, arms crossed protectively around it, back hunched over, chin resting on her forearms. The other leg lay useless, swollen and mangled. Lifeless. The heights of the sharp, searing agony had passed by now, leaving

a dull thump of pain that was considerably more tolerable unless she actually tried to move either limb. Then the pain smashed back into her, washing over her with savage urgency until tears ran down her cheeks. Then she would have to admit failure. Failure and weakness.

The woman knew the extent of her injuries and had seen similar many times before in others, whose names and faces of the majority of which had almost passed from memory. It was not the damage to muscles and bones that would break her - those the sawbones would repair in a few short months, even though she had chased them away during the game. She did not fear the knife, or the anonymous faces covered in pure white cloth, nor even the sleep that the Physician's Guild enforced during treatment. As soon as she arrived in Piervo, work would begin to restore her body.

The damage would persist far beyond that.

With inexorable, unstoppable slowness, the sun continued to fall, casting the skies in hues of sickly yellow as its colour bled outwards. In another place and another time, the sunset might have been considered beautiful. Here, there was none of the warmth she would normally expect; nor the pleasant gardens and fields which would normally flourish in that warmth. Here, everything the eye could see was barren, stunted, and petrified under the stark, heartless light.

She would have to learn to walk again, once the

surgery was completed. That much was obvious. It was irrelevant whether the procedure to knit her shattered legs back together replaced her own flesh and blood, or simply healed them to pristine condition. The body was not designed to suffer such trauma and recover. The act of restoring her was entirely against the natural order of the world; accordingly there would be resistance as she forced her way back into life once more.

That in itself would add further weeks, even months to her absence. Still, she feared something else. She had suffered injuries before, as any Guild Ball player had, albeit none so debilitating as these. What she feared was obsolescence. Obsolescence, and becoming just a memory, like those others whose names had been forgotten, slipped through the sands of time, never to return.

She would be replaced. She knew with certainty. Pragmatism demanded that her Guild do so for the time being, if nothing else. The woman was not so foolish as to waste time hoping that a sense of loyalty would keep her place until she could return. She would be replaced. The team would begin to form anew and adopt a fresh identity without her. Even those closest to her would be unable to resist the change. Such things were insidious. The woman doubted it would be a promotion from within. None of the men and women on her current team were at a stage of their careers where it would be appropriate.

It would be him.

She had watched the man, the dark skinned bastard from the far south, for some time. She'd known that in due course, he would be the one to challenge her ascendancy with his own. It left her bitter just how agonisingly easy it would be for him now. He'd be able to slip in and adopt the mantle that had been hers, had been part of her identity. He'd made no effort to hide his ambitions or to approach her with a potential solution of how to share the power he so desperately wanted. Thinking about it now, in this quiet, brooding place, she would, if she were honest, have refused him even if he had come to her with such an offer.

In that moment, she asked herself "why?". Why had she demanded that he did not travel north with them for the tournament? Why had she felt such a sense of animosity towards him? Was it because of her sister's newfound association with the man? That had been a significant pressure on their already strained relationship. Too many times she'd watched the man achieve so much more in partnership with her sister than she ever had. Too many times she'd felt bitter, violent rage towards him over her own failures in dealing with Harmony. Or was it the legacy of power, of not been able to relinquish control? When her time had come to lead, she'd sworn to herself that she would remain humble. Yet she saw now that in order to succeed, an individual had to grow into leadership and adopt the self importance and possessiveness that came with it. A leader who did not commit to the

task wholeheartedly, without absolute confidence in themselves, was destined to failure.

Failure. She considered the word again. The brutal honesty of it frightened her.

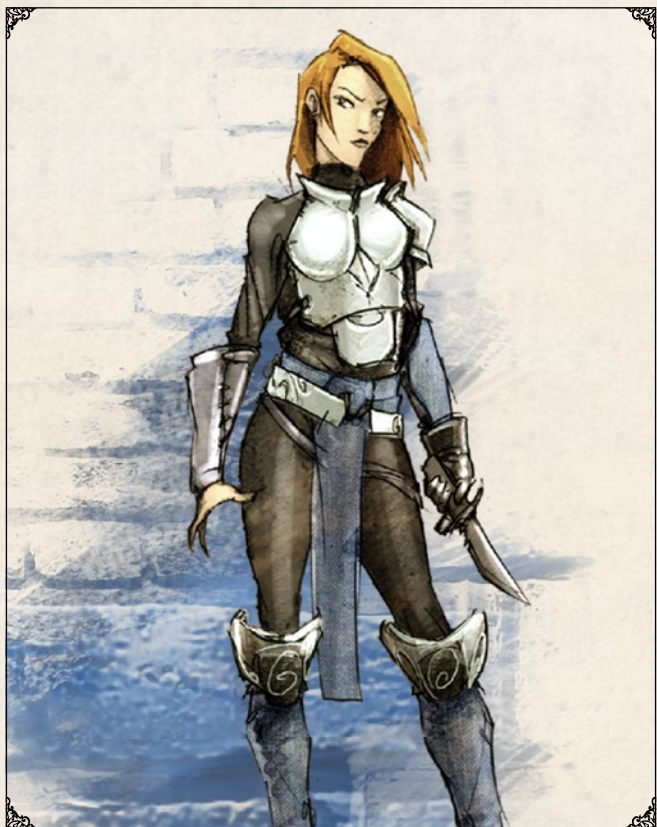
Mercifully, the wind that had begun earlier started to relent. Without the wind, there was silence. No sound, not even that of animal life. Not in this abandoned, dismal place. For years, she'd attended the Frontier's Cup, and each time she had heard it remarked that humanity should not be here, that man did not belong in the wilds. For the first time, the woman took some time to consider the idea. She could only agree. She would leave part of herself here, imprinted into the soil beneath her feet, a long and glorious career now severed and lost. The forgotten gods of this place only knew what would happen to her now.

All was still. The shadows of the trees in the distance lengthened, blackness slowly consumed the land as the light of another day passed into nothingness. The sound of the stands ringing through her ears had long since died. The stamping feet and cheers, all faded like fallen leaves. The pulsing exuberance of the men, women, and children as they screamed their support, burned away to stillness. All she had left was silence and emptiness. Her world had shrunk, collapsed in upon itself, only the view before her left to call her own. The sun reached the horizon and the final part of its descent. At last, all the momentum that had driven her to this place, at this time, had ceased.

Honour was still, unmoving. Her force was spent.

She didn't know how much time passed before the Guild officials dared to approach her. They carried her away with them, all strength gone from her body. She had no resolve left to admonish them as she had earlier.

Her time, her reign, was over.





THE BUTCHER'S CIVIL WAR



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— THE PRISONER —

Not even the slightest breeze penetrated through to these dark depths, fresh air defeated by the stench of rot and decay. The sense of foreboding misery was overwhelming, those that were banished to this place having long since given up hope of seeing sunlight once more. To be imprisoned here was to be torn from the world completely. This was purgatory, the abyss from Solthecian scripture.

It was a pitiable fate. There was no escape or respite from this hell, only the darkness.

The prisoner's world had shrunk to the dirty walls and floor of his cell, only broken by heavy iron bars. Cold metal spoiled by spots of orange rust, they were set into the stone and served as a door on one wall. The corridor beyond housed several similar cells, lined either side along its length. Each of them was just as wretched.

The only sounds were a faint drip of water from a flooded cell further down, and the murmur of the other inmates. The barrier between life and death was insubstantial here. Amongst the bundles of rags, some of their number were corpses already. Bodies that had either yet to be discovered, or their disposal unimportant enough to warrant removal. The remainder that lived clung desperately to a thin thread of life through instinct, never questioning the pathetic existence left to them.

New inmates worked out very quickly to conserve what little strength they had, and not to waste it by

fighting. There were always unfortunates who learned this too late, or who warranted special attention for one reason or another. Huddled over, they groaned from the agony of their injuries, the result of the sadistic attentions of the men and women that ruled in this nightmarish gaol.

The prisoner grinned. That would not be his end. When he had first arrived, already beaten into a bloody pulp of bruised flesh and cracked skin, his captors had been none too gentle with him. He'd laughed in their faces, as they had enacted their most violent tendencies upon his battered form, and come up short of what he had already known in the past. It was far less than what he swore that he would do to them given half the chance. The prisoner was not another weakling to be cowed into submission.

He looked at his bulky limbs, now bound by heavy iron shackles, and smiled wickedly at the memories. The chains were much heavier than those he had worn before, but still not heavy enough, if his captors made the mistake of sending another scrawny wretch to try and torture him.

The prisoner sometimes wondered what had become of those in the world above. He was not so egotistical as to think that the world would stop without him. The nobility would still live their petty and unimportant lives of indulgence, and the poor would still eke out whatever lives they could before poverty or illness took them. The Guilds would continue to war with each

other, on both the pitch, and across the negotiation tables of shadowy back rooms.

Even the crimes which he had committed were unlikely to have made much difference to daily life in the Empire of the Free Cities. Murder was rife anyhow, no matter how high profile. Every evening in the cities brought fresh bodies, all neatly laid out on the cold stone of mortuary slabs across the land. His victims were but a handful of faces, lost amongst the multitude.

Life inevitably continued, no man or woman able to stop the relentless advance of time, or the changes it wrought. Even if he were ever to be released, the world would never be the same place he had left behind. Even the destiny of a Guild was fluid, one of those mighty organisations which seemed invincible from the outside.

Of all Guilds which would have changed in his absence, the prisoner suspected that the Butcher's Guild was the most likely to have experienced the passing of time. Doubtless the murder of the Master Butcher had sent them into turmoil, with the members of the Butcher's Guild team infighting amongst themselves. They had ever been a cadre of the ruthless and violent, all brought to heel by the presence of their captain. Without Ox's approval or patronage, it was likely that few amongst their number would accept a new leader, meaning a difficult and potentially bloody ascension for the successor.

The prisoner knew it would be Fillet, the Valentian girl. She was the only logical choice. Although not

possessing the robust physicality of the Master Butcher, she was no less resolved; tenacity and determination lending zeal to her leadership. Whilst the prisoner doubted that she would inspire the same sense of bloodlust in her team as her predecessor had, the woman was extremely capable and utterly deadly. Alone she would be capable of surmounting even the Master Butcher's tally of heads, without any assistance from her team. Over time, that reputation alone would bring some errant members of the Guild in line.

If the girl was sensible and wanted it over quickly though, she would bring in assistance from outside to influence the Guild and team both. Although it would be cleaner, and strengthen Fillet's claim if she took the throne by herself, that was unrealistic. A long life of observing magisters and chamberlains had taught the prisoner that very little happened without involvement of another Guild, or the Union. Barely a meeting passed without a Longshanks lurking in the shadows close by, their presence woven into the cloth of every Guild as much as the trade itself.

Despite this, the prisoner doubted that all of the Master Butcher's old family could be swayed by the threat of violence. The loyalty of blood was too strong for some, such as Brisket and Boiler, and others embraced such an existence; bloody conflict a gift to their savage nature.

Not all would honour the Master Butcher's memory, however. The prisoner imagined that Shank especially

would soon switch his allegiance. An inherent coward, the Master Cutter knew only loyalty to coin, all other ties be damned. Meathook too was a relatively new addition to the team. The vicious Erskirii was unlikely to stay in the fold on the strength of camaraderie alone.

It all depended really on who the old family chose as the Master Butcher's successor.

Boar was obviously the strongest, the meanest, and the most proficient fighter. He also, without doubt, possessed the blackest heart. Still, the prisoner couldn't see the others following a madman, despite all that. None of them would be so foolish as to put their lives in the hands of the Beast. Instead, it would be Brisket.

By now, she would have recovered from her injuries inflicted by the Fisherman's Guild, and know the truth of the Master Butcher's vengeance. It was likely that the experience at the wrong end of the knife had changed the woman's outlook, made her harder, and trimmed away the last shreds of her light-heartedness. Those were solid qualities to have in a captain, at least in the prisoner's experience. A lack of compassion, coupled with ruthlessness, kept an individual honest and lent a certain pragmatic clarity to leadership.

Intelligent and ambitious, Brisket would have been the Master Butcher's choice, had he been able to make one.

The prisoner knew that neither of the women would back down. Too much was at stake for both, the good of the Guild warring with the fierce respect that had built the fraternity of the team.

Fiery Valentian pride coursed through both of their veins, both possessed of a backbone and stubbornness that could never abate without conflict.

He was broken from his reverie by screaming. Another pathetic wretch had been torn away from his life above, and was being dragged down here to waste away in the darkness. The sound had little bearing on the prisoner, but it underscored an undeniable truth, and made further contemplation of the Butcher's Guild seem pointless.

The prisoner didn't belong to that world any more now.

His memories and observations were from another lifetime, the experience and musings of another man; not the one that languished in this cell. His existence severed from the lives of those above, he wouldn't even have the luxury of watching the power struggle between Fillet and Brisket play out. Here, alone in the darkness, the prisoner would remain until he was taken away for his execution. Assuming, of course, that he wouldn't just be left to starve; another desiccated corpse amid a bundle of rags.

He smiled, the edges of his lips curling up under his thick beard. It was a shame. A Butcher civil war would have been most entertaining to see. The memory of the Master Butcher overshadowed the struggle for leadership, the dark deeds of the past influencing those of the present.

Only the strong would survive this struggle for leadership. To the other? Death.

PARLEY

The torchlight flickered in the faint breeze; a caress of cool air over exposed skin. The waft of air seemed out of keeping with the confines of the stone walls, the heat from the central brazier oppressive; colouring the scene a warm collage of orange and murky red.

At one time, this had been part of a grand demesne of some lord or another, the name of that family long since passed into memory. Now, the estate had also fallen into ruin, and the abandoned chapel they stood inside was but one example of the decay wrought by time. Paint had peeled away from the walls, as the once grand frescoes chipped and broke. The carpet underfoot had long since rotted through to reveal dirty stone underneath.

The remaining faces of saints and angels stared out from the walls, their glares warped and distorted, almost pleading to join the fragments of their brethren on the floor. In grander days, this place had been a grand celebration of civilisation and the arts; now it looked like anything but.

The secretive gathering was surely the first of its kind since the end of the Century Wars, but the parley took place amongst the ghosts of the past, and marks of destitution both. They were poor omens. At least the domed ceiling had yet to fall in, although the skeletal frame was thick with ancient cobwebs and soot.

If any of their number looked truly apprehensive of

their surroundings, it was Silence. The pale man hid as much of himself away within his heavy black robes as was possible, only his face stark against the darkness. He leaned back away from the light and into the shadows, as though he tried to disassociate himself from the assembled figures.

Stoker by comparison leaned forward into the brazier, embracing the hot, smoky air. His smirk was feral and wicked in the light cast by the flames, combining with the hard ridges of his mask to transform his expression to that of a devil.

Harmony ignored them both, her features betraying her disinterest. The slender Mason held her arms crossed and shoulders squared, body language closed and unwelcoming. A few feet away from where she stood, Decimate mirrored the stance almost exactly, the scabbards that housed her vicious rapiers glittering in the light.

The final one of them looked most at home here in the darkness, although he was an unfamiliar face to Brisket. She knew his name to be Jaecar, but little else about the man. Like most of the Hunter's Guild, he was a mystery.

Brisket looked at them all, only a handful of those she had invited to this clandestine meeting, and none nearly so influential as she had hoped. She wouldn't let it be seen, but inwardly she cursed her hubris. These five were peons amongst their Guilds, those whom held no favour at all.

'Why are we here, Butcher?' Harmony spoke first, her tone haughty and unkind. Easily the least capable fighter of their number, the young woman made up for the deficiency in proud aloofness.

'I too am curious. Pray for your sake that you have not wasted my time.' Silence's voice was a snake-like hiss, low and urgent.

'Is it not obvious?' Stoker slyly stared around at them all. 'The Butchers seek revenge for their fallen comrade.'

Harmony waved a delicate, disdainful hand. 'Such a worthless aim. Leave the weak behind, and move on.'

Brisket almost drew a knife then, at the implied insult to the Master Butcher. This was already going poorly, and once again she doubted her wisdom in summoning such a conclave. She had done little but that over the last few hours.

'Clearly, not one amongst you has the slightest idea. Be sensible and wait for your host to speak, lest we all waste our time.' The new voice was without accent, flat and monotone. Pin Vice stepped forward from the darkness of the doorway. Behind her, Corsair followed ungainly, face flushed from a skinful of rum. Brisket's heart quickened. These two were exactly the rank of player whom she had hoped might attend.

Captains. Men and women with real power.

The new arrivals settled in beside the others, all eyes expectantly upon Brisket. The only sound was the crackle of the fire, the echo of footsteps stilled. Tension lay heavy in the room, each player the enemy

of the others. There were no friends here.

Brisket cut through it. 'I won't pretend to avoid the truth. None of us trust one another, most of you trust the Butcher's Guild even less.' Corsair belched loudly, and grinned at her. 'But I am not standing with you as one of the Butcher's Guild, or at least not one of their lackeys.' Brisket paused, to let that sink in.

'There are those of us within who still remember the Master Butcher, who still belong to his family. We remember his sacrifice and legacy, and refuse that which is being forced on us now.'

'Now? Now your people are wild dogs, running off the leash. They need to be muzzled or put down.' Silence leant forward, his features both earnest and serious. His eyes nervously darted back and forth between the others.

Jaecar smiled at the Mortician, bared teeth portraying lethal intent. 'I can do it if you'll pay well enough, Spook. I'll put each of them down for you, slowly, just like your Silent Terror.'

Brisket thought she heard the hint of a chuckle from Corsair. Silence backed away without another word, retreating hurriedly into the embrace of the shadows. It was clear that none within earshot believed the Hunter's threat to be insincere. Brisket cleared her throat and continued.

'What I am asking of you is only that we have your support, when the time comes. The support of you, your teams, whomever you can bring.' Brisket hadn't expected

that last part to sound quite so needy, and offered them all a steely glare to hide the implied weakness.

What she asked was treason against Guild in some cases; this would be the moment when she could truly gauge the reaction of the unlikely group.

Stoker was unafraid of her glare, and met it with his own. 'I speak for Esters, and her allies. She would doubtless agree to what you ask, if you were in a position to extend a similar gesture of goodwill.' His thick accent coloured his words, but the meaning was clear.

Brisket nodded. Once, the idea of supporting a leadership challenge amongst the Brewer's Guild would have filled her with both indifference, and a deep sense of trepidation, especially siding with a man with as poor a reputation as Stoker.

Yet necessity made for strange bedfellows, it seemed. Brisket knew she would likely have to offer something similar to every man and woman in attendance before the evening was over. Looking at all of them, each had their stories of dissent within their own Guilds. It was probable that they all had attended to secure the same support as Brisket.

She was gambling she knew, by laying a hidden thread of rebellion out in plain sight and lending her own face to it. It left both her, and the Butcher's Guild very vulnerable, as the predators circled.

Brisket did not intend to show a single one of them any weakness that might be exploited, however. This was a cry for strength of arms, not the death throes

of a man that shed his blood. If she had to agree to back a hundred rebellions, she would. Later, once her own was over and done with, there would always be a way to break the contract, or twist the knife without excessive bleeding, should it come to it.

‘Trust that I can speak for the Mortician’s Guild, Butcher. What advantage do you offer me for supporting your claim?’ The hiss had returned, Silence never quite earning his moniker. Corsair laughed.

‘You speak for shit, Spook. Not a single person here believes you to be anything more than a puppet to your master.’ The Fisherman turned to face Brisket, skin around his nose and cheeks rosy red, even in the light. ‘I piss on the grave of your Master Butcher. The bastard took my leg, and stole my team from me.’ He scratched his chin, heavy with stubble. ‘But he did at least murder that worthless cretin, Laurentis, saved me a job there.’

Brisket responded with a vicious retort. ‘Aye, and why was that? I have a host of jagged scars on my belly that give voice to your good nature.’ She took a deep breath, calming herself. ‘As I said, none of us much trust one another. Believe me, I don’t doubt that several amongst you would prefer to see me floating face down in the canal than speak with me.’

‘My piece is said. I will not waste my breath relaying it again. If you are with us, then well and good. Show me an indication, and if the time comes, I will call upon you. If you are not? Then cease this pretence and leave.’

In the ensuing quiet, Pin Vice was the first, striding towards Brisket. Up close, the aloof Engineer was taller by several inches, and she looked down dispassionately at the Butcher. Her eyes betrayed no trace of any emotion, and her mouth was hidden by a dark wrap, leaving her unreadable. Long seconds passed before the Artificer Queen spoke, the air between the two women cold.

‘You have my allegiance, for as long as it suits me.’ It was all Pin Vice offered before departing once again, her pace strangely mechanical and steady over the uneven floor.

Brisket didn’t care for the Artificer Queen in the slightest, but her support was worth a great deal. Even outside of the Engineer’s Guild, it was obvious the woman held significant influence. Others would follow her lead, now she had committed herself.

Sure enough, Stoker was next, repeating again that he vouched for Esters and her own backers. He was followed by Silence, for all that the untrustworthy Spook was worth. Even Corsair nodded to Brisket before he left. Harmony strode out without the slightest indication, and Jaecar only offered a smile, which could have suggested any number of meanings.

The last to leave was Decimate. The woman carried herself nervously, her mask offering no barrier to the way that her eyes refused to meet Brisket’s.

‘I cannot... that is to say, I will take your proposal to Rage.’

‘You can save your bullshit. I know that your kind only respect coin. Once your traitorous master has finally decided how greedy he is, send an envoy to tell me how much will buy your loyalty.’

Decimate shuffled away, not even having the stones to pretend at indignation. Brisket watched her go, smiling. How different things were now for the Union. Once, they had ruled even the Guilds themselves, able to dictate their presence and involvement in affairs that had no ties to their shadowy organisation. Now, they were the worst sort of sellswords, untrusted and underpaid. Their desperation was palatable in every meeting.

Brisket was left alone by the brazier, the warmth unable to penetrate her icy demeanour. Ahead of her was a long and hard struggle. Today she had taken but the first steps along that path. There would be many more before she was done, and each fraught with just as much risk and danger. But it was worth it, for the memory of the Master Butcher, and the preservation of his family.

COURT OF THE USURPER

Despite the name, not all of the undercity was completely within the shadows. Although most areas belonged to the sewers or forgotten dungeons; in some places the light still shone during the hours of daylight. Presently however, it was not the golden warmth of the rich sun that illuminated Fillet's path before her, but the icy chill of the full moon, colouring the way in ghostly, silvery blue.

As the Butcher hurried to her destination through the open air, she finally felt the absence of the eyes that had watched her from the shadows. Wretched and abandoned souls lurked in the musty and foetid depths, those places where the sun had long since given up claim. The eyes had followed Fillet as she made her way through their reclusive lair, but close to the surface where the air was fresher, their owners chose not to tread. Now Fillet travelled alone, as she had hoped.

Surrounding her on all sides were broken down buildings and walls, gutted by fire, or rotting away to bare stone. Weeds choked the gaps between tiles underfoot, or broke the stone in two, forcing themselves towards the light. Stillness pervaded the scene, adding to the sense of a forgotten and desolate kingdom. It amazed Fillet that such places existed without the knowledge of those who passed above, ignorant of the existence of the undercity.

But then, it served its purpose marvellously. This meeting was away from prying eyes, the words not to be repeated by the uninvited. It could only have taken place somewhere like this.

The war in the Butcher's Guild had escalated, and it was time that Fillet took control, reigning in the disruptive elements of her team. Her first step would be to offer them a head, a shared enemy. But to do that, first she would need to know who to offer as sacrifice to the wolves.

The answers likely waited with the infamous figure waiting ahead.

The open square was clear in the light of the full moon, strangely serene. Rage was already there, standing in the direct centre of the abandoned street. Clad in his long coat and top hat, he looked strangely out of place amongst the derelict surroundings, too clean and neat. His jaw moving slightly, betrayed by the movement of his moustache. Fillet thought she heard him whispering under his breath, but he was alone when Fillet arrived.

The Union captain's hard features were fixed into a scowl, and smoke from his cigar tainted the air with its earthy aroma, a sign of how long he had been here. Fillet was pleased to see that his cleaver and knives were at least hidden under the coat, and not in his murderous hands. Although she would if need be, the Butcher did not want to have to fight Rage.

Fillet had known his kind before, bullying, hateful men, with short, fiery tempers and little control over their own violent impulses. They were pathetic creatures, driven by their base urges. Of all men, they were the most predictable, and easily led.

He reminded her very much of the Beast. Unlike many others, Fillet had never feared Boar. He was simply an instrument, a blade which was to be aimed at the opposition's throat, unleashed and then left to rampage. Any time he did, she brought him to heel sure enough, splattered with blood and dirt, after he had sated his bloodlust.

She could not do the same with the Union captain, but Fillet knew how to handle him. She had spent a lifetime working around the murderous threats of men like Rage and Boar, and knew just how to manipulate them to get what she wanted. Doubtless the man ruled his pack of hounds by being the biggest and most belligerent amongst them.

Fillet was not so easily impressed. She had no intention of backing down from Rage, but now was a time for words, not violence. That could wait for the pitch, when something might be achieved by the bloodshed.

Rage coolly watched her approach, hands clasped together at his waist. Fillet nodded at him, holding out her own by her sides to clearly show she did not carry any blades. He mirrored her, smirking. It was an almost pointless gesture, since both kept enough

sharp metal on themselves at any given time to start a minor war. Or end one. Steel was always within easy reach for individuals that lived lives like theirs.

‘The Flashing Blade herself! What brings you to this misbegotten stretch of the undercity? You’re a stranger to these parts.’ Rage cocked an eyebrow in her direction. Certainly no one could accuse him of being laconic.

‘Pursuit of knowledge. The truth.’

‘The truth? That surely is an objective term.’ Fillet wondered at Rage’s eloquence. It was said of him that speaking from one moment to the next could be like speaking to different people. Fillet conceded that perhaps she had sorely misjudged his ferocious intelligence, thinking it only low, animal cunning.

‘Perhaps.’ A careful answer. Time to draw out the truth, if she could, let him run and speak.

Rage offered her a nod. ‘This is a strange place to find the truth, girl. Your predecessor walked upon these stone tiles, but you? I do not think that you are welcome amongst the lawless scum that dwell here.’

‘That may be. But I go where my answers might be found. And who better to ask than the monarch of such villainy, the lord Usurper himself? I come here for your court.’

Rage grinned dangerously. ‘My court? Tell me then, why should a shithole like this be my only court, girl? Am I not deserving of better?’

‘You tell me. Is one that murders his own worthy of any home, other than a neglected stretch of forgotten

land?’ Fillet danced on dangerous ground, she knew.

‘Murderer I may be, but I am no fool.’ Fillet detected the rising anger in Rage’s tone. ‘At least I do not pretend to that which does not belong to me.’

‘The throne of the Master Butcher is mine! Mine, and none other.’ Fillet hissed the words. Rage had stroked a fresh wound.

The Usurper laughed. ‘Perhaps we are not so unlike each other, Butcher girl. But tell me, what is to stop me from gutting you where you stand? You look lovely all dressed for the part, but I think I’d stain you with more red before I’d be done. Much more, and all of it your own.’

There was the switch. She had pushed far enough, now to bring him back to the predictable Rage she had expected.

Fillet scowled at him. ‘If you think your threats will work on me, you are sorely mistaken. Unlike the craven sycophants in your gang, Rage, I don’t fear you.’

The Union thug only offered a thin smile back. He puffed thick, arrogant bursts of smoke from his cigar. The grey mist hung in the air between them, unwilling to dissipate.

‘In the past, men and women have been wiser than you in their words, and for good reason. Look at you, pretty and fragile. I could snap that delicate neck of yours in a moment and feed you to the rats.’

Fillet wasn’t impressed. ‘If you truly think like that, then come and try it. I promise you, I will bleed you out. I am no innocent victim.’

'No? I doubt that, very much.' The words almost didn't seem for her, Rage listening to something else, flesh around the edge of his left eye pinching. With alarming suddenness, his gaze swung back to her. Another change in his personality. 'Say I humour you. Why are we here, girl?'

Fillet had heard that Rage was given to fits of insanity. His sudden switch didn't startle her, but it did suggest to her that she find out the information she sought sooner rather than later. If the man was deranged, there would be no telling how long he might entertain lucid thoughts, before giving in to darker impulses.

Fillet cut through to the point, all pleasantries forgotten.

'Who killed the Master Butcher? One of you?'

There was a moment of silence between them, Fillet glaring at the Usurper accusingly, whilst he took infuriatingly calm puffs of his cigar. Rage blew out a stream of smoke as though it were the fiery breath of a dragon, and watched it settle into the air before replying.

'That will cost you. That secret is not well known for a reason, and will be most expensive.' His voice became a lecherous chuckle.

'Meaning that you don't know.'

The mirth died in his throat, very abruptly. 'Meaning that I will tell you only if you have the coin to satisfy me.'

Fillet shook her head. 'I doubt that would achieve much, somehow. If you had done it, then you would have told me by now. A mark like the Master Butcher? I

imagine that you would have lorded such a kill over me in an instant. Quite the scalp for a petty thug like you.'

'I have gutted men for less insult, girl. Watch your next words very carefully.'

In the pale moonlight, Rage's face was cold and deathly as his stare. The embers on the stump of his cigar were a burning hole in the world, a fuse that slowly burnt down towards an explosion of violence. Fillet was satisfied that she would learn no more from Rage. His lack of boasting, and evasive answers had given her all that she needed.

The truth was not here. If the Union were responsible for the death of the Master Butcher, then it was clear that it was not at the hands of the Usurper or his gang. Time to move on, and seek out one of the Longshanks.

'You will earn no coin from me this day.'

'No? Then the fate of your Master Butcher will forever be known only to me, and me alone.'

'Somehow I very much doubt the truth of those words, Rage.'

He cocked his head to one side. 'Are you really willing to waste time, only to be led back to me and my court once more?' His grin returned.

She shook her head. It was a poor ruse, from a man with an even poorer hand.

'We are done here. You can remain king of all that you survey, in silence. I have no further interest in you.' Fillet backed away, careful steps opening up space between them. She didn't break eye contact,

hands resting on the hilts of her long knives, sheathed at her side.

Rage looked at her as she departed, amusement clear in his eyes. 'I thought you said that you were not afraid of me, Butcher?'

'Oh, I'm not afraid of you. But I am not foolish enough to show you my back either.' For the first time during their meeting, Fillet smiled. 'Look at the last man to do that, and how he met his fate.'

Rage's sinister expression broke into a vindictive smile by way of reply, and then gave way to roaring laughter. It was tinged with more than a hint of madness, berserk and deranged. The sound followed Fillet until she was out of earshot, echoing from cracked paving and broken walls long after it should have ceased.

— THE GUILD AT WAR —

It was a typical autumnal evening, the temperature cool and clear, muggy days of the summer passed into memory. The rustling trees had already begun to adopt spotted yellow and brown, visible even in the light of the overhead lamps. Only early in the evening, there were still plenty of people on the streets, lining the walkways and spilling out onto the cobbles. Most were in varying stages of inebriation, their drunken voices louder and more foolish than usual. Whores, both males and female, plied their ancient trade from the shadows of alleys, a night of pressed flesh and coin ahead of them.

Boiler had no interest in the whores, nor the lure of alcohol. He was still young, and had yet to develop the taste for either. He kept his head down as he walked through the crowded and dirty streets, trying to avoid being recognised. Guild Ball fame brought with it the death of anonymity, and Boiler frequently preferred to keep himself away from the limelight. He was not one for embracing the life in the same way as Shank did, or Brisket once had.

Brisket.

Boiler desperately missed the old Brisket from his memory, the woman who had been the first to embrace him into the fold of the Butcher's Guild. Once, she had been a big sister to him, doting and kind, her words friendly and encouraging. That had been before that

terrible day, when Boiler had come across her bleeding out on the pitch, her life staining the grass crimson.

Since her recovery, Brisket had become a changed woman. No longer did she share mead with the rest of them, that was as over as her flirtatious laughter. Now all the soft words had ceased, replaced by uncompromising hostility.

Boiler had been as taken aback by it as anyone, although it had hit him hardest. Brisket had been the closest person in his world. When the death of the Master Butcher came shortly after, Boiler had still looked to her for support, only to be stonewalled. Brisket had worked through her grief in isolation, leaving Boiler to wallow in his despair alone. Weeks had passed since that time, yet the air was still uncomfortable between them, as though both had words to say, but some unseen barrier prevented it.

While previously Brisket might have used her charisma to get her own way, now her first recourse was cold, deadly steel. She had never turned it upon Boiler of course. Their relationship was strained, pushed well past what it was before, but they still shared a kinship in the Master Butcher's family. That bond was lifelong, a brand forged from blood and comradeship that could never be broken.

He followed her now because that sense of family remained such a defining part of who he was, and because over all else, it had been to the Master Butcher he had pledged himself. If Brisket had been his sister,

then Ox was undoubtedly the only true father figure that Boiler had known in his life. The death of the Master Butcher had been the most earth-shattering event Boiler had ever known, forcing him to grow up and face some of the world's unpleasant realities.

The path it had put him on, however, along with the other members of the Master Butcher's family, was terrifying. To look a Guild in the eye and refuse their commands was near unknown as far as Boiler knew, and far more dangerous than what he faced on the pitch, or in the proving ground duels.

Boiler was torn. Torn between where his heart told him to be, allied with his friends, his family, companions through bloodshed, victory, and defeat – and where his head warned him to be, alongside the powerful Guild which had taken him in, and offered him a shot at life beyond the miserable existence of a gutter rat.

Boiler even liked Fillet, though he struggled to accept her as the Master Butcher's replacement. The woman was strong willed, determined, and one of the deadliest duellists he had ever seen. If Boiler looked at his teammates on her side, Meathook, Shank, and Tenderiser, he saw a much stronger and more welcoming fraternity. Other than himself, the only other that stood with Brisket was the Beast. Boar had always left Boiler with feelings of unease. The man was a slaving dog, a wild animal that threatened to run amuck, out of control, lashing out at anything near.

Boiler refused to believe that was where his future lay, bound to a raging berserker.

But Brisket did not stand alone. Her shadow was the same as that cast by the Master Butcher. That shade trapped Boiler in place, and would not relinquish the firm grip it held over him. And so, Boiler's side was picked for him.

The Butcher's Guild proving grounds were as lonely as they had ever been, Boiler the only soul in sight. The wind had picked up again, and whipped around savagely, leaves fallen ahead of time skittering around the empty stands, banners and pennants stretched taut. Hands in his pockets like a petulant child, Boiler aimed a frustrated kick at a pile of leaves that had stacked up against a post. His boot hit them and they exploded outwards, scattering in all directions.

'Feel good, kid?' The lethargic drawl was instantly recognisable as belonging to Shank. Boiler's eyes soon saw the Master Cutter, perched on the edge of a terrace step, partially hidden by shadow.

'Not particularly.'

Shank chuckled. 'Never has, that kind of violence. Next time around, aim your foot at someone else, instead of dead leaves.'

Boiler nodded, dejectedly. The thought that he shouldn't be speaking with Shank, one of the enemy, was the last thing on his mind.

'When did it get like this, Shank? Were we always

this way? Was I just blind to it?’

‘Aye. We’re all a pack of killers, we only follow the strongest.’ Shank stooped down pick up a leaf that had brushed up against his foot. He twisted it in his fingers, before snapping it in two. ‘The Master Butcher just held us together, that was all. One mean, vicious bastard of a dog, with the loudest bark.’

‘You do him dishonour with those words.’ Boiler could feel the hairs on the back of his neck raise in anger.

‘Do I? I don’t really care. I only ever followed him for the coin, and the protection, back then. The fact that you care so much is why you’re on one side, and I’m on the other.’

Boiler smiled, shaking his head. That was true enough. Shank had been the first to ally himself with Fillet, no shred of loyalty or honour to be found in him at all.

Boiler looked around at the pitch, illuminated gently by torches set evenly into the stands. Some of the greatest memories he could recall took place here, victories all of them. If he closed his eyes, he could have pointed out the scars in the dirt where particularly brutal tackles had taken place, or spots of shredded grass from shots at goal. Once, the Butcher’s Guild had been a hard, unyielding, dangerous team, feared by all. Now? There was a game in two days’ time, and Boiler doubted that they could even field a full team for it. The fall from grace had been a very hard one.

‘If you let go of that ghost, it might not be too late to join the Guild again, boy.’ Shank’s voice snapped him back to reality.

Neither of them really believed the words to be true. The conflict had escalated too far, become too personal for that now. The lines were drawn in the dirt and could not be rubbed out, except by some unlikely miracle where one side backed down. More than anything, Boiler was saddened by this ignoble end, wrenching his heart in different directions.

'Yes traitor, it would. You are no longer welcome here.' Tenderiser's deep voice was dark, and without humour. The man sounded like laughter had been a stranger to him for his entire life. He wasn't wearing his mask for once, allowing Boiler to see the hard scowl accompanying the words. It looked more pronounced thanks to two long scars, each running out from a corner of his mouth toward his ears. They were ugly, deliberate lines of tissue, cut to match the spiteful intent of whoever had put them there. Looking at the tall man, Boiler imagined that the perpetrator was long since under the ground.

Fillet's enforcer walked up from the dug outs to join them, stopping directly in front of Boiler. Behind Tenderiser's broad shoulders, Boiler could see Shank shrug.

'Perhaps it is then. Don't look at me, kid. I don't much fancy putting myself to the trouble of helping you, especially against him.'

Boiler backed away from them both, keeping his hands close to his knives. It had been a mistake coming here, absent minded nostalgia and sentiment leading

him astray.

‘That cowardice is just like you, Shank. Ever wonder why Ox didn’t trust you?’ The truth was all coming out now, although Shank didn’t look too surprised. ‘Forget it, I have no interest in siding with those who would disrespect the Master Butcher, anyhow.’

Boiler looked directly at Tenderiser, one hand twitching towards his favourite knife. ‘You might be big, but I’ve taken down big lads on the pitch before.’

Shank laughed behind them. ‘Some stones, boy.’

‘The Master Butcher taught me well enough. You’re the one hiding behind the enforcer, like a craven coward.’

Tenderiser made no move to follow Boiler, as the adolescent’s steps took him further towards safety. ‘Next time we meet, boy, we shall be enemies, and I will not watch you go. Take this warning back to your den of treacherous scum – if any of you return, I will gut each of you in turn, and feed your entrails to the pig.’

‘Fuck you, Tenderiser. I’ve yet to see strength in anything but words from you. We’ll return soon enough, for that day of reckoning. Maybe then we’ll see whether Truffles gets a feast, or becomes one.’ Boiler thought he even saw a flash of respect cross Shank’s features. Boiler was not afraid. One benefit of the death of the Master Butcher, and being forced to grow up quickly, was learning to master fear.

He strode from the proving grounds, leaving them, and his past life behind him. If ever there had been cause to underscore what Brisket was trying to achieve,

it had just been laid in front of Boiler, as viscerally as a carcass that had been splayed open for butchery.

Those who had no pride themselves had no respect.

It was obvious that the old days of unity were over. The division was too pronounced to continue without violence. Now, there could only be an end in blood.

THE TRIAL

It was deathly still inside the Guild house, a scene of morbid anticipation. The only sounds were the heavy winds outside raging against the stone walls, and the occasional crackle from a brazier. Tension was thick in the air, the scribes and magisters broken from their duties to nervously watch the confrontation between the two women.

Fillet and Brisket glared at each other across the floor, their body language openly hostile, eyes conveying murderous intent. They stood at the head of their respective supporters, the expressions of the figures behind just as cold and determined. As yet, no one had reached for a weapon, but fingers strayed dangerously close to hilts and grips, the scene never more than a heartbeat away from violence.

Fillet considered Brisket with undisguised venom, a predator staring down its prey. This was it. The end of the road, the culmination of the last bloody weeks, the moments when the future of the entire Guild had been in question.

It was the first time that the two women had been in close proximity for months, ever since the outbreak of this bitter rivalry. The following weeks had seen an increase in tension, to the point of breaking the team apart, harsh words quickly giving away to violence. The civil war had even dragged in other Guilds, different teams and individuals throwing their support behind

either side as it progressed. The concept disgusted Fillet. Outsiders had no business or place in this, and Brisket's efforts to draw in allies from outside was another sign of her weakness.

Most of the Butchers had come over to her side willingly when Fillet had vowed to break the old family once and for all. Within the Guild administration itself, the majority of the supporters for the Master Butcher's legacy had chosen to remain voiceless. Those who did speak out had been swiftly eliminated, their bodies left unseen and lost in the darkness.

That only left the leaders, Ox's faithful soldiers, his own blood.

The war ended today. It was time to spill that blood. There was no way that Brisket walked away from this confrontation smiling.

'You know the rules. No one leaves the Guild. No one. Especially not under my captaincy, and not you, most of all.' Fillet hissed snakelike at Brisket, each word spoken with as much vehemence as she could muster.

'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.'

Brisket nodded, but the look in her eyes lacked conviction. Fillet sensed hesitation for once, as though some great burden affected Brisket, leaving her unsure

and faltering. It was thrilling, even enthralling, that Brisket saw her fate at last, laid out before her in plain terms.

‘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 offered a thin smile, vicious and deadly. ‘Death. You cannot be allowed to live.’

Brisket took a deep breath, appearing to steel herself. ‘Then why don’t you try to cut me? Are you craven?’

Fillet looked through narrowed eyes, staring Brisket down. ‘Do not doubt me. This has gone on long enough... I invite you to take the trial.’

Beside Brisket, Boiler gasped, the look on boy’s face anguished and dismayed. He had good right to be both. The trial was a tradition born in ancient times, almost as old as the Guild itself, but more than that, it was the most brutal end imaginable for any dispute.

In the most aged and influential Guild houses there would always exist a bloodstained circle, set into a pit carved out of the rock, deep underground. Such places were made to be far away from the eyes of outsiders, far from the world and its petty laws. The trials which took place there were vicious duels to the death, adhering to as barbaric a code as had existed in past days of gladiatorial myth. The pits had existed for long years as the last resort for internal conflict. Even speaking of a trial without good reason was near forbidden, let alone invoking one.

This was a strong enough cause. Each of the pits were an archaic and primal hell, reeking of years of

death and violence, and Fillet intended to carve the hide from Brisket's bones in such a dark place.

Brisket seemed to be surprised at the reply, but her courage remained, at least. She steadily returned Fillet's gaze. 'I accept. We go to trial.'

Fillet nodded and drew one of her long knives, carefully cutting a thin line through the flesh of her left palm, bright red blood welling up from within. Without hesitation, Brisket did the same and offered her hand to Fillet. Fillet studied Brisket for a moment, and grasped the proffered palm, shaking once, enough to mix their blood together. She detected the faintest trembling from Brisket, and smiled cruelly.

The pact had been made, and sealed with warm, vibrant blood.

The light in the pit was as brooding and murderous as Fillet had ever known it. The flickering light from the torches along the walls illuminated only their immediate surroundings, leaving the centre of the pit cast in deep shades of crimson red.

Neither woman was a newcomer to the pit, both having spent time in the outer circle watching previous trials. It was the third time that Fillet had stood in the centre. She didn't know or care about Brisket. It was understandably rare that a Butcher would enter the circle, and many didn't step out again.

Precisely half of those who entered, in fact.

Fillet had only spent so much time in the circle because of her meteoric rise through the ranks, and the bad blood it had caused. Each time had been a necessary but unwelcome distraction to her ambitions. But that experience was now a significant advantage which she planned to exploit – and this duel, she had been looking forward to.

Eyes following her opponent warily, Fillet slowly circled the pit, Brisket keeping pace opposite. Every few steps, one of the women would both pass near the flames. The light reflected from their knives, lending the blades a harder edge, an unnatural sharpness. The musty scent of sweat permeated the air, still edged with a faint musk of dried blood from the last trial.

Fillet could see how it had ended, long arcs of dark brown blemishing the sand on the floor, and staining the stone beneath in a foreboding reminder.

The other Butchers surrounded them, standing underneath the dark granite arches. They were deathly silent as they watched the duel, even Boar, although the Beast grinned inanely at the promise of bloodshed.

Some part of Brisket seemed to find words, tried to offer resolution before the inevitable, a last chance before the end.

‘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 snarled her reply, still circling, one foot

carefully stepping after another.

‘Fillet, listen to me. If you don’t let me go now, I will have to gut you and leave you for dead.’ Brisket’s voice was level, somehow retaining a sense of calm.

‘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.’

Fillet abruptly danced in, long ritual knife glinting in the unsteady light. The khukuri were long, curved blades designed for these murder-duels and little else. They were much closer to the machete blades which Fillet favoured than the throwing knives Brisket was used to.

The two weapons met with sharp sound which stung the ears as Brisket parried, already moving aside from the thrust to find space. Fillet followed with a fluid sweeping movement, slashing through empty air as Brisket dodged again, backpedalling away but unable to stop Fillet from stepping inside her guard.

Springing forwards from her back heel, Fillet delivered a stiff knee to the ribs, her fingers reaching for Brisket’s knife hand. She missed, barely blocking a retaliatory strike as Brisket hurriedly reversed her grip and stabbed downwards, more like a stiletto thrust than the slashing action the curved blade was designed for.

The two women separated again, both breathing heavily as they prowled around the circle. In the stories and plays, duellists always spoke throughout, taunting each other and invoking curses from their

gods. Fillet had never known a dance to play out that way. This silence would only ever be broken by the voices of others, both women utterly focused on their deadly confrontation.

Fillet stepped forward once again, almost within arm's reach, her knife raised in a neutral position. Brisket followed the line of the blade carefully, unable to step back into the stone pillar she knew was behind her, but clearly unsure how to press forward.

She chose to duck to Fillet's left, trying to force a parry from the knife rather than invite an attack as she swept for her opponent's legs. Fillet had known the move was coming before Brisket even started moving, and kicked out. The sideways punt hit Brisket in the chest, driving the air from her lungs in a loud gasp. Before Brisket could react, Fillet slashed out across her right arm, drawing first blood.

Momentum kept Brisket moving, and she rolled back to her feet in a spray of fine sand, safely out of reach. She was too far away for immediate retaliation, but Fillet saw that Brisket's fingers were already slick around the handle of her knife, blood running downwards from the spiteful cut.

Still none of the other Butchers broke the sound, observing the trial with grim reverence.

Both knew that Fillet was the more skilled of the pair. She was entirely at home in this hell, senses honed to deadly effect, the true inheritor to the bloody Butcher throne. Repeatedly she led the dance,

darting at Brisket to strike with a clash of steel, and then dodging away again. As a hunter might stalk a wounded animal, Fillet was ruthlessly testing Brisket's strength each time. Both women knew that it was ebbing away with every drop of blood trailing from the stripe on Brisket's arm.

But the traitor wasn't done yet.

As Fillet dashed forwards again, Brisket didn't try to dodge, instead lowering her shoulder and throwing the weight of her whole body forward. One foot raised from the ground, Fillet was unable to twist aside in time, and Brisket slammed her over, both women landing in a tangled heap. The fight suddenly became desperately close, each of them trying to gain the upper hand and deliver a fatal blow.

Brisket held Fillet's knife hand by the wrist, firmly pushing the weight of her good arm down to pin the more agile woman in place. Her own knife had been dropped somewhere in the fall, no use now, and her bloody fingers instead wrestled with Fillet's own. Although Brisket was the stronger of the two, Fillet could tell her opponent's free hand was beginning to grow numb from blood loss. Muscles straining, she was overpowering Brisket, moments away from getting enough leverage to free her trapped arm and end the duel once and for all.

Brisket risked a desperate head-butt.

Sharp pain flashed across Fillet's face, and she blacked out for half a second, before her eyes blinked open

again. Her nose was broken, a messy explosion leaking a stream of red. Through the haze, she saw Brisket had taken the advantage, slapping the remaining knife out of reach before Fillet regained her senses.

Still unable to see straight, Fillet recovered as best she could, spitting a mouthful of blood into Brisket's face, and slamming Brisket down onto her back as she recoiled. Blindly, Fillet rained vicious punches down, relentlessly striking Brisket's skull.

The blows took their brutal toll, as Brisket's arms, bunched over her the top of her head, began to weaken and fall away. Fillet kept hammering away triumphantly, blinking blood out her eyes even as she watched Brisket slip into unconsciousness. Victory beckoned.

Brisket's eyes snapped open suddenly, possessed by some new resolve.

She bucked, and threw her assailant off, grasping Fillet by fistfuls of her dark hair. Fillet felt the back of her head smash into the ancient stonework beneath the sand, and then again, over and over, her vision dimming from blurs to darkness, the world spinning.

Letting go with one hand, Brisket scabbled for Fillet's knife, bloody fingers closing around the smooth grip. In a heartbeat, it was between them, the blade biting against Fillet's throat, the cold edge of the blade sharp and deadly. Fillet could feel it cutting in slowly, flesh parting as she strained to breathe.

Brisket had won. She held Fillet's life in her hands.

The trial was over.

In her head, Fillet urged Brisket to finish it. She was not afraid of death. She would die as any great Butcher might, lost to the exhilaration of the duel, a worthy end. There was no shame in this fate, the trial taking its bloody toll.

At least once she had gone, Fillet trusted Brisket to unite the team again. The woman had proven her resourcefulness this day.

Her vision beginning to clear, Fillet focused on Brisket as the woman looked around at the other Butchers. They watched in silence, awaiting the final bloodletting.

Fillet felt a trickle of blood run over her skin as the knife blade dug in a fraction closer to her windpipe. She fancied that she heard a whimper from Meathook.

The gods would have to forgive her a moment of weakness, but she would miss her little Erskirii.

Brisket's eyes returned to Fillet, and for a moment they shared a long, hard stare, the metal of the knife as heavy between them as the tension in the air.

The final cut never came.

Fillet realised that Brisket couldn't do it. Couldn't take the life which the trial had chosen.

No matter how much she had been determined to win, at least Fillet would not be the one to deny the trial its toll. She tried to force her throat upwards and into the blade, to steal the choice away from Brisket, even as the redheaded woman slid the knife away and threw it aside.

Fillet knew then that she had misjudged her opponent. Brisket was nothing but weak and craven after all, a usurper unfit to lead the Butcher's Guild. Being a leader demanded ruthlessness, and conviction to follow through with the moment, no matter how bloody. Brisket possessed neither quality.

Fillet half grinned, half snarled her disgust at her opponent. Brisket could only watch, distraught, as the other Butchers surrounding the pit turned their backs to her one by one, as they sensed the same truth. Her challenge was irrefutably over, the verdict final and damning.

Brisket was exiled, forever in disgrace, for failing in her bid for leadership, and for not upholding the blood pact of the trial. Such crimes were unforgivable, further beyond the creed of the Butcher's Guild than she had thought it was possible to stray. Even Brisket's most loyal supporters couldn't respect her refusing the duty of the trial.

Fillet smiled as widely as she ever had, her teeth pink from the blood in her mouth. Although she could have demanded Brisket put to death, she would not. An execution was almost pointless, now that Brisket's power was gone. Let her wander alone for the rest of her days, shamed and cast aside. That would be a worse torment by far. Brisket's allies would soon cross the floor and re-join the Guild in shame.

Fillet had won the civil war after all, and unquestionably taken the throne of the Master Butcher for herself at last.



SEASON 3
COLLECTED STORY



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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 Soltheician 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

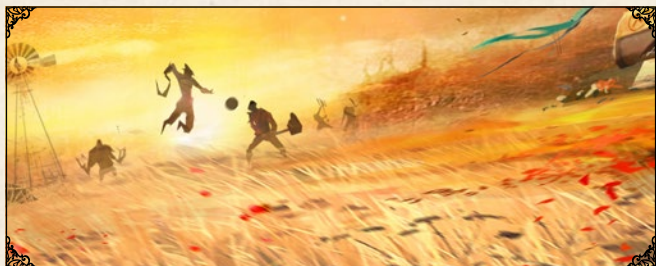
curious. Honour wondered what the church might have invested in an agenda to involve itself in the world of Guild Ball. She had never heard of such a thing before.

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 Brewers 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.

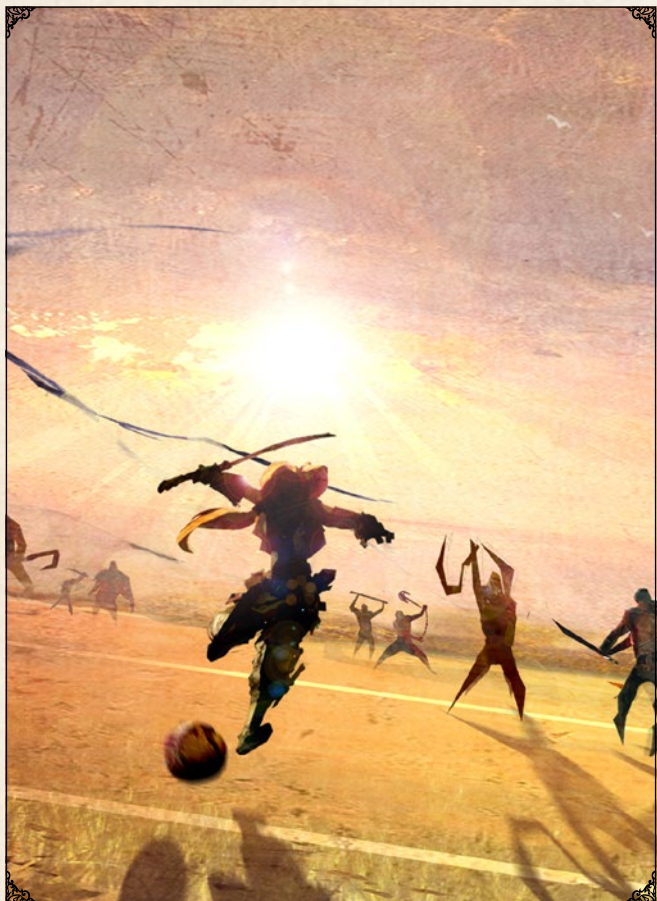
His eyes opened suddenly, skewering her in place, his stare like a spear thrust. A moment of silence passed between them, and then a wide grin stretched across his lips.

‘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

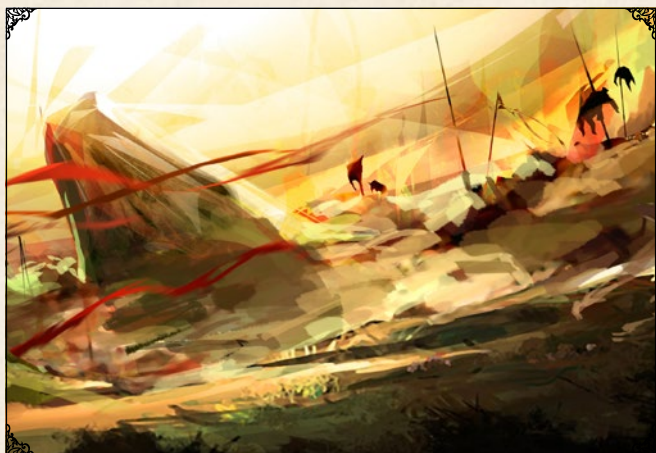
great once again. I did it because they deserved it—not for my own glory.’

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.





THE UNION IN CHAINS



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SHADOW OF THE TYRANT

Natural light did not exist in this forgotten place. The only illumination was cast by flickering candles set into alcoves in the walls, several of them already exhausted from where flame hungrily consumed their wax. What little artificial light remained was reduced to a pittance, colouring the figures inside the cramped cell in a sickly yellow glow.

The Saint silently stared at the sorry figure before her, his body suspended from the high ceiling by thick rope. The rough material had already proven too abrasive even after so short a time, the flesh around the captive's wrists visible as pink and swollen between heavy knots. She reached back with one gauntleted hand before slapping him across the face with all the strength she could muster.

'So, this is to be your fate, Rabia? Dragged into these depths along with the rest of your miserable cadre and left to rot? You and your kind disgust me. If it were my order, you would be long dead and our time would not have been wasted.'

'Nor... nor the lives of your men, neither.' Rage's voice was a coarse rumble, as dry as his dark humour.

Grace felt her face flush at his unrepentant reply. Biting her tongue, she abruptly turned to leave, the tail of her robes cutting through the air. The Inquisition could beat such impudence out of the wretch. Alongside, Benediction offered one final baleful glare

before departing with her.

Alone, Rage cackled to himself, despite how the sound wracked his throat. Solthecians were ever the easy targets; he had yet to meet one without a stick up their arse.

‘Of course. Just like you, bullying those who can’t fight back.’ The voice drifted through his mind unbidden, the words sharp enough to cause the Union thug to pinch his eyes. ‘I don’t remember you having the spine to stand up like that against a real threat.’

‘Get fucked.’ Rage didn’t know when talking to the voice had become commonplace. Once, he had refused it with all of his being, he dimly recalled.

That time was far past.

‘How imaginative. Tell me, is that the same eloquence which will see you free of this miserable cell, and talk you out of a worthless death down in these depths?’

Rage refused to answer, sullenly pulling at his restraints.

‘I thought so. Save your strength, Usurper. Hear the footsteps in the distance? That will be the boots of your torturer – a vicious man, servant to only bloody and unconscionable deed. He’ll break you. Drive nails into you, or tear parts of you away until you submit.’

‘Looking forward to that, are you, Blackheart? Don’t count on it. I’ve killed and gutted bigger men before – just like I did to you.’

‘Yet, am I truly gone, Rage? You should have known better than to try and end my saga. The tale of the Pirate King is one yet to end...’

Rage could only close his eyes and try to ignore the deafening laughter echoing through his head, as the shadow of the tyrant consumed him once more.

— A FATE UNKNOWN —

Light flooded into the empty chamber, coloured in faint hues of red and green from the faded staining in the glass dome above. Motes of dust fluttered through the air like tiny fireflies, tumbling ever downwards in lazy spirals. A peaceful stillness had taken hold of this place and refused to relinquish it, entirely at odds with the sinister darkness lurking in the catacombs below.

Grace stood in quiet contemplation of the scene, light reflecting from her pristine robes in a blinding glare. Her lip curled. She cared little for this place. A long-abandoned chapel built atop an ancient temple ruined some centuries past, the neglect of this sacred ground was an offence against Solthecius himself.

The Inquisitor's dilapidated surroundings offered little to placate to her condemnation. The elements had not been kind to a building standing unattended for so many years, her eye picking out places where walls had crumbled and fallen in, and dark metalwork was spotted with orange. Tall windows, once proud and vibrant, had grown dull in their frames; the panes from several others shattered over the floor in pointed shards of multicoloured glass.

This remote shrine would be impure forevermore, sins of the past having rendered it far beyond the limits of mortal sanctification. The order had allowed the lonely site to be quietly forgotten over the years as the trail of attendant worshippers had slowly reduced

to a trickle, content that the pious should never know of its existence. It was probable the dusty flagstones had known neither foot nor knee for decades until the arrival of the Inquisition, the carpets once covering them having rotted away long since.

But, Grace was not here to kneel in supplication.

A warren of tunnels hid underfoot, a sprawling dungeon first created for the primitive temple a thousand years ago, made into a labyrinthian maze by the architects of the chapel erected in the time since. They had not been alone in their attentions. Nature too had touched the confusing hive of forgotten cells and foetid cellars just as it had the land above, shuddering tremors and flooding causing irreversible destruction in the depths. Fraught with collapsed ceilings and impassable corridors, even the most recent map was hopelessly obsolete.

It was the perfect prison for as vile a fraternity as the Union.

Despite the length of leash allowed him by the new Bacchus, Rage had quickly proven too wild a dog to be left to his own devices, his rebellious instinct too fractious to be of use. Grand plans for the treacherous cadre spoiled, Pious VI had not sat idle in retaliation. His Inquisitors' mission of stewardship soon become one of hunter and prey, Grace and Benediction ordered to entomb each member of the Union underground, far from the eyes of man.

Their first quarry had been Rage himself, the

vicious thug now imprisoned in a cell as bleak as his blackened heart. His capture in particular had been a dark enough deed to cost of the lives of three initiates, each bloodied by his wicked cleaver until their bodies moved no more. Pursuit of the other wolves in his ruthless pack had been less barbaric, yet none had come easily.

The Saint would have lied if she did not admit to a sense of satisfaction in persecuting such reprehensible scum. She had readily paid penance each night, quickly reaching forgiveness for her behaviour in service of the August Lord. Her conscience remained as pure as her unbroken innocence.

Footsteps cut through the silence and from the corner of her vision, Benediction's immense frame appeared. Unlike Grace, he wore his armour and faceplate, his robes dirtied from travelling through the depths below. Behind him he dragged a long chain, metal links clinking together as they writhed, the final malefactor struggling in vain against the hard iron.

The witch had arrived.

The woman had been a dishevelled mess even before she had been dragged from her den, clothes a tattered collection of unwashed rags, her hair matted into thick dreadlocks. She reeked as only an individual with an aversion to bathing could, a musky stench of dried sweat and mould.

Grace's eyes narrowed, a sadistic smile creeping across her features. Hemlocke deserved cleansing in

more ways than one. Amongst all of her miserable brethren the witch offended the order most, by defying the very word of Solthecius with her sacrilegious profanity. She belonged in the dark ages past, a slave to the pagan beliefs of man when he had paid fealty to the elements and the stars above.

Sensing the contemptuous stare, the witch turned her head towards Grace, only to wilt and avert her tortured eyes as she shrank away again. The brief glimpse revealed pupils dilated to monstrous proportions, all trace of colour replaced by heavy black orbs. Doubtless, Hemlocke had been sampling her own stock.

A vicious yank of her collar dragged the witch under the light of the grand dome, painting her in dappled hues. She reacted by clawing at the chain and shrieking at her tormentor.

'No blind man should see as you, giant. You are unnatural, an abomination!' The sudden outburst was the first collection of legible words the woman had offered since her capture, the rest only gnashing of teeth and forlorn wailing.

Hemlocke's spite earned her a backhanded slap across the mouth, the impact whipping her delicate neck backwards. When her head swung back again she glared murderously, bloated eyes unblinking. A thin trail of red trickled over her chin, and the witch defiantly spat a mouthful of bloody phlegm onto the floor, crimson covering a cross carved into the stone.

She grinned, teeth stained pink. 'The Old Ones care little for your pretend lord, or the misguided fools who follow him. You are as powerless as the lies your kind peddle, and these worthless icons crumbling under my heel.'

Benediction punished her blasphemy again, a huge hand seizing Hemlocke by the throat and roughly hauling her into the air. His head swung around to Grace as the witch's hands scrabbled at his grip, blank mask somehow conveying his silent question.

Grace took a moment to savour the undiluted panic over Hemlocke's features. Her face was turning a painful shade of purple, her legs frantically kicking on tiptoes. The witch was clearly running out of breath, her sullen tongue silenced but for a strangled gasp.

The Saint shook her head.

Benediction gave one last cruel squeeze before hurling the Union scum away, her body tumbling through the air until she landed amongst the rotting remnants of a row of pews. The witch struck the wood with a sickening thud, an agonised scream torn from her lungs on impact. Her voice trailed into a rasp as she slipped to the floor like a child's discarded ragdoll.

Hemlocke lay still amongst the splintered wood, only movement a tremble as she sobbed pathetically. The line of red across her chin had become a wide river, pooling on the old stone beneath her.

'I will not pretend you do not deserve death for your sins, witch. You are barely a trial in our holy mission,

a trivial distraction at most. Perhaps death would provide the best form of censure for one such as you, rather than imprisonment.' Hemlocke didn't react to the words, her eyes still closed.

Grace glanced at her companion. His mask hid any hint of expression, but Grace knew his judgement would match hers regardless. The heathen woman's fate was sealed in a moment of unspoken communion.

'Illuminate her.' With the slightest nod, the Virgin Sister signalled her guardian into action once more. An armoured boot stepped forward from under his robes, catching the light in spite of a thin layer of grime.

Hemlocke lurched up into the air, a marionette with her strings suddenly pulled taught. Her hands scratched at the air, nails clawing like talons clutching invisible rungs. Back straight as a rod, the witch's head snapped towards Grace, eyes rolled back to become milky orbs. She bared her teeth in a feral grin.

Benediction broke into a run, hands reaching for her, but the witch slipped away as though possessed by a devil, her nimble agility at odds with how erratically her limbs moved. She reached the nearest window in moments, the tall glass pane already shattered inwards. Without breaking her unnatural gait Hemlocke launched herself through the opening, disappearing but for a bloody scrap of cloth.

Benediction roared in frustration, punching an armoured fist into the wall. He looked back towards Grace, tilting his head downwards in self condemnation.

The Saint's smile returned. It was time to persecute the hunt once more.

Hemlocke's eyelids slowly parted, her vision blurry and indistinct. Whatever spirits had aided her escape had scattered, leaving her entirely mortal once more, a broken shell stretched over weak and bruised flesh.

As her senses returned she became slowly aware she lay at the bottom of a shallow ditch, muddy water soaking through her clothes, icy cold against her clammy skin. It seemed some time had elapsed since her flight, the avatar of the Father fallen from the blank skies to usher in the dominion of the Goddess. The landscape was coloured a pale hue, the faint and ethereal light birthing a deep shadow in the recess where she now languished.

Her ears detected nary a hint of pursuit, but Hemlocke knew the accursed holy men would still be searching for her. She was the last of the Union to have evaded them, and their kind did not rest easily. They would hunt for her until her last breath, the chase as relentless as their passion for their falsehood god.

She groaned, knowing she was poor game presently.

Her forehead was warm and fevered; from her short breath and a dull ache in her flank she was likely wounded inside, the taste of coppery blood painted over her lips. Two of the fingers on her left hand

were broken, pointing in unnatural directions. With her frenetic scramble apparently ceased some hours before, Hemlocke feared that if she tried to move her body would not obey.

She was a shattered figure, collapsed in a bolthole and awaiting death.

Hemlocke closed her eyes once again. If the gods wanted to take her, she would gladly relinquish her life to them. Even in this state, she was their servant, and she dared not betray the ancient oaths of her order. In a faltering mumble, she began to mouth ancient words from the rite of ending.

An image appeared in her mind, her voice faltering as the words inexplicably caught in her throat. She felt herself frown outwardly as the vision expanded and a fine lunar mist eclipsed all, covering every surface and leaving her numb. Somewhere in the distance faint silhouettes moved, their forms indistinct and wreathed by billowing clouds. Whenever she would strain her eyes to concentrate on one it would become intangible, only to maddeningly reappear some distance away.

Their voices echoed through the murky gloom, words illuminating each spirit momentarily with sparks of colour against the grey background.

‘What do you want for this one’s release?’ Even distorted the first voice was deep enough to be undeniably male, strong and powerful, the speaker glowing bright amber.

‘A gesture, support in coming trials.’ The second voice was a sinister hiss, the slither of a serpent baring its fangs.

‘Very well.’ Hemlocke felt uncertainty creep into the first speaker’s tone, and saw a shard of cold ice break through his aura, a jagged line of canker, twisted and bitter. He reluctantly spoke again after a pause. ‘We shall enter into agreement with you.’

The second spirit did not reply, instead sweeping around to face her as the mists surrounding them whipped up into a storm. His eyes bored into hers for a moment through the turmoil, and a cold sweat dripped down her spine. The vortex spun faster, accompanied by the shrieking of a thousand crows, swirling forward to envelop her within a cloak of charcoal feathers.

His face coalesced inches before her own, the spirit became a horrific visage of a cloaked devil, a skull with sharpened teeth leering from the folds of blackened sackcloth.

‘You are not supposed to be here, witch. Why have you transgressed into this past?’ His dark words were the chill of the grave, morbid and flat, bereft of any trace of warmth.

Hemlocke found herself unable to answer, terror seizing her breath and suffocating her. Her knees buckled as her essence ebbed away, drawn on strings leading to his skeletal fingers.

The devil’s hold was broken in a howl of agony, a spear of light skewering the enveloping darkness,

warmth flooding through the rent to return life to the world once again. On the other side, she could see the first speaker, his golden aura strong and restored. He shielded another figure, a bestial creature which snarled furiously, and clacked her slavering jaws.

‘Come, Hemlocke! Quickly!’ This voice was female, the animalistic snarl familiar somehow. ‘Salvation!’

Hemlocke’s reply was drowned out by the murder of crows, a jagged cacophony which lashed at the golden figure and reopened the rent in his soul, allowing the ice to pour in.

She felt herself slipping away, the vision pulling itself to the edge of her consciousness. She desperately tried to reach her hands outwards, still unable to wrest meaning.

‘Run! Run, Hemlocke! Whilst you can, come to us!’ The urgent voice broke through once more, faint and quickly fading, swallowed by a tide of rolling mists, retreating away into the aether.

Hemlocke’s head recoiled, a great breath forcing itself into her lungs with a violent shudder. Her eyes open, she saw that day had come once more. Somewhere nearby, she could hear footfall in the undergrowth, dried leaves cracking under booted heel.

It was time to flee her hiding place. The gods had seen fit to send her portents once more, and where they beckoned she would follow without question. She scrambled to her feet, forcing herself to ignore a sharp spike of pain in her chest. Her role in the

machinations of the Old Ones was far from over, her
future undecided, a path untraveled.

And her side yet to be chosen.

EXILED TO THE DEPTHS

Rage bellowed into the gag, a viscous line of drool escaping over his chin. Saliva coated his chest already, shirt stripped away by a rusty knife and the shreds thrown into a corner. Above him his wrists were tied tightly, arms supporting the weight of his body as his feet dangled through the empty air, inches above the stone tiles.

For all his willingness to demonstrate a sadistic streak the torturer was yet to speak a single word, content to conduct his spiteful attentions in silence. When the Inquisitor had first entered the cell, the candle in his hand had revealed a body small of stature but for an enormous pot belly, and cursed with a face ugly enough to make whores turn him away. Rage didn't need to be able to see his tormentor now to imagine a pair of piggy eyes gloating in vicious excitement from under the heavy brow.

Rage knew the type all too well. Small-minded, vicious men with no redeemable qualities to name, or for others to follow; this was the only power they had, breaking a captive man as if their life depended on it. Each grunt or scream gave them something, but seeing fear in their victim's eyes meant victory. Once they had wormed their way into the soul they would never truly leave.

Rage was far from afraid, but kept his eyes closed in petty defiance anyway. The Inquisitor would have to

take his satisfaction from his own spiteful tendencies alone.

The torturer leaned in once more, and heat from the naked flame seared Rage's skin, cooking him like a joint of meat. Gleefully the man held the candle to his victim's ribs for a second too long, enough for a fresh spike of pain as the tip touched the flesh, before pulling it away again. The flame removed, Rage immediately sagged against the ropes, muscles releasing their taut hold over his body.

Still he kept his eyes closed, skin pinched at his temples.

'Look at him!' Blackheart's voice came through as loud as ever. *'Don't think that you'll be able to avoid opening your eyes forever. Or perhaps you will... like the coward you truly are. Is that it? A craven and spineless sycophant, lying to yourself that you're too brave to open your eyes, when you're really too afraid to meet the stare of another man without a knife in your hand?'*

Rage grunted, and forced his eyes open in response. He was many things, but yellow was not one of them.

Blackheart's evil laugh echoed in his skull. *'Some act of resistance, Usurper. Are you always so easily goaded?'*

Rage mumbled a reply into the dirty rag blocking his mouth, attracting the attention of the Inquisitor. The man appeared in front of him, staring hard.

'You can feel his judgement, can't you? Sense his disgust at the scars crossing your back, the brand of the lash from years past. No one should wear shame like yours, traitor.'

Blackheart chuckled. *'But then, he probably mistook you for a man. We both know better. Do you know if he's seen the weakness carved into your wrists?'*

Rage screamed, fury lending the strength to pull at his restraints. Flakes of dust trailed down from the ceiling and stuck to the sweat on his skin. Blackheart's cruel words were a barb cutting into his flesh, poison coursing through his veins.

'You forget that I know you, Usurper. I can hurt you worse than this petty fool with his rusty nails and clumsy pincers ever could, even more than the flame in his hands. I know the truths you hide, those which burn you more horrifically than he might ever accomplish.' Blackheart's voice took on a foreboding sinister tone, his words a cold caress from beyond the grave. *'I will break you, just as I have every other pitiful soul before.'*

Unknowingly, the torturer turned Rage's scathing retort into an incoherent roar by forcing the candle into his blackened flank, under the pit of one arm. The flame extinguished almost immediately, the sharpest pain quickly dulling, but melted wax scalded already bruised skin agonisingly. With a violent shudder, Rage yelped one last time and then was still, his head hanging low.

Alone, the Inquisitor chortled darkly to himself, face contracted to an animalistic sneer by the candlelight.

Content to move the prisoner to the rack, he turned his back to sorry spectacle and started releasing the knotted rope hooked to the wall. Body blocking most

of the light, his fingers fumbled noisily in the darkness for what seemed like an age, until the old rope finally relinquished its hold. Somewhere behind him he heard Rage's body collapse to the ground with a thud.

He paused to get his breath back, leaning one spindly arm on the wall before him. The struggle with the frayed rope had been surprisingly difficult, and he cursed once more that the order had not spent more coin on hiring guards for this sort of duty.

His guttural stream of profanity was broken by a gravelly voice in the darkness behind, a throaty rasp from a throat ruined by screaming.

'I am no stranger to torture; stronger than death itself, I am a legend that could not be felled by the hand of a worthless bastard like you. I will not be broken.'

Barely a terrified squeak more escaped the torturer before Rage was upon him.

For the thousandth time, Svetlana cursed her poor judgement. She laboured under no illusions it had not led her to this place, imprisoned in the darkness of a forgotten ruin, wasting away in a subterranean hell. She glared pointedly around her. This sty would make a peasant blush, let alone nobility boasting as distinguished a lineage as she.

In spite of her dark mood, Decimate had to laugh at that. The Volstov name had meant so little to her for

so long, it now seemed ill fitting in the extreme. Ever since she forsook her family for the fraternity of the criminal underworld she had ceased to belong their dynasty, her parents likely to have thought her dead long since.

She might have called that her first mistake, leaving a life of unashamed opulence for one in the gutter, but her memories of fighting through the sewers and tunnels of the undercity were fond ones. She still remembered the faces of each and every ganger; recalled boisterously drinking with them until the early hours of the morning, bedding those bold enough to pursue her.

Her younger days hadn't always been like that though.

Svetlana had seen her share of darkness in the depths. Even now nightmares might wake her gasping for breath, as urgently as when she'd been forced to flee for her life, the screams of her allies still ringing in her ears. When she opened her palm, she could still see the white lines drawn as blood oaths for the fallen. They carved their way through her skin in jagged white rows, severing the fate trails to be found there.

A superstitious old fool read Svetlana's palm once, and become convinced those scars had stolen her future, leaving only hard reminders of the past. She'd laughed at that.

In the years that followed, she became a legend. Decimate, the duellist and bravo, dancing across

the pitch with absolute impunity. She missed that period of her life most passionately. The warmth of fellowship amongst her adopted family in the Brewer's Guild had been second to none, a natural evolution of the brotherhood they shared in the depths. Survivors of those dark days, united in triumph.

Her mind would have struggled to conjure a starker contrast between that time and her service in the Union. Blackheart had ruled his crew with an iron fist, his dominant will an unspoken threat to mercilessly crush all opposition, earning him the ire of each of his teammates. When the moment came to cull him from their number at last, Decimate had watched with ill-suppressed passion, barely able to stop herself from cheering.

But then Rage's reign began.

Under their new captain, the Union had become a band of common mercenaries hiding behind a rotting facade. He whored his followers to the highest bidder, banishing or murdering the Longshanks standing in his path until none dared oppose him.

The first to step across the line and accept his bloody coin, Decimate had borne the brunt of the resistance to her new liege from her teammates. It wore her down as much as Rage did, sending her increasingly farther afield as his bitter legacy grew, and with even more frequency than the other players.

She knew she'd earned him a fortune from the coffers of the Mason's Guild alone, a team she spent so much time amongst that Mallet scathingly asked her if

she wanted her own kit in their colours.

Decimate might have run the old bastard through for his impudence, had she not been desperate to find allies outside of the Union. It was unlikely the Brewer's Guild would welcome her back into the fold, and so she'd been forced to turn her eye to the teams she played for during Rage's regime.

The Masons were but one option, albeit the most receptive. With the First Lady absent and the team's morale plummeted to a desperate low after the events of the Sovereign States final, they made easy pickings.

Other Guilds were not in such weak positions. Pin Vice had made her lack of interest in any arrangement clear during their last meeting, and Ballista was exiled. The Alchemists had no coin for their own players, let alone her. Bedding down with the Butchers would be as foolhardy and dangerous as remaining with the Union. Fleeing Rage would mean forever fearing a knife in her back; she had no wish to join a fraternity where another blade could be slipped between her ribs just as easily.

Decimate snorted. That was the predicament of yesterday.

Her only choice now was whether she chose to die with dignity, wasting away in proud silence, or shame herself by begging with whatever captors ruled this infernal gaol.

Rage's grimy hands closed around the guard's throat, white crescents under his nails contrasting sharply against flushed fingertips as he pressed into soft flesh. His victim struggled beneath him, one hand locked around his wrist and the other clenched in a fist which struck ineffectually, the blow progressively weaker each time.

He howled jubilantly, a vicious grin struck over his features. Moments like this were when the vicious thug felt truly alive. He barely felt the blows. He was a god, simple flesh made divine as he elevated himself through lawless and unrepressed abandon.

The soldier's mouth opened and closed in a gurgling scream, the man coughing bloody bubbles as his delicate neck was crushed. The human body was poorly designed to suffer such abuse, and with a final, violent shudder, his eyes rolled back into his skull.

The guard was still, his life expended.

Breathing heavily, Rage stared at the corpse disdainfully now that his high had passed. His assailant had been little more than a youth, only a faint line of dirty blonde hair on his upper lip, turned copper from the blood. He opened and closed his hands, dirty skin stained by trails of the same claret red, bloody sin running over his forearms and already beginning to dry.

'Did it feel good, Usurper?'

He spat a reply through gritted teeth. 'Fuck you and your mocking words, Blackheart. I've long since run out of time for you.'

‘You’re only hiding, trying to keep the pain away. Why not embrace it? Look at yourself, at your bruised flesh. Pain is all that you are now, carrion waiting for death to claim you. Killing doesn’t give you command – you have nothing still, not even that which you tried to steal from me.’

Rage’s snarl became a grin. The Pirate King was wrong. He had wrested all the power he needed with this foul deed.

He had a weapon now.

His hand reached down towards the sandy tunnel floor, bloody fingers tightening around the haft of the guard’s guisarme. The blade was pristine in the soft light, sharp edges glowing umber, and Rage wondered if the boy had ever wielded it against another man before. It looked far too clean to be a veteran’s weapon. No man of any experience would have brought such a weapon into these tunnels besides, so poorly was it suited to the tight confines.

The misjudgement had cost the young man his life.

Grudgingly, Rage was forced to admit Blackheart did at least have one thing right. He was still lost in the darkness of this damned labyrinthian prison, shut away beneath the earth. The walls and ground were so indistinguishable that he’d probably been wandering in circles for hours.

‘You’re going to die down here, cowering and afraid of the dark. How long before you turn the blade on yourself, like before?’

Rage wished he had something to cover his exposed wrists.

'You can't hide them from me, Usurper. They speak to me, tell me you'll try again.'

'Get bent, Pirate King.' Rage muttered the reply whilst hitting his palm into his temple, hammering away at his skull in a vain attempt to drown Blackheart's voice out.

'Did you wonder where all of the others went, Usurper? I killed them all, even bloodthirsty Red, and Purple, all high and mighty. They're gone now, forevermore.'

'Good. Did me a favour for once, you bastard.'

'But now, you're all that's left, Rage. Just you. I took their lives, so it could just be me and you down here, all alone in the dark. We were brothers once, before your betrayal. Before your contagion stole the throne.' Blackheart chuckled. 'In death, we shall be again.'

Rage imagined for a moment the corpse behind him lurching to its feet, its features contorted into a hideous likeness of Blackheart, slack jaw open in sinister merriment. Foul talons reached for him, pestilent and infectious, a ruinous poison racing through the air.

'Are you prepared? Ready to be claimed? You cannot keep running Rage.'

'Never!' He twisted to face his undead adversary, lantern held in a shaking fist. The corpse remained lifeless in the flickering amber light, cast with a sickening warmth to match the murder he'd just committed.

Rage studied it for a long moment, before a familiar grin crept across his face, his eyes settling on a set of heavy iron keys attached to the lad's belt.

His actions would be another act of defiance, just as petty and weak as that which Blackheart had accused him of hours before.

But he didn't have to be alone with the Pirate King after all. And that would be worth admitting he had failed himself this one time, at least.

LADY DEATH

Dank brick walls surrounded Gutter on all sides, coloured mottled green and brown. They hemmed her in oppressively, a solid barrier broken only by a tiny window set high in one corner, admitting a trickle of low light between rusted iron bars.

Judging by the staining on the murky walls her cell had flooded in the past, and the rain drumming against the brickwork now was disconcerting. She had heard plenty of stories of prisons in her homeland designed to admit in sewer water through such windows, and with it all manner of vile rodents.

Being stripped to the bone by vermin was not a fate to wish upon anyone.

Gutter stretched out on the rotten wood of her cot, willing herself to be tired enough to sleep. As they had been each time she lay down, her eyes were drawn to the Fisherman's Guild icon carved into the wall. Her only notion of human contact in this wretched cell, it had presumably been scratched into the brick by the previous occupant, not yet severely discoloured or aged. Whomever it was had blotted out another glyph adjacent which she recognised as belonging to the Butcher's Guild, the crossed cleaver and knife motif still faintly visible.

She wondered at the fate of that person. Had they died in this hole, shut away from the world outside, forgotten and alone? Was that to be her fate also?

Perhaps it was.

And maybe this was the best place for her anyways, the poor little Erskirii princess who was a slave to her own fear and self-loathing.

Her throat parched, Gutter slid off her cot and padded over to the slick wet stone below the window, head tilted upwards and mouth open to catch whatever spattering of moisture she could. It would have been a wasted venture had she not been so contemptibly thirsty, most of the water hitting her face and doing nothing to slake her thirst.

At least it was vaguely refreshing.

After several minutes, she gave up and wandered aimlessly back to her cot. No matter how she cursed herself for her foolishness, the young woman knew she'd return if they didn't bring her water again soon. Gutter hadn't decided whether the guards in this place were deliberately torturing her, or simply negligent in their duties. They only seemed to bring sustenance after large intervals that left her stomach aching and throat dry, no matter how she rationed herself. The last flask sat under the window, finally drained yesterday but still hopelessly empty.

Gutter collapsed onto the old wood, her mind too fatigued to be furious for once. That alone might have been a blessed respite in different circumstances. Her life had given her plenty of fuel for vehemence, and she could no longer recall a time when a veil of raw, seething anger hadn't covered her eyes. Suddenly

being free of that curse was disorientating.

She had long since given up any attempt to understand her time amongst Blackheart's crew, her memories tainted by a hazy mist of revulsion and contrasting affection towards the Pirate King. Reflecting upon the past she knew that had been when she first broke, her fragile mind pushed so far as to shatter, destroying all reason.

Whatever girl she had been never returned from that hellish ship. The princess was dead, replaced by the ruthless and heartless bitch, the woman that gutted the men who came for her until she gained notoriety enough to be left well alone.

Yet, she'd somehow forged a new life for herself whilst surrounded by the worst scum in the world, the very dregs of humanity. Throughout it all the Pirate King had been there, watching, witnessing her slow corruption. He stoked the darkness inside, directed and shaped it, until Gutter became an instrument of his wrath amongst the crew; a willing slave to worse cruelty than she ever thought imaginable.

She'd loved him once, she was sure. Part of her still did. It warred with the slither of reason still left to her mind, the splinter of civilisation lost in a world of lawless treason and betrayal.

Freedom had failed to come when Rage stole the throne. That day colour faded from her life instead, to leave Gutter laconic and bitter - and the void was soon replaced with indiscriminate fury, her accumulated

hatred within unleashed at last. Several times since she had murdered men and women for little to no reason, dragging her victims into shadowy alleys to bleed until they ceased to be. Others she killed for coin, becoming a brutal assassin with no regard for her own life as she indulged in horrific acts of bloodletting.

None of it brought her peace.

She had known killers plying their unwholesome trade for pleasure or to exact twisted dominance, but for Gutter it was a belligerent attempt to force her way back to the world, bathing her path bloody red. Each failed attempt bred more frustration and impotent aggression.

She reserved the most focussed hatred and bile for Rage. Even more than she loathed herself she despised the man who ended the false sense of security she once clung to. He had sent her world into ruin for a second time, crushing the illusion of stability and forcing her to confront what she'd become. For months she'd stalked him, patiently waiting for the time she would claim her vengeance.

The Inquisition had captured them all before she could enact her revenge. Even Gutter, divorced from the fraternity of the Union, was not spared their attention. And now she found herself becalmed, a ship in the eye of the storm, staring at cold walls.

Every step of her life had been bent towards escaping imprisonment. First from Blackheart's crew, and then from Blackheart himself - and just as she'd thought herself free, the traitor had given her a new cage. This

place was only another gaol, one more infernal pit into which she fell as she reached the cusp of freedom.

It was of no concern. This place was no more or less foreboding than the others. Sooner or later, Gutter knew the world would run out of bars to contain her.

Grace squatted down next to the corpse. Lifeless and pathetic, the guard only looked like a victim in the light, long shadows casting his boyish face mournfully. His eyes stared directly at her from where he lay, bruised neck twisted unnaturally to the side. Once she might have been shocked at the silent accusation she sensed in their glare, at the disdain of the dead.

Not now.

The Virgin Sister Extant existed no longer, that wilting rose long plucked by the word of the Bacchus. Now Grace was only Inquisitor, sentence and punishment both for the ranks of heretics under her heel. The only honour she could bestow upon this fallen soldier was to leave his eyes open, so he might see the benevolence of the August Lord as his soul passed.

She reached down and roughly pushed the boy's eyelids closed. He had failed in his duty, a crime unworthy of reward. Let his weakness curse him to an existence in purgatory.

If Benediction cared for her behaviour he chose not to voice his opinion. Her sentinel stood to one side,

the height of this tunnel a rare instance within the labyrinth where he could stand up straight. His long blade was drawn, prepared if the boy's murderer was fool enough to revisit the scene of his heinous sin.

Rage was the only member of the Union to have escaped the captivity of his cell so far, but it was likely he now possessed keys to free the others, assuming he could find them. Although the guards stationed within had begun the hunt, few possessed the piety to care for the task. Their prey was a dangerous killer, and Grace doubted the mercenaries would risk life and limb for the paltry coin she paid.

This foolish boy had been the exception, likely hungry enough for pride and ambition to cast common sense aside. A thought occurred to Grace as she contemplated the fate of such inexperience. She stood, the guard at her feet now forgotten.

'Perhaps we should look to a different resource for this hunt. Even if the sellswords found their quarry, I doubt they would rush to recapture him.' Benediction remained impassive, nodding once in agreement. 'What we truly require is an individual with their own motivation, something which cannot be so easily dismissed.'

As she did so often of late, Grace wore a cruel smile under her mask. 'Our master has been an inspiration in many things, and pragmatism is one of them. I am not above following his example of using vermin to track and kill their own.'

Her mind made, she turned on her heel and strode

into the waiting darkness, Benediction stalking behind her as closely as a shadow.

Gutter was startled from her thoughts by a key turning in the lock of her cell door, metal scraping together to emit a series of clicks. She watched warily as the heavy wooden barrier swung inwards with agonising slowness, aged joints protesting with a loud creaking sound.

Beyond stood one of her captors, a hooded figure wearing an expressionless mask which betrayed little.

'You are the one named Gutter.' The voice was undeniably female to match the figure's slight frame. Contempt soaked through her clipped tone, dismissive and hostile both.

Gutter stared blankly.

'Speak, wretch!' Any pretence of calm was suddenly gone as the Inquisitor swept into the room, long robes trailing behind her. Gutter had a second to step back before she was grasped by the shoulder and slammed into the wall behind, the sudden assault driving her to her knees.

Gasping for air, she glared upwards at her captor. 'I... I am the Gutter. Mur-Murderer... of the innocent, Blackheart's Life... Drinker.' She spat the words into the air as much as said them, wet saliva coating the Inquisitor's fine robes. 'Does that answer meet with...

with your approval?’

Her attacker judged her from behind the mask. Light reflected over the smooth surface from the torch in the woman’s hand, bare flames painting a dancing avalanche of gold that never quite managed to reach the shadows of the eye sockets. A moment passed between them in silence, both women unmoving but for Gutter’s laboured breathing.

‘Nothing would see me happier than to see you cleansed from this world, scum. You, and your vile associates are unworthy of redemption.’ The cold voice was a dramatic contrast to the warmth of the light. ‘But, my master has taught me the limited worth your miserable kind hold.’

Gutter didn’t dignify the statement with a response. If one was expected, it would have to be beaten out of her. She stared back insolently, waiting for the next words.

‘You know your kin are trapped here with you, and we both know you to be unwelcome amongst them. Rage would have your head mounted next to that of your black-hearted tyrant, and pay any one of your traitorous brotherhood their weight in bloody coins for the trophy.’

Gutter felt her skin flush in familiar anger, the woman’s words drawing a vicious nail through an open wound. Still she bit her tongue, determined to be remain stoic until forced to submit again.

She was done with weakness.

‘Good... I see seething fury still resides within.’ Her

reaction seemed to amuse the Inquisitor. 'My words are spoken true; you are alone amongst these wolves, a loner no longer welcome amongst the pack. You may have no soul worthy of saving, but perhaps your vengeance might serve us both. The leader of the despicable brood runs free in these depths – an unrepentant murderer still, well suited to this pitiful darkness.'

Gutter's eyes narrowed at the implication.

'You may choose to leave this place, of course. The corridor outside only has two paths, and both are open to you.' Gutter thought she detected the hint of mirth in the woman's voice. 'But somehow, I do not think I have misjudged you, or the violence in your heart.'

The Inquisitor smoothly stepped backwards, feet taking her to the cell door. Reaching the threshold, she paused to throw her torch onto the hard-stone floor, the brazier landing in a shower of embers. 'Do not disappoint me, Gutter. I offer you what little resurrection might remain to one such as you are. Demonstrate your penitence in the last, and salvation might await after all.'

The Inquisitor faded into the darkness beyond, leaving Gutter alone. The cell door hung wide open, illuminated by the soft flame.

Gutter didn't move at first, pulse racing as she replayed the woman's final words. She felt a familiar warmth spreading through her belly, a raw and visceral wrath rapidly rising through her.

A vicious grin broke out over her face.

‘The Svantelit curse you, and your precious faith!’ She leapt to her feet and snatched up the torch, swift strides taking her into the corridor outside.

The same grey and brown brickwork awaited her, stained green around her ankles. A chill breeze ran through the corridor from the right, forcing the light to flicker and wane for a moment, and turning to face that direction she saw the ground level slowly ascending. A glance to the left confirmed the opposite, the inky blackness appearing to absorb the light around it, the ground sloping away into the depths. A long knife lay on the mottled floor in that direction, the metal dulled and spotted with rust.

The demand upon her was clear.

Gutter turned her head once more to the right, facing the cool air. She closed her eyes as it caressed her skin, savouring the sensation. One deep breath felt like the promise of rebirth, a return to a world of colours beyond, escape from her violent past and from the demons which ruled her.

Precious freedom from prisons at last, denied her all these years.

She kept her eyelids shut tight and turned her head back, until she knew she was facing the darkest path. The barbaric knife awaited her hand, the first image to focus when she opened her eyes. The sharp edge glittered in the low light, betraying naught but malicious intent.

The moment had passed.

'I am become Lady Death, Rage. And now I come to end your blight once and for all.'

Gutter turned her back on freedom, committing herself to the bleak and colourless darkness once more.

VENGEANCE

The trio scurried through the darkness, Rage leading the way. The lantern shook crazily in his grip, casting a wild storm of cascading light and shadows over the uneven walls. No words passed between the figures, the only sounds their hurried breathing and the crunch of dirt under their boots.

The tunnel so narrow as to only permit single file, Decimate followed second in line, Harry behind her. She stared intently at Rage's bare back. Neither poor light nor a layer of sweat and grime could hide the long white stripes criss-crossing over his flesh, brutal scars no doubt inflicted by the lash. They looked old, long since healed, and she wondered how he'd earned them.

It couldn't have been a crime worse than the theft of the captain's mantle.

Ahead of her Rage began to slow, panting and wheezing like a horse led to pasture. Decimate matched his reduced gait, intently listening for the sound of pursuit. They were fleeing from a party of soldiers in mismatched colours and armour, a group so motley it offended her she hadn't been able to run each through for their affront.

Her lack of blade at least dulled the outrage.

After a moment, she was satisfied the only sound was Rage's laboured breathing, his heavy frame bent over double to match the hands holding his knees. Once she might have worn concern, but this time

only scorn graced her features. Decimate was done with her captain and his vision of the Union. If she had been determined to seek refuge before, now her resolve was heightened even more so.

Not for the first time, she eyed the long halberd blade in his hands. Rage had broken the weapon's haft over one knee to turn it into an axe of sorts, but she still would have wagered the crescent blade was neigh on worthless in a duel. The metal was far too heavy for the short length of grip, and the long point would make slashing near impossible in these confines.

It was a badge of leadership regardless, a symbol of power offering an upper hand between them.

Rage sensed her stare and stood, grinning as she hurriedly averted her gaze. Words were unnecessary; both knew either would abandon this alliance the moment they could survive on their own. For now, there was at least safety in numbers. Decimate only hoped the end didn't lie in bloodshed when that was no longer true.

He brazenly turned his back to her and stalked away, almost daring her to try and attack him. She had no choice but to follow.

Decimate glanced sideways at Harry, searching for a sign he shared her predicament. She might as well not have bothered. The Hat wore a nonchalant expression as he shrugged shoulders broad enough to barely fit between the narrow walls.

She grumbled a curse under her breath. The

apathetic response was typical of the lax attitude of the big man. At least he hadn't paired the movement with the infuriatingly idiotic grin he usually wore. Of all the Union Harry was the one she knew least, including the monster. He had never been part of Blackheart's crew, only joining their band once Rage took control; even then the Hat had spent far more time on the field with the Alchemists and Engineers than with the rest of the Union.

The premium Rage had reputedly demanded for Harry's services was outlandish, and an affront to every other player in the Union. Decimate cared little for either Guild, finding their players obnoxious and egotistical, but she did find offence in the fees. Why should Harry be worth more than the rest of them? Everything about the man was a mystery, a complete unknown.

His performance on the pitch was hopelessly erratic, besides. In the early days he had been subject to great bouts of rage, furiously attacking the opposition with his oversized wrench, but that time had passed. Ever since the Mortician in the leather jacket had beaten the tar out of Harry with his bat, the big man looked bewildered more often than not, slow to anger as friendly players dodged past him.

He would be no ally to Decimate in these bleak depths, and Rage knew it.

It felt like they had been wandering the endless corridors of this wretched place for days. Decimate's throat was impossibly dry, her stomach cramped and aching. One hand had snaked its way into her tunic some time back and lived there ever since, pressing on her stomach to lessen the pain. It didn't work particularly well. Hunger was constantly nagging at her, an unabating hollowness leaving her lightheaded.

At least she seemed to be faring better than Rage, who had deteriorated rapidly over the last hours. Huddled over like an old man, he still led the three of them at the front, trembling hand holding the lantern out in front of him. As he walked he muttered to himself, holding his mouth into his shoulder. Decimate couldn't hear the exact words, only a garbled stream of what sounded like cursing.

She was more concerned about their light source. As soon as it was exhausted they would be lost in the pitch black, destined only for death – and given the passage of time since Rage freed Harry and Decimate alone, the candle had to be near the end of the wick already.

Rage stopped suddenly, frantically staring about the gloom. 'Where? Where!?' His voice was the rant of a madman, no trace of sanity therein. 'I see your Talons, Pirate King! Did you truly think you could so easily ensnare me into your shadow!?'

It was the third such outburst so far and no less alarming for it. She barely had time to react before Rage snarled and ducked into a hidden alcove, plunging his

companions into the very darkness Decimate feared.

She leapt for where he had disappeared from sight, fumbling along the wall as Rage's voice echoed around her, amplified into a monstrous cacophony fit for the tongue of a devil. Decimate had to follow, despite her misgivings. The only alternative to keeping in the light was suicide.

Chasing down the tunnel she felt the footing grow firmer as the grainy dirt gave way to stone paving, the rocky walls becoming irregular brick once again. The change left her legs aching with each hard impact as she ran, trying to catch her insane leader and his fevered burst of speed. Somewhere in the distance, she could hear the faint rumble of water over the rasp of her breathing and the sound of Harry lumbering along in her wake. It steadily grew louder, the exact proximity impossible to know.

She rounded a sharp corner in her path and almost immediately collided with Rage, who had halted dead in his tracks. Mouth open to offer a spiteful curse, she stopped, jaw slack at the vision before her.

The tunnel widened and ended abruptly after a few more feet, opening into a wide crevasse. Moonlight flooded downwards from where the ground had broken above, torn asunder by a violent tremor which had sunk down to sever the pathway and created two opposite rock faces. On the other side of where they stood a torrent of water cascaded downwards, spilling from some unknown source above and showering

noisily over jagged rocks far below.

Decimate's eyes strained as she looked for handhold along the ravine walls and found only treachery waiting. She could see a round circle of shattered brickwork opposite, the other side of their tunnel some twenty feet away at least; shattered masonry below gave hint of what happened to the rest between. The gap was definitely too far to jump, even on fresh legs that weren't numb from the chase.

It was obvious they had reached impasse in this direction.

She could have laughed at the absurdity of their situation. Until mere moments ago she had been concerned for the lack of illumination – now they had natural light and even the promise of freedom, only to have to turn back and return to the black depths.

Next to her Rage stared ahead motionlessly, the lantern discarded at his feet mere inches from the edge. Decimate kicked it back to safety, daring a tug on his sleeve.

The mad bastard didn't react at all, either ignoring her or lost to a stupefied daze.

Decimate didn't care which. Stooping to collect the light source, she turned her back on him at last. He could die out here for all she cared. Now was the time that he had outlived his usefulness. She took one last look at the rocky walls, desperate to find anything to stop her from returning into the catacombs.

For as far as she could see they only offered a blank

expanse of sheer rock. Climbing would be impossible, even if she waited out here on the ledge with Rage until the first light of dawn.

'Coming?' Her words hurt from how dry her throat was. Harry nodded. Apparently, he shared her desire to abandon the man who had been the cause of their imprisonment.

Decimate led him back into the tunnel, casting a worried look at the low light as they turned the corner. Inside the lantern was worse than she feared, the wick balancing on a glossy pool of melted wax and waning dangerously.

They only made five paces. Unable to tear her eyes away from the pathetic lick of flame, Decimate watched helplessly as it flickered out altogether, their only hope of escape dying with it.

Panic claimed her, as raw and visceral as waking to a thug's knife at her throat. Pulse racing, her mind screamed words that didn't reach her mouth, curses mixed with wild terror. She felt herself fall to her knees, one hand groping for the wall to support herself in the darkness.

They were doomed.

Harry snagged at her coat and she batted his clumsy fingers away, raising her head to protest before being struck mute yet again. Dumbfounded, she could only watch as a faint light in the distance weaved crazily back and forth, steadily growing larger as it approached them. The steady sound of running footsteps began to

echo along the walls.

'Gutter.' Harry saw the identity of the new arrival first.

Hair swept back to reveal her face, the Broken Princess' features were illuminated to horrific effect, her snarl a rictus death mask and eyes deep hollows of malicious intent. Decimate had never seen the unhinged woman so determined, some greater purpose driving her legs relentlessly forward.

The reason came to her almost immediately.

Rage.

Choking back rising bile she turned blindly, fear lifting the great numbness afflicting her feet. She heard Harry blundering his way behind her, his size and lack of agility forcing him to move slowly through the narrow passage. Decimate skidded around the tight corner, natural light seeping back into the world. Seconds later Harry lumbered into sight, the big man offering a her a terrified look.

Suddenly it was too late, and Gutter was upon them. Like a shrieking dervish she launched herself forward into the light, her howl deafening.

The Hat shoved Decimate away hard and she tripped on unsteady legs, falling to the dusty ground with a jolt. One hand trailed dangerously close to the open ledge and she quickly snatched it back, other hand scrabbling for a handhold to pull herself back to safety.

She returned her eyes to the altercation in time to witness Gutter plunge a long knife into Harry's belly, right up to the hilt. The large man grunted and

folded over, shirt rapidly staining deep crimson as he bled out. Gutter tore the blade from his body with an enraged screech, arcs of blood painting the walls as she swatted Harry's outstretched hand away and stabbed him again.

The metal cut into his soft flesh with ease once more, and the Hat dropped to one knee as Gutter ripped her weapon free. Face twisted in pain, his lips parted, about to croak words through a mouthful of blood before Gutter delivered a powerful kick to his chest.

Harry disappeared over the edge, plummeting towards the rocks below.

Decimate felt her eyes widen in shock.

Looking over the side she saw Harry land heavily, impact clearly breaking his body open under his clothes, an explosion of red staining his chest. His corpse lay still, one side of his head caved in from where he struck the unforgiving stone. With morbid finality, his top hat toppled into the rushing water and was carried away on the current.

Decimate returned her gaze to Gutter, her body unable to stop trembling.

Vengeance yet unclaimed, the Broken Princess stalked forward with murderous intent. Her ragged and unkempt hair wildly trailed through a breeze that suddenly swept in from the opening, lending her a feral appearance to match the cold hatred burning in her eyes. Pale skin taut over lean muscle and cast in silvery moonlight, the woman looked every inch

the avenging spirit come to life from the pages of old tomes and faerietale.

Rage's bloody legacy was upon him at last.

Their captain had shaken his stupor, the scent of death dragging him back from whatever brink he teetered upon. His expression was hardened into a frown, but Decimate detected a hint of amusement still hiding in the dangerous bastard. He gripped his makeshift weapon in both hands and leant forward in a fighting stance.

'Very good, girl. But old Harry was unarmed. Can you do the same to a man with a blade?' His lips sneered the words with condescending disdain, eyebrows raised at some joke only he understood.

Gutter remained unfazed, staring him down. Decimate saw the shorter woman's leading leg tense, and suddenly she was on the attack, blade piercing the air. Rage parried, cold steel meeting in high-pitched union. He ducked a second swipe of the knife and lowered his shoulder, barging Gutter backwards and stepping away from the edge himself.

Rage drove a hard knee into her stomach before she could counter-attack, his fingers roughly grabbing a fistful of hair and wrenching her head back. Gutter flailed off balance for a second, before her head was smashed into the wall.

'You've never truly understood, have you? Just another wilting flower caught up in the games of the Pirate King. You're no killer, just a mummer playing at

games beyond you.' Rage chuckled, little more than a sinister rattle. 'The gift of death is mine to give, and I do not share with those underserving. You cannot take it from me!'

Still holding her hair tight, he heaved her away with one hand. Gutter staggered and fell, before twisting her body and pushing herself up again. Rage backed away, all trace of merriment passed.

'This is your avenging angel, Blackheart? This miserable whelp?' He was struggling again, forehead furrowed in concentration, one eye twitching. 'Be silent! Cease your incessant chatter, carrion bastard!' He roared each word, his voice torn viscerally from his throat rather than spoken.

Gutter didn't waste time trying to comprehend his actions, feinting a kick to the knee before lunging at his exposed torso with her knife. Distracted, Rage fell for the ruse, only barely able to block the strike. His right arm failed backwards, launching his weapon into the unknown.

He retaliated with an offhand punch, a wild haymaker which sailed through empty air and earned him a straight-armed jab to the jaw. The blow unbalanced Rage, and he dropped to his knees.

Gutter glared at him, her eyes glittering triumphantly. 'I am Lady Death, Rage. Welcome to my embrace!'

The murderous thug before her stared back with eyes unfocussed, his breathing heavy. 'I will survive this eternal night. Those scars prove nothing, only

your empty lies!' Rage spat his reply in a shower of phlegm.

Decimate doubted his words were for the Broken Princess.

The knife reflected the cold light as it swept downwards, aimed for the throat. Rage caught the blade in his fist at the last moment, blood blossoming between his fingers as Gutter pressed her weight down, cutting deeper. It was a deadly test of strength, Rage holding one white knuckled hand over the other, Gutter's expression fixed in a baleful stare and her teeth bared.

They were on the very edge, Rage's knees edging backwards and his heels hanging over open space. He snarled defiantly even as his ruined hands shook, his wrists painted rich red. Decimate realised she was holding her breath, unable to release it until this final act was resolved. The world had shrunk to the two combatants struggling before her.

The Broken Princess braced herself and pressed down harder. She was already the victor here, on the threshold of claiming her vengeance.

Rage smiled. One last, terrible grin that could have meant anything.

Gutter's eyes widened in recognition.

And then the Usurper was gone.

Gutter almost launched herself with him, suddenly collapsing forwards from the lack of resistance. She managed to fight her way clear, muscles knotted as she

strained to find purchase.

Life flooded back into the world in a rasping breath, and Decimate found herself standing on uncertain feet. She cast a sideways glance at Gutter, the other woman panting from exertion now her wild fury had been thrown into the abyss alongside Rage.

An eerie silence settled over the scene.

Eventually, Decimate could bear it no longer. She opened her mouth to form some sort of plea, but Gutter waved her down. 'Death is no easy matter, Svetla. I have no quarrel with you.' She spoke in their native Erskirii, the words as familiar as the shortening of Decimate's name. 'Leave, before the Inquisitors find you here.'

Nodding, Decimate walked to the edge. There was no sign of Rage, only a second bloodstain on the rocks below, near to where Harry lay. The light had begun to grow brighter, a new dawn rising far above.

Decimate realised she didn't know what was to follow for any of them now. Those fortunate enough to have broken free from the Inquisition's shackles would have to make their own way in the world once more. Her mind cycled through the faces of her fallen comrades, remembering each of them. She surprised herself by shedding a tear, a single line of sorrow which she quickly wiped into oblivion.

There could be no return from this. The brotherhood of the Union had met ruin in a frenzy of bloodshed and vengeance at last, ironically accomplishing the

very task the Inquisitors had started. Rage's death on the rocks below was the final nail in their coffin, the passing of the bloody throne without heir.

It was over.

The Union had been brought to its knees, and now existed only in chains.

— NOBILITY REBORN —

Decimate could feel frost touch her flesh in spite of the brazier's warmth, ice creeping into her bones from the harsh and unforgiving landscape. She swore in Erskirii and pulled her jacket closer. Mald had ever been a cold place, even during the summer. In wintertime, a man could quickly freeze to death if he were caught outside overnight.

She had realised by now her folly in travelling to these frozen highlands. Rooted in the forlorn hope of a restored place within the Brewer's Guild, the journey north had left her more isolated than ever. The land was sparsely populated outside of the cities, and Decimate had no friends here. She spent most days miserable and half frozen, bedding down in dilapidated and empty taverns once the night drew in. Standing on the veranda of such a place now she was as utterly alone as every evening, the silence unbroken but for the gentle creak of the alehouse sign on the wind.

Her nights in such squalid hovels were at an end in any case, the purse at her belt nearly empty. She didn't need to count the handful of copper and silver pieces remaining to know their meagre value. Unable to pay her way, she would need to steal her way onto a ship heading back to the mainland in the morning.

The Exile spat in frustration, watching the phlegm freeze on the hard ground below. After that? Only the roads beckoned her, poverty and death suspended

over them like a terrible storm cloud.

Another figure stepped out onto the veranda with her, heavy boots announcing his arrival. For all that he was barrel chested and broad, the Grand Brewer's aura filled the space more than his intimidating presence, his unexpected appearance taking Decimate aback.

'What happened to your mask?' His gruff voice cut unapologetically through the silence.

Decimate felt herself blush, her cheeks growing warmer. A token of her resolve to leave the Union behind her, she had left her mask in the labyrinth - only to discover how conscious she remained of the scarring over her left eye. Even now she hid the old wound behind strands of hair.

She forced a nonchalant shrug. 'Easier to travel this way.'

Tapper nodded, his face not showing whether he believed her or even cared at all. 'You're some long way from home, lass. Rumour is you're here to parley with us.'

Decimate didn't reply at first, searching for the right words. Before she found them, he continued.

'I heard about the bad blood between your kind and the church. We live in unforgiving times, but I'm not so hard as that.' He unclipped a leather flask from his hip and held it in her direction. 'I've never much cared for clever words mind, so I'll speak straight. I expect no less from you.'

He was offering her a black flag, a hand extended in truce.

It was more than she could have hoped for. She had never been one for whisky, but eagerly took a

mouthful. The moisture felt good in her throat, the warmth in her belly a blessing.

Tapper nodded in acceptance. 'Are you tired of running, Exile? Searching for a hearth instead?'

She handed back the flask, wiping her fingers across lips turned numb. 'Maybe. Although, I'm not sure that yours suits me. I heard you were weak.' She held her breath. Her words had been a gamble, a risk which sat ill with her precarious position.

The Grand Brewer chuckled. 'I like a strong lass with fire in her belly. Aye, I face a challenge. But we're not talking about me, Exile. I can offer you haven once more. Under my wing you can be returned to the fold.' His eyes fixed her in a hard stare. 'All I ask in return is your loyalty.'

Decimate carefully looked for a trace of treachery, the tell-tale hint of a smirk or an errant blink. After so long amongst the dregs of the world she was all too wary of the signs, deeply untrusting of the intentions of those who would offer her fellowship.

Tapper only returned honesty, his gaze stern but fair.

He offered her the flask of Old Jake's once more. Decimate hesitated for only a second longer before accepting, this time taking a much longer draught with another meaning entirely.

— BLOODY SUNSET —

Gutter sat on a bench overlooking the harbour, the docks below as quiet and still as the placid sea beyond. Winter had muted the landscape for as far as could be seen. Large chunks of snow slowly drifted downwards, each flake fluffy and impossibly white against the grey backdrop, even the setting sun unable to penetrate the stony cold.

She didn't know how long she had sat here, aimlessly watching. Some hours if she had to guess, just staring at the sun as it fell from the sky. Soaked through, she ignored how her pale skin shivered against the settling frost, the same numbness which had taken root in her heart come to eclipse the rest of her. The death of Rage was supposed to have lifted some great burden; in truth, it had become a noose around her neck. With her final murder, the faces and voices of all her other victims had swum into focus, condemning what her life had become.

The freedom she had dreamt of for years tasted like ashes, pitiful and bitter, no escape at all.

Ox didn't try to hide his approach, his broad and muscular body as ill-suited to sneaking around as his hard demeanour. Gutter simply offered him a nod when he joined her, without turning to face him.

'I was captured by them, before you. I don't envy what you went through in those depths. I know all too well of the torment.' His voice was strangely calm,

in spite of his brutish appearance. The tone of a man offering her sympathy.

Gutter didn't return his kindness, hers long lost. 'Do you, Master Butcher? I doubt we share the same scars.' There was no way he could have known the brutal horrors of her escape.

He ignored her contemptuous tone. 'The bastards couldn't break me, and I grew stronger for that. The cage taught me to find myself again - who I really was, the forgotten man from years past. Stripped away the shell of bullshit surrounding me.' Ox paused, the next words difficult for him. 'But I only made it because I had someone on the outside. My mark was still stamped on the world, no matter how they tried to tear me from it.'

She turned to study at him, his face glowing umber from the sunset. He met her gaze and continued. 'I know you didn't have that luxury. What you had to do, you did alone. I doubt anyone will pay you respect enough for that feat.'

Gutter desperately tried to keep the sorrow from her face. In spite of her flinty reserve, the Master Butcher had struck a chord within her. Mentally, she willed away the tears beginning to form at the edges of her eyes.

His eyes bored into hers, unflinching and relentless. 'Time enough has passed with you on your own, I reckon. There is a kindred spirit in you, Gutter. The soul of a ruthless and bloodthirsty killer, crafted by the Pirate King and sharpened to a lethal edge by your hatred for the traitor.'

She averted her gaze, pulling her head away from his fierce glare. Down below, a crew were preparing to set sail, and Gutter stared at the tiny figures enviously. Their carefree world appeared to within touch of her fingertips, yet in reality was nigh on impossible to reach, kept from her by invisible bars. She considered the Master Butcher's words. Maybe she was little more than a heartless murderer now. Trying to hold onto an ideal of the girl she had once been seemed futile.

A figure she didn't recognise stepped boldly into sight, waiting a respectful distance away. Gutter looked sideways at him, eyes drawn to the long knives and whetstone at his belt. He clearly didn't intend to draw one of them and attack, thick arms crossed over his chest. Older than her, he wore maturity well, temples peppered grey. It lent authority to his demeanour, the same intimidating aura of command she saw in Ox or the Grand Brewer.

The Master Butcher nodded in greeting before turning his attention back to her. 'The time for preamble is spent, Gutter. I must depart, and I would take you with me; the only question now remains with you. Are you ready to join us? Come home to your true kin?'

Gutter paused before answering. Looking at the knives adorning Ox's companion, she could easily imagine the likely consequences of turning the Master Butcher down, but that didn't matter. It simply wasn't an eventuality she cared to entertain. Mentally she bid a final farewell to her past.

On the horizon, the sun finally fell. It left a crimson stain in the skies, coloured in deadly vibrancy yet utterly bereft of warmth. The vicious woman cast by its ruddy shade nodded in acceptance, a forsaken and broken princess no more.

INHERITOR

Harriet rushed into her rooms, arms full of scrolls and tomes stacked far past her head. Long apprentice robes tangled around her legs, she nearly tripped over in her haste, and for a handful of seconds she danced an embarrassing jig trying not to lose her balance. It was no use; by the time she stopped moving she had dropped most of her burden anyhow, the floor around her covered in dusty parchment papers and heavy books.

Sighing, she carefully set down the meagre pile of reading material still pressed to her chest, and looked around mournfully. Open books stared back at her, their pages folded and torn, or wearing a boot footprint. Harriet found herself fighting back tears. This would no doubt earn her the ire of her tutors, let alone the fearsome chief librarian. Their disappointed faces and words of condemnation came to mind all too easily, familiar from the trouble she'd gotten herself into in the past.

She lost the uneven battle and launched herself onto her bunk, wet eyes streaming. She was likely facing expulsion regardless. The College of Artificers had rejected her final paper twice already; a third time would be unheard of. Even if she did manage to pass this semester, the junior classes were already pointing and laughing behind her back. It was humiliating.

Things would probably be best if she just snuck out one night and never looked back. At least that might spare her the long walk of shame towards the school

gates, cruel heckling following each step.

The sun had begun to set by the time she had composed herself, the tall hat on her bedside table casting a long shadow into the room. Truthfully, Harriet didn't know why she had picked it up from the flea market down in Addicts Alley, or even why she had gone to such a notorious location in the first place. Such bold behaviour was completely unlike her, better suited to the daring and extroverted girls in her classes than nervous little Harriet.

The young Engineer barely had the purse for such frivolous spending, but thinking back she was sure the old hag at the stall hadn't charged her much. She vaguely recalled a pair of grubby hands thrusting the hat towards her all too well, but no part of haggling over the price.

Harriet rolled over to consider the strange headwear.

It was quite unlike anything she'd seen before, in the style once worn by pompous old gentlemen, but all proportions exaggerated. The brim was too wide and the trunk projected up into the air comically, flaring outwards like a trumpet. The material seemed to be stitched together from multiple sources, a patchwork of messy fabric that didn't match in the slightest.

Her nose winkled. From the damp smell, clearly it had been for a swim, too.

She snickered, despite her foul mood. What would the other girls say if she turned up to class wearing such a silly thing? One hand snagged the hat as she rose from her cot, padding over to a tall mirror set in the corner.

The hat in her hands seemed even more extravagant in the distorted glass, far larger than life. It tingled to the touch, warm from sitting in the sun all day.

Grinning impishly, she took hold of the thick brim in both hands and pulled it on, over her head.

'Harriet? Harriet!?' Answer me at once if you're hiding in there!' The voice came from the other side of the door, accompanied by the loud drum of bare knuckles on wood. Without waiting, the owner of both rudely swept into the room, pausing on sight of the sprawling mess covering the floor.

'What on earth do you think you've done, young lady?!' The chief librarian's face had turned purple, glasses slipping rapidly down her patrician nose, veins standing out against pale skin at her temples.

'Young lady?' Harriet looked down at herself before returning the older woman's stare. 'Why, I suppose I am at that.' She twisted her shoulders, marvelling at how narrow they were. 'Such novelty! I must admit haven't been this short for quite some time - I'd fair forgotten how close the ground really is.'

The librarian looked at her quizzically. 'What are you babbling about?'

A wide grin crept over Harriet's face. 'Don't worry, old girl. It would take far too long to explain. You could be a charmer though and tell the dean that I'll be clearing out later today - after all, the Hat must step where she must, and where her inclination may take her.'

Exasperated, the librarian threw up her arms and

stalked away.

The young Engineer looked at herself in the mirror. 'Well, Harry, it looks like you're back once more. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Think I'll even take the name myself, if you don't mind.'

— THE UNBINDING —

The two men walked slowly through the blackened ruins, their footsteps breaking through the silence as they crushed extinguished embers underfoot. Once this had been Union land, a place none beyond that treacherous brotherhood would have dared to tread. Through fear of bloody reprisal, the outlaws had held this place for as long as either man could remember, the word of tyrants become the law in this dank and shadowy corner of the world.

That myth had been proved false overnight. The Union had never wielded true power, only the semblance of it. When the eye of the Solthecian order fell upon them at last and the Inquisitors came, torches in hand, flames revealed the promise of retribution against trespassers for the lie it always had been.

For the first time in their lives, Avarisse and Greede shared a moment of uncharacteristic reverence as they stood side by side and surveyed the destruction. Not a trace of life remained throughout, every surface and piece of furniture hopelessly charred. The structure little more than a skeletal frame, the hideout had become a morbid monument to the ruination of the Union.

‘Just us left then, from the old firm.’ Avarisse was the first to speak.

‘It would appear so, Mssr Avarisse. Your insights remain as sharp as your wit, and dashing smile.’ Greede flashed his colleague a dark humoured grin of his own

before continuing. 'I suppose the question now should be whether we are to claim punitive vengeance on behalf of our fallen brothers and sisters, or to forgo that particular sentiment entirely.'

Avarisse kicked a chair lying on the ground beside him, barely more than a burnt silhouette, watching as it exploded into charcoal. The lumps of cinder and dust were unrecognisable from what they had once been, with no hope of ever returning to their previous state.

'Don't much feel like it. Never liked most of 'em anyways.' He snorted. 'Besides, there's enough scratch in my pockets for me not to care, even if it were my old dam that burnt to death in this shithole.' He patted his coat, feeling the satisfying bulge of gold coins.

Greede raised an eyebrow. 'I was unaware we had made such a lucrative arrangement with any of our principles in recent times, Mssr Avarisse. Do be so good as to share the wealth, as the common man in the street might say.'

'You didn't make any arrangement, little man. I did, for myself. The penny finally dropped, and the bag of gold in my pocket tells me where I'm headed. Don't know about you.'

'A lone enterprise? Are you suggesting... we go it alone?' A quaver in Greede's voice betrayed uncharacteristic nervousness. 'I am hesitant to entertain the thought of parting ways. After all, old soldiers must stand shoulder to shoulder until the end, comrades forevermore, if you care to remember

the creed of the old Raedlanders.’

‘We were never them, though.’ Avarisse wasn’t nearly so naïve to believe the manipulative dwarf’s plea. Everything Greede said was carefully calculated, spoken only in order to further his own agenda.

Greede sighed by way of reply, sullenly staring at the setting sun through a gap in a broken-down wall, the burnt wood lit bronze by the light.

A strange sense of vulnerability settled over the scene, as each man contemplated their future. Neither had ever tried to make their way in the world without the other, the dissolution of their partnership offering something completely unknown.

‘Enough of this bull.’ Avarisse was fast growing tired of waiting. ‘I probably owe you enough to dice for it at least. Didn’t you have a set somewhere?’

‘Alas, I fear my favoured possessions resided in the corner yonder, more is the pity.’ The smaller man pointed to a bare stretch of blackened stone, bitter winter wind having swept away any ashes remaining from his lost effects.

‘Hmm. Shame. Good dice they were, engraved ivory.’ Avarisse caught himself smiling wistfully. ‘Didn’t you steal them from the old friar on Thrift Street? I remember you pocketing them whilst I dug the hole to throw the silly bastard in.’

‘Mssr Avarisse, you do have such a worrisomely eidetic memory.’ Greede grinned. ‘So, that leaves us stone, parchment, knives then?’

Avarisse sniffed. 'Haven't played that since I was a lad.' 'How fortuitous a statement!' Greede was playing a pantomime for his own benefit. 'I even believe such a game was how we first decided to begin our joint venture. Now I think of it, it occurs to be even more appropriate than I first thought!'

'Whatever. I'm tired of this already. Just get on with it.'

Greede's smile turned bittersweet, his expression softening. 'Why, Mssr Avarisse, I would have expected at least a hint of theatrical flourish from you. We stand now at the precipice, and speak of a momentous unbinding of fates!'

Avarisse didn't rise to the bait.

The smaller man took the hint and hurried on. 'Very well, then. Let us proceed. If you win, we shall go our separate ways.'

His words were bold, but Avarisse had to force himself to stifle a dry chuckle. Neither man was under any illusion Greede would likely survive on his own, so varied and far ranging were the enemies he'd made over the years. The dissolution of their partnership was a death sentence.

Greede continued, unabashed. 'But if I win, then our partnership is unbroken.' At this, his gaze strayed greedily towards the outline of Avarisse's coat pocket, and the promise contained therein.

Avarisse eyed his colleague warily. It was well known that Greede cheated at all games. Already the grin plastered over the dwarf's face had begun to slip away,

replaced by a sneer to match the vicious and manipulative thoughts no doubt coursing through his mind.

He gave up worrying about it and shrugged. 'On three, then.' In the worst instance, he'd have to murder his old friend and leave the body somewhere.

That was fine. No one would miss the little bastard.

With purposeful threat, he held out a fist, his huge mitt dwarfing Greede's tiny hand. Greede at least had the decency to look suddenly nervous. Avarisse offered a threatening smile of his own in reply. Through the hole in the wall the sun dipped behind the horizon, heralding the end of a long day at last.

'One, two... three!'

THE FERRYMAN'S PUPPET

The scent of incense hung in the humid air, smoky clouds obscuring the ceiling and staining the marbled surfaces shadowy grey. The heat in Scalpel's chambers had grown oppressive since the start of the ritual, both women stripped to thin cloth yet still wearing a layer of sweat over their skin. The ritual chalk Hemlocke had generously daubed over her face and chest had long since dried and flaked away to nothingness, crushed to dust underfoot.

Unfortunate souls surrounded them on all sides, hideous spirits stripped of their human likeness and trapped in this cage of cold stone. They appeared as skeletal wraiths with hollow skulls for faces, crawling and writhing, their forms twisted and convoluted as they silently danced in tormented agony. Above them the aether circled like the current of an awaiting storm.

Hemlocke had been unfamiliar with the blood rites of the Spirit Weavers, but the practice came naturally to one with as close an affinity to the primordial world as she. Communing with the dead was simplicity itself when compared to the intricacies of the Old Ones, the messages of mortals far less cryptic.

Alone amongst the Morticians, Hemlocke had once been unafraid to call Spirit Weaving by the true name for such an art, immediately recognising the practice as little more than enslavement. Yet, as with all things,

power corrupted. It had not been long before she herself had fallen, lured by the dark powers at her fingertips. At night, her forsaken masters sent wild and unexpected nightmares to torment her, foreboding dreams her punishment for abandoning the covenant she had once sworn to the Old Ones.

It didn't matter. She had learned to endure. Practising the back arts had allowed her to steal the sacred essence of the gods themselves, turned to her own wicked devices.

Ritual sickle in hand, Hemlocke slowly drew a stripe through her soft flesh, intoning strange and foreign words of power. The souls nearby immediately rushed to the wound, tumbling over each other in their lust for the rich warmth.

The blood seer chuckled to feel them helplessly trapped within her aura.

Angered, they swirled around her in a cascading tide of spiritual energy, struggling against their captivity. Hemlocke inhaled deeply, feeling her veins pulse powerfully as she violently wrenched the remaining life from them, subjugating them to her will.

The practice was extremely dangerous. Even in this controlled environment, she could feel them scratching at her like rats. The resistance of the spirits drew her blood in tiny rents, drops which were consumed in an instant to aid their struggle. It was little wonder that so many Spirit Weavers had been destroyed by this trial. The slightest lapse of concentration promised only death, the practitioner

ravaged by the vengeful dead and left a desiccated husk.

Hemlocke brought her hands together in a clap, stamping her foot and ending the rite. At once, the storm lessened, the remaining souls scattering to the shadows in the corners of the room in what little relief they could still feel. Gorged with power, Hemlocke leered at them. They would be hers in time, their doom inescapable. Grinning widely, she looked to Scalpel, heady and drunk.

Obulus stood opposite instead, in the place of the Spirit Weaver.

His image distorted in the heat, and she recalled his horrific transformation in her last vision, the creeping darkness which had threatened to overcome her. Fear chased any exultation from her body suddenly, a frozen chill wresting her by the neck and driving her to her knees.

Hemlocke was ashamed to admit it was weakness alone which had forced her into this existence. Discarded and broken in the ditch she had chosen to side with the ferryman, in spite of the promise of the gods. She stood now as a mere puppet in the schemes of the devil himself, as weak and helpless as the spirits at her beck and call.

Suddenly sober, she nodded her head in penitence, before collapsing to the ground.

Servant to the ancient and primordial lords no longer, instead Hemlocke had been enslaved just as she did the lost souls at her command, her new master a darker entity than she had ever known before.

— THE LUNAR GLAIVE —

The voices of the old gods came on bitter winds in these wilds, a frozen tide sweeping down from the realms beyond distant mountains. Minx waited in the clearing, heavy cloak pulled close as she listened, sensing the currents as snowflakes fluttered around her. Shrunk down to a lean and wiry frame, her body had yet to grow used to this cold. The vicious chill had held her in its stranglehold for some days now, settled in her bones and radiating outwards to consume her entire being.

The touch of the Moon Goddess was not for the weak.

She felt the gaze of the Winter Queen before she saw sign of her, Skatha's dark presence a creeping shadow at the edge of her vision. For a moment Minx didn't move, chin proud as she paid fealty to the Champion and her divine mistress. Supplication meant death amongst these harsh peoples, their culture unaccepting of any sign of submission. To do so was to become prey and be torn limb from limb.

Eventually the long moment passed, and Skatha came into view. She prowled as she walked, resting on the ball of each bare foot, more akin to a midnight devil than a young woman. The Winter Queen's furred cloak whipped on the winds to reveal pale flesh underneath, her long hair as untamed and feral as her expression.

Minx felt a curious mixture of sorrow and admiration

for the girl. She knew Skatha to be but a vessel for the indomitable presence of the Goddess, her fate to be utterly consumed, discarded as a frozen and lifeless husk once the winter ascension had passed.

It was a miserable fate, but a proud one. Worthy of remembrance long after bones grew cold.

She steeled herself and boldly returned the Champion's stare, their eyes meeting.

A gasp was torn from Minx's lips, the timeless depths contained within more potent a communion with the gods than she had ever experienced before. Her last resistance to the bitter winter was swept away in an instance as the will of the Goddess flooded in like an unstoppable blizzard.

She felt her eyes roll back in her head as a vision assailed her, a fleeting glimpse of a kingdom under the heel of the Moon Goddess, illuminated by her ghostly avatar in the skies. Harsh winds buffeted the landscape and drifts of snow covered all, sapping colour until only dark shades of blue and grey remained. Horrified, she looked around. Carcasses lay in every direction, prey stripped to brittle white bone.

Skatha watched through the aether, eyes that were not her own glowing with a baleful light.

Minx felt judgement weigh upon her soul, every deed considered and weighed, past and future. If she failed this challenge it was likely her bones would rest with those surrounding her. She fought the incomprehensible tide as best she could, her struggles insignificant against the

might of such a primordial creature.

The vision shuddered abruptly as another portent broke through, a magnificent falcon swooping towards her, sharp talons outstretched. A golden glow appeared on the horizon in the bird's wake, painting the harsh blue in amber. Skatha shied away as the first rays of dawn banished the bitter ice and snow, darkness forced to retreat before the encroaching warmth. It enveloped Minx, chasing the rampant frost into oblivion and allowing her to breathe once more.

Through an umber shade she saw the clearing as it was in summer, bright light filtering through the trees to bless the world. The Winter Queen had been replaced by a long spear, haft freshly cut and steel tip unblemished by age. Minx reached trembling fingers to touch it, and a word seared through her mind, emblazoned like the afterimage of the sun.

Scion.

Her eyes returned to the mortal world. Skatha had fled, the only vestige of her hostile presence the biting cold wind.

The weight of ages slipped from Minx's shoulders as she felt acceptance. She offered a weary and near imperceptible nod before quietly withdrawing, to resume her journey to the Oracle of the Moon Goddess once more.

— THE SILENT CURSE —

A tiny speck of darkness against the blinding white sands and bleached rocks, the figure strode endlessly onwards, dragging his feet over the uneven ground. His lonely passage across the anonymous dunes had been utterly alone; his only companions a long trail of footprints left in his wake and the carcasses of creatures long since rotted to clean white bone.

The wintery shroud cast over the rest of the Empire of the Free Cities barely reached the arid deserts of Sultar. The sun beat down unabated during daylight hours, the season only remarkable for increasingly bitter evenings when any trace of warmth was quickly chased from the air. Not even the boldest of outlaws were desperate enough to seek refuge in such an inhospitable landscape.

It made little difference to the man. He was already dead, twice over.

Irrespective of the time of day he continued, only resting when sleep finally claimed him, limbs too heavy from fatigue to continue. Collapsed in a heap of rags, as soon as his exhausted body regained any measure of strength he would unerringly rise once more. By now he could barely feel his booted feet scraping beneath him, irrespective of whether they kicked up piles of sandy grit, or climbed over hard stone. He was a walking corpse, his tanned skin horrifically gaunt.

Such bloody-minded determination would have

been the end of a lesser individual, but he was no ordinary man. In the past, his name alone had made tyrants and kings tremble, his word enough to bring even the mighty Guilds to their knees. Weak flesh and exhausted muscle were as unable to stop his relentless march as the unforgiving climate.

He did not spare the lash, even with his own body. Failure was unacceptable.

In the back of his mind he could hear the voice, faint and indistinct. A constant grumble at the edge of his hearing, the words were barely formed as anything other than incoherent fury. It was easily forgettable.

The Silent Curse.

She awaited him, and he would not deny her a moment longer.

He reached the crest of the rolling dune as the sun began to fall from the sky, tired legs protesting and threatening to give way. Holding one hand up to shield his eyes, the man surveyed the land, grinning when he made out the broken ruins in the shallow below.

Half buried in the sand, the smugglers den looked just as it did in his mind. Bricks faded and chipped from sandstorms framed a shadowed hole in the landscape, sand encroaching over the stone floor inside. Across the top a line of aged wood struggled to keep its shape against the weight of years.

The man smiled and began his decent into the long shadows below. He had reached his destination at last.

Stepping across the threshold and into the inky blackness was akin to falling into a deep void, a place removed from all humanity. The whole world turned to darkness, his lantern was but a single bead of illumination, near lost as the bleak depths threatened to swallow him and leave nary a trace to be found.

Uncowed, the man strode purposefully through the evening hours, his goal finally within grasp.

The depths he plumbed were entirely artificial, brick and wood evidencing some past industry since abandoned. Faint recollection told him much had been constructed by slave labour, the rest by fierce desert bandits. He knew with absolute certainty both sources of labour were entirely absent now.

By death or imprisonment, the Pirate King had made sure of their fates.

Still, they had left behind devious and ingeniously placed traps which he was forced to evade. Blades with vicious edges swung from hidden places to cut the air inches from his face; darts flew from concealed pipes to blunt themselves on walls, only seconds from puncturing his skin and infecting him with the virulent poisons they were no doubt coated in.

Yet, all of these trials did not deter the man. What formidable sense drove him forward also kept him alive, forewarning of when to sprint through dangerous areas, and how to avoid secret tripwires and pressure plates.

Upon encountering the first pitfall the voice had raised in sufficient volume to echo from the walls around him, obnoxious and distracting. He'd silenced it with a cruel smile, savouring the moment the words waned to a sullen whisper. Nothing would come between the man and the destiny awaiting him.

The Silent Curse.

He turned the next corner in the narrow passageway. A rich vein of golden light painted the path ahead, at last revealing the vast cove hidden at the bottom of the bolthole.

Suddenly his limbs were completely enraptured, dragging him forwards at pace. With every step, the longing grew stronger, heart pounding in his chest. Sea air rushed through to replace the stagnant gloom, familiar and welcoming with its embrace. The man barely noticed the narrow wooden frame constructed around the entrance as he squeezed through excitedly, splinters from the aged wood digging into his leathery flesh.

An unusual reverence fell upon him. After so many days absent from the world, he had returned.

Light flooded into the space from the opposite side, daybreak tainting the world in a rich amber glow. It reflected from the water to illuminate the magnificent galleon anchored in the bay from underneath, the darkened wood of the hull cast bronze. The man's breath caught in his throat as he stared, a thousand memories flooding into his mind, none entirely his own.

He knew even the slightest detail about her with unwavering certainty, every mark and burr appearing vividly in his head. Looking at the furled sails he realised he could take ash to parchment to sketch their crossed sabres and skull stitching with perfect recollection, or draw the amorous curves of the hidden figurehead. Grinning, he offered a nod to the morbid remnants of the crew, dry husks in a small alcove a few feet away.

Without command his feet took to motion once more, striding confidently towards the ship.

His boots made quick time over the dusty gangplank leading up the side, until he stood on deck once more. Expression triumphant, he closed his eyes, savouring the sensation of movement beneath his feet and the sound of the red tide below. A faint breeze swept through the cove, caressing his skin like an old lover.

The Silent Curse.

All too readily his mind faded to the spray of salt water, the creak of the sails and masts overhead, the warmth of the sun on the open seas. Darker, more insidious thoughts followed almost as quickly, urgently pressing upon him. His cruel disdain for the defeated captives sobbing below decks; chuckling darkly when a bloody grudge was satisfied amongst the crew. Cannons bellowing deafeningly, accompanied by splintering wood and the screams of men and women as they died in battle.

The colour of his enemies' blood, dark crimson over cold steel.

These memories were not his own, he knew. Yet, they were as much part of him now as the cleaver and the knives at his belt, or the cigar stub nestled between his yellowed teeth. He could barely wait to lift anchor and take once more to the seas.

The Silent Curse was his. His again, or his at last? The man couldn't be sure. He knew enough to not care regardless. He filled his lungs to bursting with a deep draught of sea air, and then opened his eyes.

A different soul looked upon the world than the one who had started this journey.

Alone, he looked across the cove, regarding the emerging dawn.

He would be ruled by Rage no longer. This day had witnessed the rebirth of the Pirate King, come to cast his bloody shadow over the Empire of the Free Cities once more.



SEASON 4
COLLECTED STORY



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PROLOGUE

The storm raged through the heavens, ravaging the landscape as the gods' anger thundered through the skies. Intermittent streaks of lightning stabbed violently at the earth below, stark bursts of light which briefly revealed the world suffering the onslaught. Amid open fields populated only by an occasional tree, the graveyard suffered the full force of the storm. Lashing rain had crushed the grass between the old gravestones and turned soil into loose mud, quickly reducing the ground into a treacherous mire. Wild and untamed winds threatened to uproot the vegetation, howling as they crashed upon the towering mausoleum's stone walls.

So great was the storm's fury it could be heard even in the room deep inside the structure, a faint tremor at the edge of earshot punctuated by intermittent rolls of thunder. A man sat keeping a lonely vigil in front of the wide fireplace, his head bent over a book. His heavy cloak lay drying nearby, and his simple robes revealed a toned and wiry body that did not explain his formidable presence. His silver-grey hair was lit in a burst of warm yellow which deepened to shadow behind him.

Back curved and shoulders soft as he fussed over the old tome in his hands, the man cast a studious figure. The pages utterly consumed his attention, the words tumbling from his lips in a subdued mutter. Fingers

never normally so hurried traced frantic lines under the ink and flicked through aged parchment pages.

A figure soundlessly stepped into the room behind him, gliding on flickering shadows. His back to the door, the seated man remained unaware.

Three long strides across the threadbare carpet and the assassin was upon him, steel flashing silver before the blade was shrouded deadly crimson. A red line drawn across his throat, the man flailed desperately, sending the book that had so engrossed him crashing to the floor. Bloody bubbles exploded from his mouth as he tried to speak, his nails ineffectually scratching at his killer's bared arms.

The assassin released the man and stepped back before delivering a kick to his back, pitching him forward. Still gurgling, the man fell headfirst into the fireplace, eyes blank from blood loss even before the flames began to lick at his skin.

The bloody deed had taken but seconds, undoing a lifetime of schemes, machinations, and plots in an instant. Strings cut, each would fray from this point, leading to ramifications both unfathomable and far-reaching.

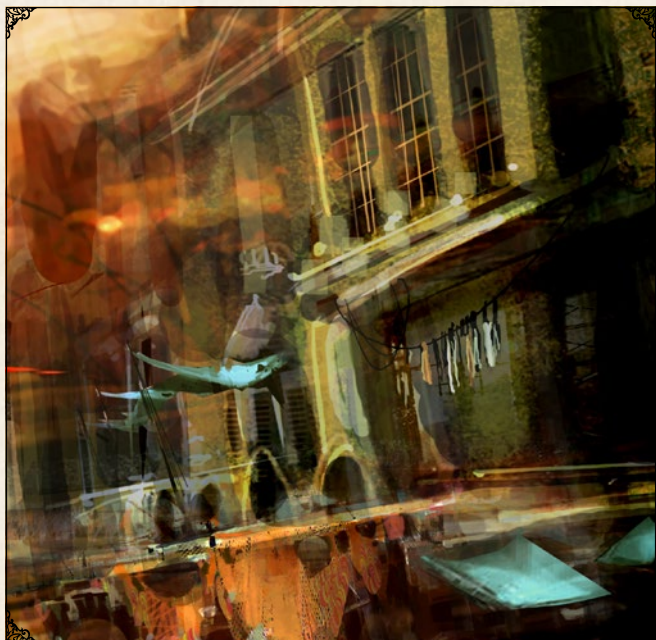
Only time would tell for better or worse.

Silence settled back upon the room, the only sound the distant storm still hurling itself at the walls outside. Ignoring the raging gale, the assassin stooped to wipe the blade clean on the sodden cloak laid out next to the fire. Then, with a reverence entirely contrary

to the brutal fate which had just been delivered, the murderer picked up the long garment and laid it over the body. As if welcoming the dark cloth, the flames licked higher, a faint smouldering smell bleeding into the room.

The solitary figure remained only a moment longer, offering the corpse one last look before fading back into the shadows.

Behind, the strings began to unravel, just as the barbs on each feather began to slowly blacken and curl in the flames.



FIRST BLOOD

Light was born into the day at last as the sun crested the horizon. It flooded between the gaps in the uneven buildings, slim fingers of brilliance lancing through the darkened streets to reveal the handful of traders already hurrying to and fro. The markets seldom waited for daybreak. Head down, each figure scuttled like an ant disturbed from under a rock, soon to be joined in greater numbers, voices echoing from the walls to fill the space as much as the press of bodies did.

Outside of the Merchants Quarter the city woke at a more leisurely pace, silence reigning but for the wind's mischief. It swept through alleys and sent abandoned bottles tumbling into the street, then rose to tease the old hinges of doors and signs, slamming the wooden panels or leaving them swinging wildly on their chains.

One such sign was that of the Drunken Seamstress, proudly suspended high above the ground for all to see. With its aged paint chipped and peeling and its colours bleached by the sun, the image emblazoned onto the wood had long been an object of speculation amongst those who cared to look. In truth it didn't much matter. The sign's importance was not the heraldry it depicted but simply its presence. Like a flag hoisted onto a mainmast, it was a proud declaration of allegiance—and a challenge to those who did not embrace it.

The sun continued its climb, and colour slowly crept into the world once more to offer a welcome respite from the icy night cold. It was not long in banishing the shadows cast upon the threshold of the Drunken Seamstress by the opposite buildings, bathing the heavy door in soft light. With its dark oak turned dull black and its metalwork rusted by exposure to the elements, it was usually just another nondescript doorway among many.

Not today.

Today the door held more significance than ever before: a message left for the Brewers, clear as the dawning day. Even afraid as they were to let their gaze linger, those few early souls unable to resist stared incredulously at the grisly sight of the animal's corpse nailed to the door before rushing onwards.

Inevitably a small crowd gathered. Voicing equal parts outrage and shock in hushed tones, they were content that in numbers they might be forgiven for stopping, a conceit entirely forgotten as the building's inhabitants roused from their alcoholic stupor. The gawkers scattered like startled deer before the sounds within, not even the Brewers' closest allies possessing the bravery to face them.

Only a single child remained behind, both transfixed by the bloody sight and too young to understand its full import. In one hand she clutched a thin, ragged toy rabbit with a lopsided grin over its threadbare face. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes and her teeth

worked her lip nervously, an unconscious reaction to the terrible sight of Scum's corpse.

A jagged piece of metal, crudely sharpened to a vicious point, had been driven through the cat's neck and into the wood of the door. Blood caked the wound, matting the surrounding hair into a crust that had turned cold during the night. The ginger fur covering Scum's belly was painted crimson, and a bloody trail ran downwards to puddle in a foreboding stain on the threshold.

The little girl startled back to herself and fled the moment she heard the heavy bolts draw back on the other side of the door. Nothing good waited in the darkness beyond, her parents had told her.

The mascot's body would only make that worse.

Hidden from sight in a dark alley across the street, Piper had watched the spectacle play out with grim satisfaction. He'd sent the others away before the break of day, knowing his kin did not possess discretion enough to remain topside, even during these early hours. Neither Skulk nor Scourge could ever be mistaken for cityfolk, their appearance far too extreme. Besides, now the deed was done, their usefulness had passed. Only he needed to remain to see that the Brewer's Guild understood the message clearly enough.

The door creaked and swung inwards, taking Scum out of sight and into the shadowy interior. Almost immediately a great cry was taken up, followed by a string of addled cursing.

The Devil of the Undercity allowed himself a dark grin before hurrying away.

The Ratcatcher's Guild had drawn first blood.

'Damn you!' Esters' fist smashed into the table hard enough to make the whole surface shake. The action matched the untamed fury in her voice, loud enough to wake the dead. 'Damn your weakness!'

Tapper didn't rise to the bait, not this time. He leaned further back in his chair with his eyes shut, one calloused hand rubbing at his temples. His damned hangover was a vicious dent in his skull, pounding like a hammer mill. Opening his eyes and letting light flood in would only make it worse.

He almost let his lips twist into a morbid grin at the lie he'd just told himself.

The Grand Brewer didn't want to open his eyes because doing so meant confronting Scum's tragic corpse lying in a pathetic heap in the centre of the table. More than anything, he wanted to keep his eyes closed for one last moment of relative peace, enjoy a fleeting calm before the storm clouds broke. After this, there would be plenty of time for anger and violent retribution, for days and weeks to come. Maybe even months.

He wanted to hold onto his composure as long as possible, especially in the face of Esters' rage.

'Damn you, answer me!' Esters bellow shattered any

pretence of inner peace, grinding into the sore spot the whisky had left behind. Tapper wearily forced his eyes open, steeling himself for an explosion of light.

It wasn't as bad as he'd feared, quickly fading to reveal the outline of their dead mascot, nail still embedded in it. The Grand Brewer stared long and hard at the shape.

They'd all assembled, down to the last. Something like this was too big for any of their number to ignore. Most had risen to their feet during the exchange, outrage written across their features. Others remained seated, framing the sad scene with sorrowful expressions. Tapper took in each face in turn, counting allies as he looked around the table.

The action had become a painfully familiar one.

Of all of them, he felt most sorry for Friday. Sunken into her seat as though trying to push herself as far away from Scum as possible, she sobbed quietly, hands barely resisting the urge to cradle her face. Spigot stood behind her protectively, his fingers reassuringly squeezing her shoulders. He wore a troubled expression as his eyes endlessly flicked between her and the cat.

Stave had also kept his seat, his face a hard read behind his whiskers. His eyes, at least, had turned to steel, although the Grand Brewer couldn't tell who that was for. Decimate sat next to the big lad, her Erskirii colours starkly different to the kutte worn by the others. A seasoned veteran of more difficult times than most of the others, she seemed far more relaxed, leaning back

with one foot over the opposite knee. The one-time exile had kept her mask, but her body language told Tapper all he needed to know. When the time came she would gladly fight—and for Tapper, given how her hips faced away from Esters and her crew.

Tapper's final man was the soldier. Hooper hadn't even sat down in the first place but had hurled his chair to one side the moment he entered the room and saw Scum. He'd been incessantly pacing ever since, muttering behind his moustache, angry cursing under his breath.

The Grand Brewer knew he could likely still trust all of them. Stave's demeanour concerned him most, but over the last few months his old friend had grown to hate Esters almost as much as Tapper did.

Against them, Esters and her cadre.

The woman herself seemed to have grown in stature since entering the room, the surrounding air taking on her fiery intensity. She leaned over the table across from Tapper with a murderous look in her eyes. Her passion had spread through the ranks like wildfire, and only one of her people remained seated. Strangely unfazed by the turn of events, Stoker sat smirking at Scum's mutilated body. As though sensing the Grand Brewer's scrutiny, the Eisnoran thug looked up and offered Tapper an ugly sneer, apparently feeling secure enough for brazen aggression.

Tapper pushed his anger to one side, dragging the desire to beat the lad senseless along with it. Time would come for such things.

PintPot leant against the wall, somehow looking hostile and bored at the same time. The Grand Brewer knew the little bastard well enough by now to realise the lad didn't bother to guard his expression much. Mash, in comparison, looked all too conflicted. Tapper detected more than a shot of sadness at the edge of his eyes. He hadn't stepped in yet, experience teaching him to wait until Esters' fury was spent.

'This is a message, Grand Brewer.' She did not say the name kindly, lip curled mockingly. 'Are you going to ignore this one too?'

Tapper stared incredulously. Did the woman think anyone here didn't know this was a threat? Calling it a 'message' was putting things mildly.

This was a declaration of war.

'The time has passed for your worthless leadership. Indecision will see us dead to this challenge, you mark my words. We answer this act with one of our own!' The Matriarch spat the words into the air with as much bile as Tapper had ever seen. Were she not challenging his seat, he would have been proud to see such a ferocious figure wear the kutte.

PintPot chimed in before he could answer. 'Now you're talking. Time to go out and kick in some heads.'

'No.' Tapper acted swiftly, cutting off the call to arms before any of the others could take it up.

'No?!' Esters slammed her hand into the table once again. 'You want to cower like a scared dog, tail between your legs?'

‘Listen to yourself. You sound more spiteful than a weakling Raedlander noble, demanding we run blindly into the undercity and raze it to the wretched ground it sits on. If our response isn’t measured retaliation, it will only turn yet more of them against us. Are you looking to build a throne for these vermin, as well as steal mine?’

Too late, he realised he’d spoken words out loud which none had yet dared voice, suddenly escalating their internal strife to a new level. Each of the others had turned their head to stare at him, a mixture of emotions cast over their features. Some wore concern. Others, anticipation. Stave’s eyes remained unreadable.

‘You dare accuse me?!’ Esters snatched Scum’s corpse and held it aloft, the animal’s body flopping about pathetically in her tight grip. ‘This is what you’ve lead us to. One of our own cut down and left out in plain sight. And you think I’m building them support? The undercity only understands one thing! Blood! And I will give it to them by the gallon for this.’

She threw Scum into the corner of the room and pounded a meaty fist into the table. ‘Who of you are with me?’ Her voice had dropped to a sinister tone. Nostrils flared and cheeks flushed red, she was a terrifying sight. Her eyes roamed over each of the Brewers, daring them to speak out.

PintPot was the first to raise his hand, quickly followed by Stoker, who twisted the gesture into giving Tapper the finger. Mash gave the Grand Brewer

a searching look, wavering for one last moment before siding with his wife. Among his own supporters, Spigot shook his head sadly and turned his gaze away from Esters. Tapper noticed a look of relief pass over the football legend's face when Friday followed suit.

Hooper was the first to defect. He crossed the floor to stand with Esters, his anger clearly having taken hold. 'Aye. I'm no coward. I'll break fingers until we find out who did this, and then cave in his fucking skull.'

Decimate tilted her head and smiled sardonically at Esters before turning her head back towards Tapper. She clearly wasn't intimidated. 'I'm with you, chief. We cut off the head, not a finger at a time.'

Hooper snorted at the insult, eyes narrowing. PintPot even stepped forward with his fists clenched at his sides. The Exile stopped both dead in their tracks, tutting as her fingers caressed the hilt of her claymore. A tense moment passed, the air heavy with bad intention and open hostility. There was only Stave to go, and by Tapper's count it would end five apiece. The Brewers were back to the same indecision which had plagued them ever since Esters' arrival.

'Sorry, Tapp.'

Stave slowly shook his head, not meeting his captain's eyes. 'She's right. We've sat idle for too long.' The huge man stood and walked away from the table, enormous arms shoving a stunned PintPot out of his way.

He stopped in the doorway to the bar. 'Remember when we were lads, and we thought we'd live forever?

We both know that isn't true now, old friend. Those days are long behind us. But back then we didn't take shit like this lying down, either. And I'm not ready to give up on that just yet.'

Stave left the room, a shocked silence hanging in the air behind him.

Tapper hung his head, defeated.

Esters wore a triumphant grin as she led her troops out.

Mash was the last to leave. The big man looked like he wanted to speak but couldn't find the words. When eventually he did, he tripped over himself. 'I don't where this leaves us, Tapp. I— I'll talk to her. No good will come of this split, not for any of us.'

Tapper managed a half-hearted nod, which seemed to subdue the larger man's worry. Mind spoken, Mash followed the rest.

The Grand Brewer collapsed back into his chair, the air rushing out of his frame.

Mash's words would fall on deaf ears. They didn't matter.

It was over.

Piper waited in the empty square under the shadows of a tree, hood brazenly left at his shoulders. Even in the shade he could feel the sun's warmth sinking into his skin, the sensation quite unfamiliar. He wasn't yet sure if he enjoyed it or not. The heat topside was

distracting for a man who had spent nearly his entire life underground, only coming out at night.

Yet there was something curiously addictive in remaining utterly still under the sun's glare, basking like a fattened rat after a feed. And to the superstitious people of the depths the tan on his skin was talismanic. The deeper the golden shade grew, the bolder he could be amongst them, and the greater his legend grew. No undercity chief before him had dared to lead his people into the daylight.

Piper would change that.

His destiny was to become godlike.

It amused him how easily it had been to pass among the cityfolk. Most didn't care to look at the dregs of society. Beggars, orphans, and whores all wore the same mask of anonymity as they slipped through the cracks on their way to the bottom. Even the street entertainers ignored the Devil as he passed through. He might have considered it an affront had it not served his purpose so well. Most of them were too poor or talentless to find allegiance with the Entertainer's Guild, existing only a single step up from the scum they pretended to ignore. In his experience, the only difference between a street performer and an old man begging for coin was the instrument they carried.

Somewhere in the distance a bell began to ring, doling out the hour. Piper followed the chimes absentmindedly, losing count after five. He didn't particularly care. Time as these people understood

it was only important topside, the concept of little importance in the depths. He was content the traitor would arrive sooner or later.

Sure enough, the figure appeared before the final echoes had faded, lurching ridiculously from shadow to shadow as their head constantly searched for a pursuer. Piper almost laughed. Such theatrics were entirely unnecessary. The Devil had known this place would be utterly deserted today, the same as it was every day. Cityfolk seldom came here. Had it been otherwise, he'd have demanded a meeting in the sewers.

He stifled his mirth for the time being. He needed the traitor in the short term. After that? There would be plenty of time to find humour in the clumsy approach. Especially when his own knife was waiting in one of those dark alleys.

Eventually the traitor arrived, just as Piper's patience threatened to run dry.

'Is it done?' Used to asking direct questions and being answered immediately, the Ratcatcher held with few of the forced pleasantries the cityfolk typically insisted on.

The traitor nodded. If the Brewer took offence at Piper's brusque tone it did not show. 'She took the bait just as expected. You should have seen the look on Tapper's face when the Guild sided with her. It was a real picture.'

'Fine.' In truth, Piper didn't care. If a wedge had been driven between the wretched Brewers all the better, but he was confident in winning the war whether they

stood divided or not. It was enough he'd forced them into rash retaliation. Nothing good would come for them if they ventured into the depths blindly, clumsily searching for vengeance.

'Pelage will find you again if I need your services. Until then, my kin know not to stick you with a blade.'

'Some boon, Vermin. Your woman had best bring the purse you owe me soon.' The masked figure's eyes sparkled at the thought.

Piper chuckled darkly. Petty lust and greed were universal, no matter if an individual were undercity scum or cityfolk. 'Don't worry, traitor. I'll not forget your due. Consider this the first token of my goodwill.'

He palmed a large gold coin from a hidden pocket and, much to the traitor's surprise, shook their hand in the style of the cityfolk. When Piper pulled his hand back, the coin was absent. 'Will that be enough to earn your respect?'

A crass expression crept over the traitor's lower face. 'Plenty.'

'Good.' Piper turned to leave, pulling up his hood and stalking his way back to the undercity. He felt hungry eyes watching his departure and allowed himself a satisfied grin. The value of the coin had been far greater than what had been promised.

His act would be interpreted as either stupidity or generosity, and both suited his plans. The traitor would remain keen to betray the Brewers regardless, greed leading them like a child chasing sticky sweets.

Such craven scum didn't have the intelligence or initiative to act otherwise.

Now Piper had only to wait and see what Esters would do next about the dilemma he'd posed her. And regardless of what she chose, hostility in kind would swiftly follow.



FAILURE

Raised voices echoed through the empty hallways, papered walls and soft furnishings doing little to muffle the ire. It was impossible to make out the exact words, putting Venin in mind of simple animal bellowing as he prowled through the darkness. Had the carpeting underfoot not masked the Alchemist's footsteps already, the argument might have aided his infiltration of this sprawling estate, but as it was, the sound was merely annoying.

At least it kept the servants away. Even at the best of times few of them would risk crossing paths with their masters unless summoned; now they'd doubtless all be cowering in whatever holes they'd crawled into. Venin chuckled to himself. He could at least appreciate that much.

The corridor ended in a stout oak door blocking the Alchemist's progress. Cursing under his breath, he pressed an ear against the wood for a moment, hoping to detect any activity on the other side. Nothing alerted him, but he couldn't be sure whether the chamber beyond was empty or the solid door simply muffled sound too well.

A moment of indecision passed, spent awkwardly pressed against the wood. Venin felt his pulse quicken, cold panic taking root somewhere near his belly. He couldn't very well stay here like this. To turn back was to admit failure, something looked upon dimly by his masters. Already, rash and youthful excitement had

begun to twist into concern that he'd bitten off more he could chew by accepting this task.

If he was entirely honest, he knew he was no assassin.

The Alchemist loathed the tremble he saw beneath his dark leather glove. He remembered the shame of being called a coward in his adolescence, made worse by knowing it to be true. The thought was quickly banished. His hand found the doorknob and twisted it sharply downwards, ego overcompensating and unheeding of any danger.

The room beyond was blessedly empty, although certainly not quiet, the voices considerably louder and far less distorted here. Venin stepped inside and quietly closed the door behind him before taking in his surroundings.

Light from a candelabra cast the windowless chamber in a warm glow. Tall bookcases filled with neat rows of ledgers and accounts lined the walls, carefully organised by a fastidious mind. Atop a shrouded fireplace the light danced over the surface of delicate porcelain and gleaming metal shields that reflected his image as he moved around the huge desk in the centre of the room. Such opulence sickened Venin, and bile rose to the back of his throat. He fought the urge to spit it over them and moved quickly on.

Adjoining the study was another chamber, just as large but dominated instead by an immense bed, large enough to sleep a family. Venin doubted more than one person ever slept here, if it was even used much. With

the low light from the study, he could see the covers were drawn tightly over the mattress, and a simple touch of his wrist confirmed the material was cold. A large window loomed on one wall, drapes pulled fast so not even a hint of light was able to penetrate into the room. There was nothing of interest here.

Venin returned to the study, eyes searching for hidden doors or missed alcoves. He quickly found the entrance to the adjacent rooms set into a wall, a rectangular frame not quite airtight and revealing the source of the raised voices.

The Alchemist smiled. He had reached a suitable destination. There wasn't anything to indicate to which Guild the owner of these chambers belonged, but that was inconsequential. All of the Shadow Council were but frail figures without their guards, their sharp minds no protection against wicked steel. Precisely which Guild bore the brunt of this deed mattered equally as little.

Atop the desk a ceramic kettle sat next to an ornate cup, likely left by a servant and still lukewarm from the liquid inside. Venin ran careful fingers over the pale-blue vial in his pocket. He seethed that his masters insisted he use their poison over one of his own creation, but he would follow their orders nonetheless. It was the work of but a moment to lace both vessels with just enough poison to bring down his victim without tainting the flavour of the tea and alerting his victim to the danger.

Deed done, Venin carefully returned the subtle mixture to his pocket, fully intending to dispose of it as soon as possible. He vastly preferred the virulent acids and venoms of his trade and the powerful statement they made. Leaving a victim with their lower jaw and throat melted into pulp would have sent a far more undeniable message.

Never mind. His benefactors did not tolerate disobedience with any great sense of forgiveness or humour. Now was not the time to push his luck.

The Alchemist crept back into the bedroom and cracked upon the curtain enough to see the horizon. The sun had already set, and night was slowly claiming the skies. It wouldn't be long before the agents outside would orchestrate a catastrophe fit to distract the guards. He settled down behind the door to wait, disinterestedly listening to the bickering voices emanating from the secret rooms. No doubt the Shadow Council had been airing out their frustrations for hours, meaning Venin's tired victim would more than likely spend the night here. That suited him just fine.

Venin nervously watched from the shadows as the portly Lord Chamberlain sipped his tea. From the size of the ledger the man studied and the gold rings adorning his chubby fingers, he was easily identified as a Moneylender. Venin attempted to calm his nerves

by reminding himself once more of the intended anonymity of this act. The victim's identity wasn't important. The assassination was a political statement designed to destabilise the whole of the Shadow Council, irrespective of their allegiance.

He would have better succeeded had the bastard shown even the slightest sign of discomfort. Blithely drinking from the poisoned cup, the Lord Chamberlain hadn't shown a hint of illness. There wasn't the merest tremble in his hands, and his breathing remained normal, free and unencumbered. Venin's mind ran through the possibilities. Perhaps he had been too cautious and underdosed the tea. Or, it could have been the man's unexpected size, his bulk requiring a larger amount of the poison to affect him. Maybe he simply held a natural immunity.

Whatever the reason, it was causing the young Alchemist's blood to boil.

A commotion outside disturbed the figure from his ledger and he looked towards the bedchamber before lurching to his feet. As the man padded across the thick carpet and crossed into the room and towards the grand window, Venin inwardly cursed. The Lord Chamberlain's footsteps were heavy but showed no sign of uncertain gait.

'August Lord!' The moment the Moneylender pulled aside the curtains a blazing inferno beyond lit the room ruddy orange. The warm colour lent a sickly hue to the short man's visage, and his jowls quivered

sickeningly as he took in the sight before him.

There could be only moments before he summoned his guards, or at least a servant. The time for subtlety was past.

As smoothly as he could manage, the Alchemist pulled the wire garotte from the pouch at his belt, took a deep breath, and stepped out from his hiding place. He crossed the floor quickly, his deft hands twisting through the air as he snapped the wire around the Lord Chamberlain from behind. It didn't take properly, cutting into the man's chin rather than his throat, and suddenly Venin found himself weathering a storm of weak blows as his victim flailed his arms. He wrenched the garotte with a snarl but only succeeded in drawing a thin line of red and a frightened yelp.

A fist hit him in the side of the head, making his ear ring. Stunned, Venin planted a boot in small of the Moneylender's back, sending him hurtling forward into the window. It cracked from the impact, one pane exploding outwards in a shower of jagged glass.

Sound suddenly rushed into the room, frantic footsteps and shouting warring with bells sounding the alarm. Wind howled through the window, dragging ashes and cinder with it. Above all, a fire raged through the building opposite, flames licking at an ancient spire as it collapsed in on itself.

The Lord Chamberlain staggered backwards uncertainly, nose raw and bleeding. 'Guards!' His voice came out in a drowned squeak, barely audible over the

din. 'Help m—' He never finished the word, gasping instead as Venin resumed his attack.

He leaned over his victim's shoulder, spitting malicious words into his ear. 'They're not coming. My masters have seen to that.' Eyes bulging, the man tried to reply, gargling like his own tongue was choking him, not the garrotte.

'I don't care who you are, so don't waste your last moments on that. All I was bade do was kill one of you pigs, and you just happened to get unlucky.' Venin drew the wire tighter and felt the man's struggling growing weaker as his life ebbed away.

The Alchemist smiled. He had found the idea of murder distasteful in the past, but not for a swine like this one. He would have gladly killed men and women of this station for free, even. The coin was nothing more than a welcome bonus.

His victim shuddered and went limp, tongue lolling disgustingly from his mouth. Venin let him topple in an ungainly heap.

Tasting blood on his lips, Venin realised he must have bitten his tongue at some point. He spat it away, noting how the rich carpet smouldered from the dark embers drifting in from the maelstrom outside. Swiping a loose dreadlock from his face, he made his way across to the window in wonderment.

The inferno opposite showed little sign of abating. The remains of the spire were now a blackened skeleton of charred supports and shattered brickwork. Below,

immense chunks of fallen roofing lay strewn over the ground, flames spreading from them to the dried grass. Dark silhouettes ran back and forth, braving a mire of floating embers and an ashen rain as they carried pails of water to dump on the burning debris.

His masters' agents had indeed been good to their word. The building looked ancient, likely a survivor of each and every miserable day of the Century Wars—occupation and liberation both—and another hundred years before that. Proudly it had stood, a symbol of tradition and endurance against the ravages of time.

It had been brought low in mere moments.

Venin appreciated the sentiment. Everything was changing now, and nothing was safe. Not aged landmarks, even one nestled into the Guild district, and certainly not the rotting institutions surrounding it. It was time to finish his part in this bloody evening, and to send the message. The days of the Shadow Council's invulnerability were past. He returned his attention to the Lord Chamberlain, ready to check his handiwork before departing.

The body wasn't there.

A trail of blood led behind the extravagant bed and Venin chased it in growing alarm. He rounded the edge in time to see his victim's pale hands tug on a long, knotted cord which disappeared into the shadowy ceiling.

He was running even before the Moneylender released the rope, knowing a gong would be sounding within the bowels of the mansion. At this late hour

any servant would likely be accompanied by guards, and neither could be allowed to find him here.

Hearing the man pull himself up to lean upon the bed, Venin looked over his shoulder to offer the bastard a final contemptuous glare before he left the room. The face which waited was a ghastly apparition in the firelight. Blood streamed from the shattered nose and ran over a sickly grin, the lips pulled back into fleshy cheeks to bare yellow teeth. A pair of piggy eyes set into the bloated visage shone with malicious triumph.

Venin's blood ran cold, his earlier hubris draining away. That smile would haunt him until he died.

It meant failure.

He swept into the study without looking, ears pricked at the sound of nearby footsteps echoing nearby. Left with only moments to escape detection, the Alchemist hurriedly slipped through the opposite door. He found himself in a corridor wide enough for a small army to march through, the walls adorned with immense frescos painted onto each wall. Self-preservation won the uneven struggle against his loathing and he hastened through, fighting the urge to take one of the torches from the wall and set them ablaze as he did.

The hallway ended in a carpeted wooden staircase leading down into the main hall. Heavy footsteps blundered somewhere behind, accompanied by raised voices and the metallic chink of heavy mail. Panicked, Venin took the steps three at a time. Close to the base he slipped and crashed the rest of the way in a

heap of tangled limbs, cold stone tiles at the bottom sending jarring impact through his body. Groaning, he didn't miss a beat but forced his protesting body to rise, ignoring the lance of pain that shot through a twisted ankle as he did. He had no choice: remaining a crumpled bundle of limbs on the floor meant death.

Large candelabra set onto tables around the room illuminated the way as he stumbled onwards. He didn't bother with the grand entrance, as a heavy iron grille barred his exit that way. Moving as fast as he could on his injured foot, he pressed on, trying to ignore the figures which had appeared at the top of the stairs and were descending almost as quickly as he had.

The first door was mercifully unlocked, and he fell through before breaking into a lopsided, haphazard run. His headlong charge took him through another door, and then another, leaving a trail of open doors and furniture he'd shoved aside.

One last frame, this one a sheet of ornate metal, and suddenly the scent of smoke hanging in the air made Venin aware he had finally stumbled outside. He collapsed against the door in relief, attempting for just a moment to calm his ragged breathing.

As the blood rushing through his ears finally abated enough to hear the surrounding commotion, he opened his eyes to see he stood in a small garden with a walkway leading around the corner of the building. A short iron fence ringed the area, its blackened metal glowing orange on one side in the light.

Venin wasted no time climbing awkwardly over it, as uncaring of the bloody scrapes the metal carved into his flesh as of the rents it made in his tunic. The guards could find him at any time. He winced as he landed on the opposite side, his ankle unable to take any weight and close to giving way. Through sheer willpower he remained standing and lurched into a dark alley, away from the raging firelight.

Ensconced within the darkness he was safe at last, free from pursuit. A quick pat down confirmed he'd left nothing inside that could identify him. He was more concerned about the Lord Chamberlain recognising him. He'd kept his mask on the entire time; he could only hope it had been enough.

The man's smile returned unbidden to his mind as he worried, the inky blackness suddenly turned as sinister as the expression, the tight walls around him a prison Venin had the urge to escape.

He had failed.

As he hastened away on his injured limb, Venin could only wonder at what the repercussions might be.

POISON

The atmosphere in the Drunken Seamstress had turned since the day they'd found Scum murdered. In better times Friday had always known it a blessed refuge from the bitter world outside, the easygoing camaraderie of her brothers and sisters a welcome comfort. Without doubt her happiest memories belonged within these four walls, the place more her home than any other den or bolthole she'd known. Now a morose sense of foreboding threatened to eclipse them all. It hung in the air as heavy as cigar smoke, twisting every smile into sardonic glee and tainting every expression.

Despite the swing towards Esters a clear divide still existed between the Brewers. Stave kept to himself, barely acknowledging the others as though great shame had grown into an impenetrable barrier. Hooper's ire had yet to be quenched, despite how he tried to drown it with beer. Decimate, exile turned favourite daughter, wore a dangerous glare for any who had dared to vote against the Grand Brewer. The rest kept their alliance with Esters close, a new crew and hierarchy beginning to emerge.

And at the top, finally within grasp of the seat she so coveted, the Matriarch.

Spigot was the only one who provided Friday with any sense of reassurance, her only remaining anchor to the happiness of past times. Yet his burden was most terrifying of all, filling her with nothing but dread. She

was far from afraid of the man. The secret they shared however, was something else.

No matter the views of the Brewer's Guild, Friday could never understand Spigot's sobriety as a curse. It had steadily drawn them both closer over the last year, the reversal of his fate an inspiration which returned feelings she'd long thought forgotten.

Their awkward courtship had begun quite innocently, mutual friendship evolving into lingering glances and blushed cheeks. She smiled to remember how initially neither had been willing to cross the line and admit their true feelings for each other. Months on, and Friday now believed she saw not only affection harboured within her partner's eyes, but the same love she was scared to name out loud.

It lent even more fear of the repercussions of his sobriety being discovered.

Presently Spigot quietly watched the other Brewers from the bar, one hand gripping a tankard Friday knew would be half empty. He'd become remarkably adept at the pretence of drinking around his teammates. Friday didn't share his abstinence, but she had grown to despise the Guild's code. Thanks to it, Spigot could never let his guard down amongst his comrades, those who should have welcomed him regardless of whether he was half-cut or not.

Friday's heart broke to know how alienated and distant he felt. Brewer culture had grown so disdainful of those who did not indulge it was nigh on impossible

for her not to feel some animosity herself. Her blood ran cold every time one of the heavier drinkers mouthed off, just as she knew Spigot's eyes would narrow in irritation. He never expressed his frustrations, but sooner or later she feared he would simply walk out on them, never to return.

His eyes found hers and Friday brushed such concerns aside, a wide smile taking root in spite of her worries. Deciding she could do with being cheered up, she set to picking her way to Spigot across the dirty floorboards, avoiding Esters' clique as best she could. After refusing to side with them, she too was left feeling isolated and vulnerable.

Stoker blocked her way before she reached the counter, leaning backwards in his chair.

'Huh, lass. Didn't see you there.' Slurring tainted the burly Eisnoran's words even more than his thick accent, rendering them almost incomprehensible. Friday wondered how long he'd been drinking.

She also didn't miss the distinct lack of apology.

Stoker had very few friends as far as Friday could tell. An abrupt and discourteous oaf, he'd made no effort to ingratiate himself with Tapper's followers and only allied himself to Esters on account of their shared heritage. She'd never seen Mash or Quaff take to him, only PintPot usually willing to share a beer with the man.

He loudly boasted about his past to whoever might listen, but in truth it was a mess of rumour and hearsay, most of which Friday doubted to be true in

the slightest. Some horseshit about hiding inside of a furnace, flames licking at his skin without burning him. Having seen his skin peeling and blistered after the silly bastard doused himself with whisky and hurled himself at the opposition, she knew that as a lie to start with.

Such stunts did, at least, explain how the man had become so repulsive. His ruddy skin was crossed with hideous scars, and he rarely lacked a sickly scent about him like spoiled meat. He was ugly as sin to boot, which didn't help. Friday would have happily told anyone that asked it was a shame he ever took the helmet off.

A swift kick resolved the problem at hand, the thug's chair swinging out of the way enough for her to slide past and make her way to Spigot. Behind her back, she heard the Eisbnoran grumbling under his breath.

Spigot's face lit up handsomely when she drew close. 'What happened to the Guv?' she asked.

'Tapp's in the other room.' Spigot nodded towards the inner chambers, where the Brewers assembled around the long table to vote. 'Thrashing something out with Esters and Mash.' His expression had dropped with the answer, the same as the tone in his voice. Like Friday, Spigot cared little for the Matriarch.

Friday listened, detecting the barest hint of raised voices escaping through the crack between the doors. Whatever it was, Esters hadn't launched into a full-blooded assault on the Grand Brewer just yet. She

supposed Mash was playing peacemaker between the pair again.

She wouldn't have wished that task on her worst enemy.

Her voice lowered to a whisper. 'What are we doing here, Spigs? What happens next?'

'I don't know, lass. We're in uncharted seas now. All we can do is ride out the storm, and hope our heads are above water when its finally over.'

Friday nodded nervously, not comforted in the slightest.

The heat gradually rose as the day wore on, the number of faces inside the pub steadily rising as the mood deteriorated further. Every patron to the Drunken Seamstress was a Brewer through and through and had taken a side in this struggle, just the same as the players themselves. Backers of both sides contemptuously stared at each other across the barroom, an occasional curse directed at the opposite group. Tempers flared even at the tables, sharp words passing between the individuals playing dice or stones alongside coins and favours.

'Hey, Legend. Yeah, you.' Stoker's drunken voice was obnoxiously loud, heard in every corner of the muted pub. The muttered discussion stopped, curious heads turning in his direction. 'Aye, the football legend himself!' The thug's stubby finger stabbed aggressively through the air towards Spigot, as if his target wasn't immediately obvious.

Friday saw Spigot roll his eyes and discreetly squeezed his hand. He smiled in return, carefully composing his face before replying.

'You're too kind, Master Boiler.' He raised his tankard in mock salute.

'Sit and have a drink with me, Legend.' It wasn't an invitation. Stoker's voice was as ugly as his expression, an unmistakably mocking sneer. Friday felt the hairs on the back of her neck rising.

Spigot waved it away. 'Thanks, but I'm comfortable here. Perhaps a quiet drink another time, eh?'

'Quiet drink? Pah! I haven't toasted our new captain yet. We fucking sing when we're winning!' The insult was much clearer this time, half the figures in the bar stiffening at his crude words. Spigot's hand tightened around his tankard as he choked down a retort.

Stoker didn't wait for a reply. He unsteadily clambered to his feet, his inebriated movement jolting the table several inches across the floor. Drink spilled over a surface already wet from spilt beer, and two empty tankards rolled to the floor.

'What, think you're too good for our new captain, eh? Don't want to raise a glass to her?' His eyes narrowed. 'Can't rightly say I've seen you raise a glass to anything much of late, now I've come to think of it.'

Friday's heart was caught in her throat, her chest tight. Stoker was advancing on the bar, lurching inexorably forward.

'You never used to be that way, Legend. Any old

excuse to have a drink with the lads, or on your own.' The finger lashed out again. 'You were a bloody drunk, worse than anyone!'

'And you're not far off that now, Stoker. Sit yourself down and stop making such a scene.' Spigot's voice had turned colder than Friday had ever heard it.

'How does a man like you turn it all around, I wonder?' Stoker's eyes suddenly flicked away from Spigot, landing on Friday. She recoiled like he'd slapped her, his drunken leer enough to make her nauseated.

'Easy there... time for you to walk that mouth back, lad. Take it outside into the fresh air, where you can use it to puke in the gutter.' Bitterness still laced Spigot's tone, despite his attempt at less hostile language. His arm dropped protectively across Friday, a tremble betraying his slipped composure.

'It's okay, Spigs. Bite your tongue.' She couldn't keep her voice below a high squeak. Everything was coming unravelling, just as she'd feared. Even if Stoker did leave them be now, he'd already raised enough eyebrows to ruin everything.

Stoker had no intention of letting it go.

'Love of a good woman, perhaps.' His grin had become lecherous, his eyes boring into hers. 'Maybe we could all do with some love from you, girl. Turn us all into legends, and win the bloody championship without trying.'

'Apologise. Now.' Spigot snorted the reply like a bull, his cheeks flushed and a grimace taken root under his bushy moustache.

Stoker lunged forward, taking Spigot by surprise as the pair of them crashed into the sturdy bar. Winded, Spigot couldn't do much more than flail ineffectually, the tankard in his hand bouncing off of his assailant's thick shoulders. Stoker roared incoherently and swatted the arm away, the metal mug bouncing forgotten into a corner.

Friday tried to pull at Stoker's sleeve as one hand rose, ready to hammer downwards into Spigot, and was belted across the nose for her trouble. Already possessed of formidable strength, Stoker's berserker fury and inebriation lent him might enough for the blow to send her reeling. Seeing stars, she dropped to her knees, only vaguely aware of a hand which came to rest on her shoulder, preventing her from rising again.

Cheering and jeers surrounded her. Fights were not uncommon in the Drunken Seamstress, and this one had been building for some time, a proxy for Tapper and Esters' own struggle. It was a catharsis no one wished to pull apart just yet.

Through blurry eyes she saw Spigot push Stoker away at last, hurriedly grabbing a bottle from the countertop. When Stoker charged in again he was ready, bouncing it off of the larger man's head with a hollow thunk. The Eisnoran staggered but kept his feet, rewarded by a second and then a third blow from the bottle, which finally shattered in a shower of green.

Letting out a deep breath, Spigot dropped the bottle as his teammate fell to one knee. 'Why are we fighting,

you damned fool?' Frustration ruled her partner's voice, mixed with anger Friday hadn't seen since his recovery.

'No... reason.' Stoker spoke through erratic breathing. 'Just don't... like... people thinking they're... better'n me.' He turned his face upwards to reveal a mess of blood and broken glass, beard wet with spit and beer.

His uppercut was the wild swing of a desperate man, but for a second time he caught Spigot unawares, lifting him off his feet and onto his arse. As though empowered by a stunned opponent, the Eisnoran leapt up with a snarl and grabbed a bottle of whisky from a nearby table. Friday shrieked and tried to stand through the dizziness engulfing her head. She expected Stoker to return the favour Spigot had paid him just moments earlier.

What happened next was far worse, a nightmare made real.

Stoker grabbed the downed man by his kutte and upended the bottle, jamming it in Spigot's mouth. 'Come on, you bastard! You'll drink with me now, won't you?' Friday could only watch in horror as she saw the spirits leak from Spigot's lips and over his shirt, the man forced to drink a mouthful of the venom he'd tried so desperately to forget.

He caught Stoker's arm with his fist and the bottle slipped away for a moment, allowing a choking Spigot to spit out what he could of the liquid. He didn't get much respite, as Stoker leapt back on him, bottle in hand.

'Nah, nah, Legend, drink up!'

Stoker's fevered cries and actions were finally excessive enough to force a reaction from Stave, who stepped into the fray to wrap one immense arm around the Eismoran and drag him away. Mash hauled Spigot up to his feet opposite and moved to stand between the pair of them.

'It's over.' His tone brooked no argument.

Spigot's eyes blazed with fury, rage having overtaken his good senses. He stared at his assailant over Mash's shoulder. 'You dare make me drink this vile poison like some drunk in the gutter? I should have taken that bottle to your throat while you were floored!'

Fridays heart sank as silence descended. Spigot's words had been heard by all, including Tapper and Esters, standing by the doors to the inner chambers.

'Poison?' Mash raised an eyebrow and stepped away from Spigot like a man afraid of infectious disease. He looked down at the whisky bottle with unbelieving eyes. 'Really?'

Spigot's choler had faded completely, his face ashen. He breathlessly spat away the last remnants of the liquor in his mouth. 'Aye, you heard me. Poison.' His voice had shrunk to a defeated whisper.

Tapper pushed his way through the crowd, making way until he stood face to face with his teammate, a stern cast to his face. The Grand Brewer measured his man with steely eyes, the weight of the world behind them. He looked every year of his age suddenly, Friday realised. Spigot, to his credit, met the gaze with unflinching steadiness.

She felt a bittersweet pang of pride as her partner faced the end with his head held high.

Eventually, Tapper spoke. 'Really, Spigs? You've forsaken the code?'

Spigot nodded.

The Grand Brewer looked around at each of his teammates. As they passed over her, Friday sensed his helplessness. He was a man undone by defeat after defeat. This was yet another. With inevitability, Tapper's eyes came to rest on Esters. She wore the same victorious expression Friday had seen when the others had crossed the floor to her side.

The Grand Brewer's shoulders dipped the tiniest bit. Few would have noticed, unless they knew him well enough to see it. His stern demeanour had successfully hidden sadness every time before. This time, Friday could tell.

Tears wet the edges of her eyes. A crushing wave of grief reared up inside her, overwhelming her as the inevitable words were spoken.

'Spigot. You have betrayed us. You are no longer worthy of wearing the kutte.'

'Aye. I... I understand. I just couldn't go back to that, Tapp.'

If Tapper felt any sympathy he chose not to voice it.

In absolute silence Spigot pulled the kutte over his head, hands lingering for just a moment longer than they had to as he gave the sash to Tapper. Still unspeaking, he bent down to retrieve his beret, which he dusted off carefully. The crowd parted as he made his way over to

Friday. Before she could stop him, he pushed his cap into her hands, a sad smile behind his moustache.

The tears broke then, flooding her vision as he wrapped his arms around her.

One final hug.

'I love you.' It was barely a whisper in her ear, but she heard it louder than the most bestial roar. Friday closed her eyes for a moment and savoured his warmth. If he was so proud, then she could be also.

She pulled away and her eyes met his. He sensed her intent before she could give word to it. 'No. This is my punishment alone. You cannot join me, little one.' Her reply went unsaid as he kissed her, full on the lips.

Friday savoured the moment of intimacy between them until she felt him move away. Her mind knew it was their last.

The heavy door opened, and for a moment Spigot stood in place, bathed in brilliant sunlight. A soft smile graced his lips, just for her. For their memories together, through times good and bad. For the Guild he loved so much, which now had exiled him. Then it slammed shut, and he was gone.

FANGTOOTH UNLEASHED

Mist gracefully skipped around Midas with the ease which Brisket had come to expect by now, dispossessing the Alchemist of the ball and shoving him away with the tip of the long quarterstaff. By the time Midas had righted himself it was too late, Mist's long legs whipping rainwater from the turf and making precious ground into the opposition half.

'To me, to me!' Brisket's voice floated down the pitch towards her teammate as she propelled herself in the direction of the Alchemist goal.

One arm still raised for the pass, she tilted her head back over her shoulder in time to see Mist's foot slide back and then forward like a pendulum. Taking a deep breath, she forced her head down and pushed harder, ignoring the protests of legs grown dull from exhaustion. Mercury's wheezing breath grew more distant as she opened the gap between her and her marker, his body as tired as hers but lacking the conditioning she'd done day after day.

It had been a long afternoon spent under broken grey skies.

Both teams played a fast-paced and fluid game, but with the earth beneath turned to mud frustration coloured every face. Near enough every time Brisket had punted the ball on she'd spat fire as she'd watched

it roll to a dead stop over the ground instead of continuing on to her teammates. Clumps of soil stuck to her studs made her boots impossibly heavy and cumbersome, adding to her misery.

At least the same was also true for her opponents, although the realisation was of scant satisfaction.

This time it seemed Mist had employed sense enough to aim beyond her position and into the open field in front of the Alchemist goal. It hadn't been a pass as much as kicking into the open, but the play still belonged to the Order alone. Mercury was the only player this far back, Crucible committed to Midas' blunted goal run and doubtless sprinting back with utter futility.

The ball landed with a wet slapping sound just ahead of Brisket, as lifelessly as she had come to expect. Her boot resolved that, a stiff toe punt moving it forward over the ground, still sticking and forcing her to slow pace.

She knew Mercury wouldn't soon catch up, but he might still meet range to hit her with a gout of fire. She had little desire to drop and roll through the mud to douse the flames. Three more paces and she'd take the shot—and hope her sodden feet didn't slice the ball away like last time. Brisket's fears were realised a second later when she felt fiery fingertips reaching for her, an explosion blasting great clods of brown dirt overhead and leaving her ears ringing.

There wasn't time to look back and see if her cape was burning. Her feet took her the final pace and

without thinking she leant back and struck the ball on her right foot, the same practiced kick she had made a hundred times before. It sailed up and away, a fine spray spiralling into the air from the soaked skin.

Brisket found herself without even the energy to punch the air as her shot struck the goal and spun crazily off the edge of the pitch, a dejected Alchemist official scattering away to retrieve it. Her shoulders sagged, and for agonising moments the world shrank to her laboured breathing, with the kiss of the rain on her skin and the roar of the crowd both lost to the echo of her hammering heart. Her hands unconsciously pressed into her flanks and she smiled in spite of herself.

Old habits never truly died.

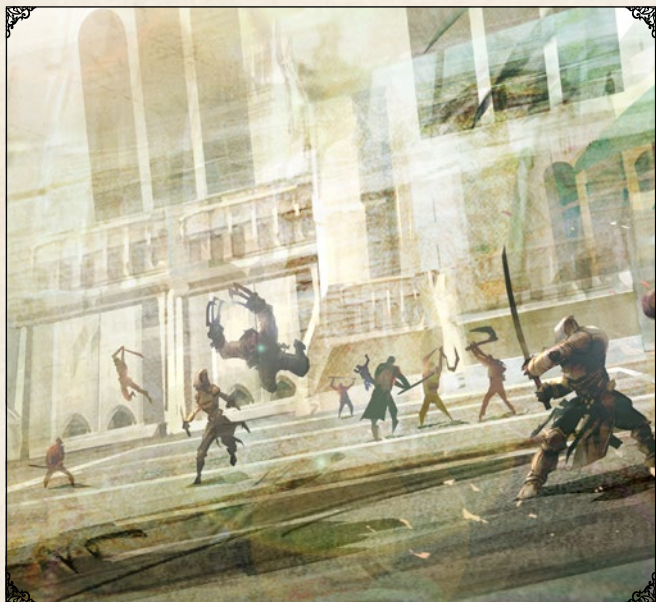
He would never have permitted such weakness in the yard, she knew. With a shaking hand fast becoming steadier she brushed back the wet hair plastered to her forehead and then spat her exhaustion onto the ground where it belonged.

Brisket raised her head just in time to watch the goal kick soar past. It landed in front of Mercury, who turned his back to her and moved away at a steady jog, taking the ball with him. With no chance of catching him Brisket drifted downfield at a more leisurely pace, still not possessing the energy for a sprint back into position. Her goal had stretched out the Order's lead over their opponents, and she could afford to wait her moment.

Mercury stopped just shy of the faint halfway line and fired a surprisingly neat pass across to Venin. The

lad's inexperience showed all too glaringly, his eyes looking only at the incoming pass rather than around him. He'd get away with his lack of awareness this time, Brisket could see. The other Order players were as out of position as she was. Her pace increased as she made for him, trying to close the gap before the Alchemist started moving.

The first touch was a good one, Venin receiving the ball high on his chest and deftly dropping it to his feet as he turned his body downfield.



Venin ignored Midas' shouts for the ball. His captain's run had been clever, but there was no way Venin intended to pass the ball to the egotistical fool. His sense of self-importance had been enabled enough already by the others.

The same went for Midas' lacky, Crucible. Once, there had been a spark of rebellion in her, stoking a sense of longing in him he'd never expected. It slipped away the moment the young woman aligned herself with Midas and the High Council, her outlook dramatically changing. As Crucible pranced down the pitch he no longer saw the headstrong idealist he'd fallen for, just another drone corrupted by the canker. Venin remained destined to be without companion, not that he minded. His whole life had been self-imposed isolation, Naja his only confidant.

He didn't intend to pass the ball out to Crucible any more than he did Midas.

Cursing at the uncertain footing, Venin tried to keep the ball moving along with some difficulty. His studs had thick sods of sludge stuck to them, lending his footsteps an absurdly ponderous gait. A blur at the edge of his vision was accompanied by heavy thuds thundering over the ground, making his head snap in their direction.

Even with his ornate armour dulled by the rain and splattered brown, the Order's towering paladin exuded an imposing air. The subdued light lent a dark cast to his expressionless mark, enough to leave an unconscious

shudder travelling through Venin's body. The Alchemist barely had time to react as the immense figure barrelled forward at full pace, one shoulder down. He managed to mostly dodge the charge before he was roughly shoved away, heels kicking backwards. No longer controlled by his feet, the ball slid away on the slick mud.

Venin kept one eye on it as he watched for his opponent's next move. One hand trailed to his belt, fingers reaching for an acid vial. He tore it from the clip as Benediction barrelled forward once more, the long blade of his sword raised high in the air. Venin ducked to his right, feeling the sharp metal pass close to his scalp as it swept downwards, slicing through his thick bun of hair. With the same movement he pounced away in the direction of the ball, tossing the glass tube behind him with almost casual indifference.

As his boot found the ball once more and tapped it onto firmer ground he heard a low grunt, accompanied by a familiar hiss. His mouth twisted into a vindictive smile. So much for that challenge.

He was invincible.

The goal waited, just out of reach. The lion sat on its haunches nearby, fur flattened by the rain and the cloak draped over its muscular back soaked through. The creature watched him intently, eyes betraying unrestrained malice, doubtless heightened from being forced to endure the miserable weather.

A flash of uncertainty shot through Venin. Earlier in the match he had watched in horrified fascination

as Pride yawned, its open mouth revealing a maw full of impossibly sharp teeth. Up close all hint of wonderment was entirely replaced by fear, his prior ebullience quickly dissipating. The Alchemist could all too easily imagine the agony should they find occasion to tear into his flesh.

'To me, you damn fool!' Midas was still shouting in high Valentian, as though he didn't think the opposition would understand his words. He had an unobstructed view of the goal—the perfect position for a snap shot.

Venin ignored the man and resumed his pace, more cautiously as he approached the beast chained to the goalpost. He knew he had only precious seconds and space to find his shot. He fired a sneer in his captain's direction and enjoyed a howl of frustration as he threw his right leg back, clearly about to take a shot at distance.

His boot struck the ball as he'd intended, clipping it just under the centre of the stained brown leather, where the stitching was most prominent. The momentum spun him on the spot, Venin offering Midas the finger as he rotated in his direction. The other man's face was ashen, a priceless moment stolen from the king of fools.

The ball veered to the right at the last moment, curled by some fateful quirk and missing the goalpost by mere inches.

Venin felt the colour drain from his face to match the drab world around him, the constant drum of feet in the stands louder than ever and accompanied by

loud jeers. Flags in the white and gold of the Order waved as though caught in the most torrid storm.

'...damn you!' He could barely hear Midas' shouting over the raucous noise. His expression turned sheepish, Venin looked across to his captain, wondering whether to try selling a sense of contrition he didn't feel or simply shrug off the inevitable criticism.

He wasn't surprised to see Midas running towards him, admonition doubtless on his mind, but couldn't work out why the older man's face remained so pale. The Chosen One opened his mouth once more and this time Venin heard the words all too clearly, his blood turning cold.

'Run, you bloody fool, run!'

The sound of Fangtooth's mace smashing into Venin's legs was sufficiently sickening to make Brisket blanch, her discomfort deepened by the agonised screaming which followed. Loud enough to be heard over the stands the sound was visceral and raw, torn from the youth's throat. The impact swept the Alchemist's limbs out from underneath and landed him in a crumpled heap he wouldn't be rising from, not from the twisted angle of his legs.

Fangtooth prowled around his fallen adversary, brutal mace cutting a crimson line in the dirt. The hulking figure stopped pacing and looked up as Midas

neared. The mask hid his expression but his body language conveyed threat nonetheless, daring the other man to draw closer.

The message was clear, even to Brisket some way away.

One more step, and you join him.

Midas raised his hands to chest level and backed off, pretending to find more interest in chasing the ball. The crowds on both sides of the pitch let him know their disapproval at his act of cowardice, clearly anticipating a bloody confrontation.

Brisket didn't blame the Alchemist. Another goal was worth more to the Alchemist's Guild than conceding a takeout and would keep up the pressure on the Order. Besides, for all his mangled legs would keep him out of the remainder of the game, Venin would be fine once the apothecaries got to him.

What followed next proved her very wrong.

The Monster retuned his attention to the fallen Alchemist, one mitt lifting the heavy steel head of his mace into the air before driving it downwards into Venin's hand. The youth's screaming reached an even higher pitch still, becoming a hideous shriek as Fangtooth ground the weapon further into the ground, crushing the ruined fingers beneath.

No stranger to violence, Brisket wondered at the sense of such an act. Venin wasn't going anywhere. He was out of the game, and a simple knock to the head would put him out cold. Fangtooth was wasting time better spent marking the downed Alchemist's

teammates.

She changed her run to intercept.

The mace pounded downwards again, this time at the end of a brutal doublehanded swing. It put Brisket in mind of a Farmer hammering a post into the ground for a fence, as relentless as a boulder tumbling downhill. The blow struck Venin across his shins with another violent cracking sound, and the scream suddenly feel silent as his voice blew out.

The Monster repeated the violent action again, and then another time, each strike met by a red explosion. As she neared, Brisket heard the boy's pained sobbing, the sound disturbingly pitiful. Still too far away to try and stop the attack, she looked over to the sidelines, expecting to the see the apothecaries rushing over.

Sure enough, two figures in Physician's Guild whites stood ready, although neither looked prepared to step onto the pitch and aid the stricken player. Fear didn't seem to be the cause of their inactivity. As she looked on a third figure had joined the Sawbones, the newcomer's cowled cream vestment putting her in mind of a priest. Brisket's eyes narrowed as she detected a flash of silver changing hands, then the third man smoothly shaking hands with the apothecaries before fading away into the anonymous shadows.

As if to underscore the arrangement, both Sawbones turned their backs, ignoring Fangtooth's bloody mace as it continued to punish Venin and turn his exposed limbs into a messy pulp.

Brisket's feet slowed to a stop, the game quite forgotten.

This was retaliation, she realised at last. A statement, or retribution of some kind. But what institution had power or influence enough to make this play? Convincing a brute like Fangtooth to indulge his violent tendencies was one thing, but bribing the Physician's Guild was quite another. To her knowledge, none of the politicians dared cross the Physician's Guild. Masters of life and death, they had occupied an insurmountable throne at the top of the tree since their very inception.

Who now dared to sit higher?

Venin's vision had turned to dark mist in the corners, charcoal shadows shot with angry veins of crimson fast rushing in to claim the rest. He could feel his throat was a ragged mass of tortured flesh, as if a terrible fire taken hold until it had burned away his voice and blackened the rest to ash. His ears had stopped hearing anything but a muffled hiss, deafened by the rising intensity of his screaming until they'd yielded in the unequal struggle.

From some distant place he felt some sort of impact. From how the world swung left to right and back he guessed his head must be rolling around. For the briefest moment he felt a lance of pain before it dimmed and floated away, gone to wherever the rest of the agony had fled from before.

He realised, quite suddenly and with a strange sense of disjointed confusion, that he might be dying. Too fatigued to be truly afraid, Venin tried to move and force some semblance of life back into his body but failed, pushed past the point of return. Even reaching into the well of seething resentment which had taken root in his heart yielded no result. It had been dried up by blistering sunbursts, and now that same sun was fast falling and leaving him to darkness.

Unbidden, the memory of the Lord Chamberlain drifted into his thoughts. Once more Venin saw yellow teeth peering out from behind fatty jowls, distorted to even greater proportions than they had been in the flesh. The smile playing over their surface was twisted and warped: impossibly broad, brazen, and taunting.

The sinking feeling which had accompanied the Moneylender's grin returned.

Failure. He would die a failure.

Somehow the thought wasn't as vivid or terrifying as it should have been or even as it had been previously. His whole body was numb, his mind fast succumbing to a similar affliction.

Another impact rocked him and sent the world tumbling away, his sight growing blurry and covered in scarlet. In the little light remaining an angel vested in Solthecian robes appeared, stepping out of the gloom.

He thought he recognised the figure for a fleeting moment, but it passed.

Venin blinked, and his eyes never reopened. The

lids felt impossibly heavy, sticky blood binding them together. Something cold and sharp rested hard against his throat, pressing into his skin in a blossom of warm liquid.

The world shrank to that one sensation, a thin line around which the whole world revolved. It was mercifully clean and pure.

His breath came in shallow whispers, pushing against the blade.

Just a thin line against his skin.

Just a thin line against his skin.

Just a thin line—

— THE DEVIL'S WORK —

Tapper had always kept a safe room at the Drunken Seamstress, a place where any of his family could lay their head in times of hardship or distress. Situated at the highest point of the tavern, atop a narrow flight of steps leading ever upwards from the next-highest floor, it had seldom seen cause to be used. Few knew of its existence, and most of those had long forgotten.

Friday did not count herself amongst them. In her earlier years she'd lived here for months at a time, preferring the soft bed to one of hard stone or wet soil, especially one shared by an outlaw she'd grown tired of. It had become as much a home as any other to the orphaned girl—more, even. The isolation added to the sense that this place was somehow hers and hers alone. Whenever Friday wanted to be alone with her thoughts, her feet never failed to bring her here.

Pale moonlight shone through the windowpane to bathe the lonely room in a cold hue, Friday painted in ethereal silver. Sitting on the edge of the wide cot with both legs pulled close to her body, she'd wrapped her slender arms tightly around them and tucked her head into her knees. Other than a light tremor from shallow breathing, she hadn't moved for hours, her mind mired in thick emotive fog.

Distress seemed to colour everything. Each time she tried to clear her head, the image of Spigot standing in the light swam into focus, unbidden and quite

unwelcome. It brought a hundred other emotions and memories with it each time. Tapper's gravelly voice, reluctantly handing down judgement. The lines around the Grand Brewer's eyes softening, his stern gaze just as tragic and remorseful as they had been for poor Amber weeks before.

Esters' triumphant grin above all, tainting everything.

Friday hated being so useless. She'd hidden herself up here every night since Spigot's exile, weeping like an old maid at a funeral until sleep eventually claimed her. No-one seemed surprised. She guessed they all had their own grief to overcome in their own ways. Spigot had been a Brewer for years. He'd been a pillar of the Grand Brewer's command, as much Tapper's right-hand man and confidant as Stave or Hooper.

On the pitch, he'd defined any team he'd played in, even during the dark times. She'd heard plenty of talk amongst pundits about certain players being talismanic for their team's hopes, proud veterans the others looked to in times of hardship.

Spigot had been that icon for the Brewer's Guild.

The Grand Brewer had been the only one to climb the winding steps to the room, come to try and comfort her each time. For time unknown he'd simply sat with her, one comforting arm draped around her shoulders. They hadn't spoken. He'd likely known how close Friday and Spigot had become long before that fateful day, she realised. Very little ever passed his attention. Somehow, his presence was a mark of

approval, recognition of something another might have called foolish or taboo.

Too late she realised they had never needed to hide their relationship, at least.

Too late. So much time wasted.

In one hand she clenched Spigot's beret in a white-knuckled fist, the grip channelled from a great reservoir of hatred building within. The only time her mind was free to race was when she indulged it, embracing dark thoughts that typically ended with her knives embedded in Stoker's throat, carving her wrath into his skin.

It was likely for the best the brutish thug had kept away from the Drunken Seamstress these last weeks. Friday wasn't sure she'd have stopped herself from giving in to such violent impulses. She doubted many would have stopped her, either, not even on Esters' side of the line. The Eisnoran thug's actions hadn't been met with any more forgiveness than Spigot's supposed betrayal. Never a popular figure, he had now earned himself the ire of an entire Guild.

He'd inflicted a diseased wound which would take years to heal—if it could heal at all.

A shredded piece of blood-stained kutte lay on the long table, ends torn and frayed. In the low light it was a sinister inversion of Brewer pride and an unmistakably bad omen. Wrapped about a heavy disc,

it had been launched through one of the ancient pub windows earlier this evening, crashing to the floor in a shower of glass and bad intentions.

The identity of the thug who'd thrown it had been swallowed by the night. By the time the first patrons made it outside, hurried footsteps had already faded into echo, and no amount of cursing would return them once more. Some speculated that it had been the same scum who'd nailed the cat to the door, a gang Esters still knew little about despite her best efforts.

That in itself wasn't surprising. Since first blood had been drawn it seemed the entire undercity threatened to climb out of the rancid depths and confront them.

It was far from the first occasion one tyrant or another had managed to unite the disparate tribes lurking in the darkness. Esters was able to recall at least three such individuals from memory alone, along with the miserable gangs they formed. Each had been put down mercilessly by the Brewer's Guild. The undercity wretches were desperate and hungry but had no taste for seeing their own blood spilled. Backstabbing and infighting usually broke their alliances even before the leaders were captured and strung up.

This time around was of far more concern. She had never known boldness like this. It spoke of a newfound confidence and organisation never before encountered from the Vermin below.

Esters carefully unfolded the bloody strip of cloth, grimacing as her fingertips were slowly stained dull

red. The object within was heavy and metallic, hard to the touch with ridges pronounced enough to be felt through the thick weave. She knew what it would be, even before the final fold of the grisly fabric was lifted. Even so, her brow creased and her eyes narrowed at the sight of the Brewer medallion. It was an older piece, brass rather than the bright steel or dull iron worn by a younger member.

Only a handful of individuals still within the Guild wore such heirlooms. Tapper had one, and Stave. Decimate carried the surprisingly pristine emblem she had produced upon her return, long thought lost in the violent coup which had ousted her. Esters herself wore a hard iron disc, having given her old family medal to Mash on the eve of their wedding as a token of their union.

Mash.

Cheeks flushed, Esters tore the aged metal from the cloth and strode to the closest candle. The metal glowed amber in the soft light, the colour rich and warm. Trembling fingers carefully revolved the disc around in her hands, noting every scratch and burr. Each seemed painfully familiar.

The Matriarch took a deep breath and turned it over.

There, stamped into the back where she'd known it would be, was her house's crest. For a moment all she could do was fight a rising bile which had taken root in her belly and was forcing itself up into her throat. In her chest her heart hammered away, a great pressure building

up as she became light-headed. Through it all she stared at the disc, a metalwork kraken glaring back accusingly.

The anger took hold as suddenly as a bright flare of lightning from the skies above. Ferocious and inarticulate, Esters' voice tore into a scream as she smashed the candle aside and hurled the badge away from her. Unthinkingly, she wiped eyes which had become wet at the edges, leaving ruddy streaks from fingers stained with blood from Mash's kutte.

Before, she had known these wretches would pay with their blood for the affronts they visited upon the Brewers. Now she vowed to put every ramshackle slum and hovel to the torch until her beloved was returned.

Hooper knew each of the streets leading to the Drunken Seamstress like the back of his hand, and the same was true for most of the alleys leading from them. He bloody well ought to. He'd walked them every day of his life, ever since he was a kid like PintPot. The lad strolled alongside him now, the pair of them on their way back from chasing down a cutpurse who had been causing grief for the wrong people.

The younger man was boasting loudly, as usual, his voice carelessly echoing over the hard pavement. PintPot's brash nature and crass sense of humour irritated most people, but Hooper didn't usually count himself amongst their number. He was fond of the lad.

PintPot reminded Hooper of how he'd been in younger years, before his stones had dropped: all mouth and stories, ready to fight anyone or anything.

This evening, however, Hooper found PintPot's excited drawl irritating. He was tired and nursing a headache, and sweat tickled his back from the thrice-damned humidity hanging in the air. The younger man was like a little dog, yipping and snarling at anything it saw.

Hooper resisted the urge to kick him.

Other thoughts troubled his mind also, an all-too-rare occurrence for a man who didn't care for much beyond the moment. To start with, he still didn't know how to feel about crossing the floor. The Grand Brewer was a good, honest man. Hooper had sat on his right as vice captain for years, always trusting Tapper's judgement at every turn. In one moment of heated anger, he'd turned his back on all of that.

He'd asked himself why many times since then.

It wasn't just the dead cat, he knew. Scum had just been the final thing to push him over the edge; the rest had been building up for months. Young Amber being cast out and the Grand Brewer not stepping up to stop it. His indecision during the Butcher strife the previous summer, when Brisket had all but handed the Brewers the reigns, only for Tapper to sit on the sidelines watching. The Butchers were powerful and established. It didn't take a Scholar to see how that bond could have benefitted them, especially now.

There were plenty of other examples. For nigh

on a year now, the Guv had allowed himself to be outmanoeuvred by Esters time and time again. To cap it all off, he'd diluted the Guild by not only letting the Exile back in but embracing her as though blood had never passed between their houses.

Despite all of that, though, it still didn't sit right to have abandoned the Grand Brewer.

Hooper didn't care one way or the other about Esters. She was playing the game, trying to edge out her rival. That was nothing new. The Guild was built around such challenges, built around leaders strong enough to fight them off or wise enough to step down when their time was past. Perhaps, Hooper conceded, some part of him thought Tapper still had legs. He caught himself sighing in frustration. For weeks, he'd led himself around in circles like this, and it had gotten him nowhere.

Thinking about the Vermin made it even worse.

During the leadership struggle, the underworld had risen a head far uglier than Hooper had ever before seen. Beady eyes with malicious intent seemed to stare from every shadow and wait at the end of each street corner. Even the pickpocket they'd just put in his place had dared a filthy look as the Brewers left. Vermin had never before dared to strike against the Brewers before, always preferring to skulk in the shadows like cowards.

Now it seemed inevitable.

Every day the streets emptied the moment night fell, stripped of people concerned for their own welfare.

Faith in the Brewers had fled with Scum's lifeblood, wasted like spilt beer. The shift in power sat poorly with him. On nights like this he paced, one hand firmly clenched around the handpiece of his maul, body as tense as the air around him. Every movement, real and imagined, caught his attention.

'...and then I bottled the bastard. Should have seen it—the claret went off like a broken tap!'

Hooper looked sideways at his companion. PintPot was still mouthing off about some conquest or another, completely oblivious to the apparent hostility of their surroundings. 'Shut it, lad. Just try keeping your jaw closed for a change, eh?'

For a second, Hooper thought PintPot might slug him, but then the smaller man apparently thought better of it and looked away. He at least had the decency to offer a halfway sheepish look.

They rounded a corner, and up ahead the faint silhouette of the Drunken Seamstress appeared, a bright light behind the windows.

Friday raised her head from the pillow, the cloth damp from yet another night where she'd cried herself to sleep. She cursed herself for being so damned stupid. Snivelling achieved nothing, and it certainly wouldn't be what Spigot would want. The moon was still overhead, light spilling into the room and painting her

like a ghost. Had her mind not been so preoccupied, she might have laughed at that idea. Some haunt she'd offer, too busy wailing about her lost love.

Her thoughts were distracted by the faint scent of charcoal, gritty and dry. Undoubtedly what had stirred her, it wafted into the room from a gap under the door, a slight breeze breaking the stillness and causing her to sneeze.

Friday sat up properly and reached for her discarded boots, drowsy fingers pulling the laces taut with a little difficulty. Sliding off the cot, she padded over to the door and opened it a fraction further. The smell was much stronger in the corridor, rising upwards over the stairs. Darkness ruled at the top of the staircase, but she fancied the air on the landing below had a hint of smoke to it, muddying the candlelight.

Suddenly alert and with her heart racing in growing apprehension, Friday crept downwards. With each step the temperature increased. By the time she reached the landing she felt a layer of sweat across her head and shoulder blades. Smoke eddied near the ceiling, the thicker scent to blame for a cough which wormed its way into her lungs before spluttering outwards again. Not waiting for the air to grow worse Friday leapt around the next corner and towards the next staircase. A heavy door blocked her path, a faint crackling sound audible behind it.

She nearly wrenched the aged door from its hinges.

Hot, dark grey clouds immediately billowed into

the corridor, enveloping Friday and forcing her to grasp the doorframe as dizziness threatened to send her falling. Below, a dull amber glow crept upwards through the gloom. Fighting the urge to retreat, Friday pulled part of her tunic over her mouth and hurriedly descended, knowing she didn't have much time.

The Drunken Seamstress was ablaze.

The last few steps nearly proved to be too much of a challenge for her uncertain feet, but raw panic kept her moving. Oppressive flames surrounded her, licking at the plentiful aged and dry wood. It was heaviest over by the bar, where the counter had become a blackened inferno which reached for the ceiling and blistered the paint covering wattle-and-daub walls. Elsewhere the fire had yet to burn as high, instead expanding outwards over the floorboards and carpet.

Friday looked around frantically, trying to make out if anyone else was trapped with her. Her heart sank as she immediately saw a large shape lying slumped over a table in the closest corner, beyond a sheet of dancing flame which denied her a way past.

'Hey! You there! Can you hear me?!' She shouted as loud as she could, but her voice was lost amid the conflagration. She opened her mouth to shout again but phlegm plugged her lungs, forcing her to hack it onto the floor in a fit of abrasive coughing.

By the time she recovered, the figure was out of sight, consumed by the fire.

Something heavy barged into her flank and Friday

recoiled until she saw it was Quaff, fur darkened by soot and his eyes rolling in terror. She knew the feeling. The massive dog whimpered and shook.

‘Let’s get out of here, boy!’ She grasped his collar and yanked him as hard as she could, fear lending her strength she’d never known. She could barely make out the doorway on the other side of the room. Surrounded by fire dripping from the walls and slowly climbing over the oak frame, it wasn’t much of a choice—but it was also the only one they had.

Hurriedly picking out a route through the burning building, Friday was about to lead Quaff towards the threshold when a voice turned her head in the direction of the inner chambers. Decimate staggered towards her through the smoke, dragging an unconscious Esters with her, one of the Matriarch’s heavy arms thrown over the Exile’s narrow shoulders. Quaff tore away from Friday, leaping towards the two women.

‘Help me, blast you!’ Decimate was wiry and strong, but not even her prodigious stamina could last in air fast becoming unbreathable. Her knees were on the cusp of buckling.

Dodging around clumps of flames, Friday hastened over to take up Esters on the other side. With her head next to the Matriarch’s, she could just make out the other woman muttering to herself under her breath in delirium. Esters was alive, but for the time being she was very much dead weight.

A massive crash sounded behind them as the ceiling

in the inner chambers collapsed, bringing half of the doorframe with it. A huge wall of burning debris and ash followed, spilling towards them. Quaff yelped and almost tripped Decimate, who kicked him out of the way with a curse in her native Erskirii.

'We're going to die in here!' The tunic fabric covering her mouth had slipped down, and her words were clear. In some part of her panicked mind, Friday knew she'd only spoken in hopes that Decimate would argue with her. When she saw the grim agreement in her teammate's eyes, sadness flooded in to mix with the animal fright searing its way through her body.

'Aye.' The Exile's voice was flat and without emotion, as though she'd already come to terms with the truth.

Glass shattered somewhere, and the roaring flames intensified still further. Friday felt her skin slowly being cooked, burned by the impossible heat. A terrified Quaff was barking and knocking into her legs. Somewhere in the distance another crashing sound broke through the conflagration, like wood collapsing inwards.

Lightheaded, Friday felt her limbs become heavy and dull, useless lumps of meat which didn't feel like they belonged to anyone anymore. She stumbled and fell to one knee, dimly aware of Esters slamming into the floor beside her.

Her eyes closed.

Spigot's face swam into view, as it always did.

I love you.

She tried to return the words, but others were shouting nearby, drowning out the raspy whisper that was all she could manage. Out of nowhere a strong pair of arms hoisted her up and threw her over a thick shoulder, and then the fiery air was whistling around her as she flew towards the door, limp as a child's ragdoll.

Suddenly she felt fresh air once again, and the heat was mercifully absent. Head spinning, Friday fought to stay conscious. She had the vague sensation of being unceremoniously dumped on the ground and watching the dim shape of her saviour's boots leading away. Almost by instinct she rolled on her side to puke her guts up.

For several urgent minutes, the world was the dirty piece of stone in front of her eyes, and even that was identified more from its coolness against her cheek than by seeing it. A blurry ball of orange light swam somewhere beyond her focus, but she forced herself up onto one elbow. As her vision cleared and sound slowly drifted back to her senses, the surrounding voices steadily became louder, their swearing more distinct.

Someone dropped down next to her, landing heavily. Friday recognised the Exile, her dark kutte a stark contrast to her light tan.

'D-Decimate?'

The other woman had lost her mask. She wiped eyes turned wet and swollen, her lips pursed in anger. Somehow, Friday didn't think the tears were from sorrow.

'What happened?'

Decimate paused before answering. 'They pulled out Esters. Don't know if she'll make it. Svantelit, the woman is strong, but she must have swallowed a bellyful of ash even before I got to her.'

Friday didn't know how to reply. Her mouth moved, trying to form words and failing. Just as she found something, howling interrupted her, turning her head in a new direction. The sound was awful, a single keening, mournful note, repeated over and over.

She found her feet unsteadily.

Five paces away, Quaff sat on his haunches by a bulky, unmoving figure, their identity held fast in the darkness. Trying not to trip and fall, Friday stumbled towards the body, panic rising.

Hooper appeared in her path, torso bared, arms and chest covered in soot, scrapes, and angry welts. His face was mournful, eyes full of hurt and sorrow she'd never before seen him wear.

'Best not look, eh, lass?' He sounded defeated. Friday ignored him and pushed past, feet catching on each other. A moment later she was next to Quaff, the mascot now whining miserably.

Her eyes grew wide and she fell to her knees, suddenly overcome.

Mash stared back, dead eyes unblinking and blood staining every inch of him. His body was covered in layers of vicious cuts and dark bruises, his clothes torn and ruined. It looked like he'd been thrashed to within an inch of his life before he expired. Yet an even more

horrific indignity had been visited upon his body after his death. His mouth had been mutilated, cut at the edges and forced into a yawning chasm.

A dead rat was stuffed inside, its brown and grey fur stained crimson.

There was no mistaking the message. It was a gloating statement of dominance, arrogant and callous.

At last the Brewers knew their foe—just as they were on the cusp of losing the war.



— SHADOWS FALL —

The chanting in the crowd was a deafening, rolling sermon which never seemed to cease, the end of one chant bleeding into another. Priests in bright white prowled the stands and stalls, robes glowing brightly in the brilliant sun, arms aloft in supplication and voices raised over the noise to spill bitter condemnation. They chose only the darkest sections of Soltheccian scripture for their audience, their hateful words bursting violently into being. Around each iconoclast the people swayed like grass in the wind, blank-eyed puppets with their strings pulled taut.

Brisket shook her head. Not all Order spectators were cut from this bolt of cloth, but as the team had progressed through the Sovereign States Championship she had seen the less fanatical supporters pushed out, until the friendly stands seldom held a friendly face, only those baying for blood.

The Betrayer was under no illusions as to the nature of the company she kept.

She wouldn't soon forget the sight of Venin's broken body in the centre of the pitch, puddles of rainwater stained crimson by his blood. Along with it was the grisly sight of Grace's knife slicing through the lad's neck, a bright streak of arterial red arcing up into the air.

The Saint.

Never had Brisket felt more animosity towards another individual, not even the Flashing Blade. Fillet at

least had believed her actions were for the betterment of her teammates and her Guild, a respectable goal unfortunately directly opposed to Brisket's allegiance to the Master Butcher. Grace only wanted to see the world purged. Dispassionate eyes betrayed a heart devoid of goodness when Brisket confronted her about Venin's death. The Alchemist's life was almost incidental, blinked away in an instant and with the same thought as a horse swatting a fly with its tail.

Grace's attitude wasn't the only thing which rankled.

The air surrounding the game had become far more violent over the last months, matching the raised sense of hostility and suspicion amongst the Guilds themselves. Some greater agenda was still being played out, and Brisket couldn't shake the feeling she and her teammates were at the centre of it.

She wished the others in her side weren't so indifferent or quick to embrace the darkness. She alone in the Order side seemed to want to hold back the tide. As she stole a glance at Honour marshalling her team from the sidelines, Brisket found herself wishing her path had taken a different turn, one mirroring that of the First Lady. Honour was loved by all. Her name and deed were set to echo throughout history long after her days were past.

Brisket was a footnote. Nothing more. A survivor too stubborn to relent, left fighting for every day since she should have fallen.

On the opposite side of the pitch, the Farmer

supporters roared their defiance at the fanatics. There was no end of bad blood between the two groups, most Farmer's Guild spectators also being devout Solthecians. The Order had poached hundreds of their number since debuting Brisket's team, pundits deserting their team to stand with the opposition. Champions they might be, but the Farmers stands were patchy with gaps.

Today the rivals at last met. The animosity felt on both sides was enough to stand up the hair on the back of the neck.

Brisket noted the empty spaces in the opposition stands had been filled for this game, although not by figures in the orange and yellow of the Farmer's Guild. Spectators in Alchemist green instead stood in a great group at one end of the pitch, several more interspersed into the sea of Farmer colours. Seeing such secular and progressive people standing shoulder-to-shoulder with staunch traditionalists was a strange sight, one which left Brisket nervous. Venin's death had been a brutal and callous act. Sooner or later, retribution was no doubt due.

She only hoped it was not today.

The radiant sun had finally reached its zenith, an open field of blue still absent of clouds. The world below was bleached dry, the restless air shimmering

in the heat and as unlike the drab mire of Brisket's previous game as could be.

Grange's clumsy pass spun away from Bushel's run and Brisket intercepted, jumping to catch it on her chest. A chorus of angry shouting echoed over the pitch from the opposition stands, and various projectiles launched like a broadside from a fighting ship. They fell short of where she landed but pelted Mist, who staggered and fell to the pitch in a tangle of robes.

Brisket kept the ball close as she darted across the ground, quickly snapping a pass to Fangtooth and dodging away as Windle aped clumsily towards her, long arms windmilling. The Monster didn't react in the slightest to her play; instead the ball struck him in the leg and ricocheted away crazily into open ground, rolling back towards Windle as it came to a stop.

She swore and reversed direction, feet moving faster as she broke into a sprint. Fangtooth shuffled along with her in an awkward run, headed towards the incensed Farmer in the centre of the pitch.

He was a frightening individual. Since he had been reborn by his newfound faith, memory of the ambling and oftentimes confused figure had been entirely driven away and replaced by the image of a fanatical zealot. The chains binding him had been cut away and the impurities burned from his body, and now only the flames of repressed rage remained, since fanned into violent bloodlust. A bloodcurdling scream sounded from under his mask as he charged into the fray, and

Brisket felt an uneasy shudder grasp at her spine. She had known berserkers before in Boar and knew to be wary. When their blood was up, violent men lashed out at anything within range, friend or foe.

A quick glance read the game enough to see none of the other Farmers were close enough to steal the ball, and she slowed, taking deep breaths into aching lungs.

Let the pair of them fight. She could wait for the opportune moment.

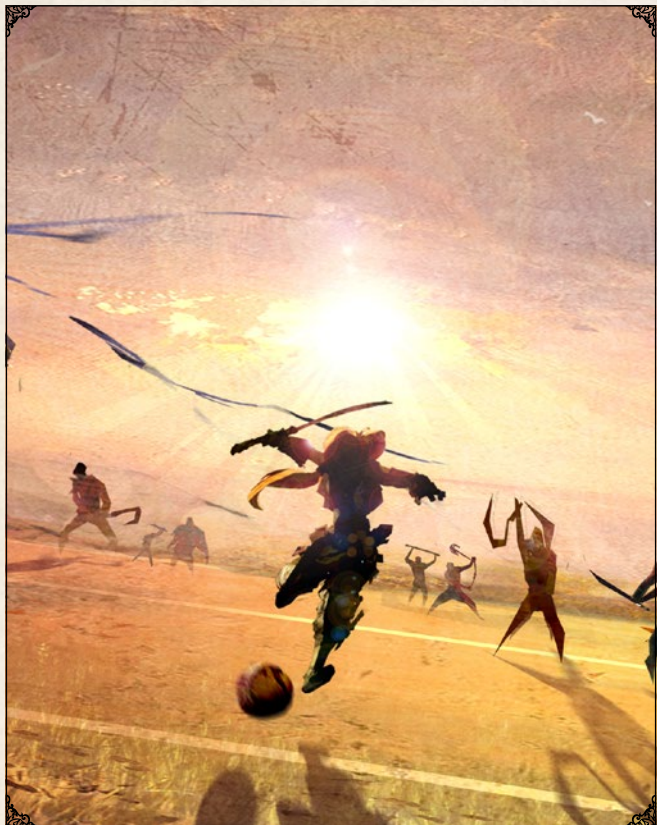
Heavy footsteps threw up great goutts of dust and left the earth shaking as the titans neared each other. Even the Order stands seemed to hold their breath for the seconds leading up to the impact, the last words of their droning hymn finally waning away on the wind. A strange sense of foreboding flashed across Brisket's mind in the eerie quiet, little more than a nagging doubt at the edge of her mind quickly dispelled a moment later.

Fangtooth and Windle crashed together, and the crowd on both sides of the pitch broke into a deafening howl of approval.

The Monster led with a massive swipe of his heavy mace, a wide crescent of murderous intent headed straight for his opponent's skull. Windle knew better than to try and block, ducking instead and wrapping a huge arm around Fangtooth to drag the Order thug off balance.

He was thwarted by the momentum of his opponent, whose body pivoted and accidentally shook Windle

free. The Farmer tumbled head over heels onto the cracked mud but regained his footing quickly and launched himself forward with an unexpected burst of speed. Fangtooth had little chance to block the attack before Windle's hay hooks raked the rough scar tissue covering his exposed arm, leaving bright streaks of red.



If the bigger man cared he didn't show it, grunting as the mace swung around once more. Windle stopped the attack dead by rearing back a fist and punching Fangtooth's mask as hard as he could, denting the metal. His opponent staggered backwards as the spectators surged, cheering louder and frantically waving their pennants.

The fight still had yet to take them too far from the ball, leaving Brisket circling in frustration, waiting for her window.

Sharp metal points glinted in the sun as the claws swept down once more, this time digging much deeper into Fangtooth's skin before being torn out once more, dulled by crimson. Windle let loose a throaty bellow and kicked the Monster's knee out from under him before closing in as his opponent dropped his mace and fell to one knee. A meaty fist lashed out, hooks scratching through Fangtooth's scalp as the mask dented again.

All around her Brisket could feel eyes staring, the air thick with suspense. The crowd was louder than ever, the din punctuated by the relentless drum of stamping feet. Something had changed. It was more akin to being in the Trial than a match of Guild Ball.

Fingers clasped together, Windle hoisted both fists up in the air before bringing them down together. The blow dashed the mask from Fangtooth's head, revealing a horrific and bloody visage, enough to unsettle the stomach. There was a handful of gasps from the stands, but most revelled in the violence,

their voices coming together in a bestial roar.

Their fury was matched by the Farmer, who repeated the action. A second before he struck a huge forearm caught the blow and batted it away.

Lurking under a stream of blood, partially hidden by horrific welts and scar tissue, a mouthful of cracked and missing teeth formed into a sadistic grin as the Monster rose back to his feet. His sudden revival further empowered the Order crowd, priests whipping the spectators into a frenzy. Reeling from the heavy-handed parry, Windle staggered a few steps to the side, only able to watch as bloody fingers closed once more about the grip of the immense mace.

Brisket saw her chance as Fangtooth resumed his advance on the Farmer, darting out wide to gather the ball. She reached it just as the mace smashed the Farmer from his feet and pounded him into the dirt. He tried to regain his feet, only to be knocked flat on his back again, yelping as the punishing blow clearly dislodged a tooth and left the side of his face bloody. A kick came a moment later, sending one hook tumbling across the dry grass.

The Farmer crowd had stopped cheering. It was happening again.

They weren't alone in the realisation. Blood draining from her face, Brisket looked helplessly to the sidelines, hoping to see the apothecaries already making their way across the pitch. She was relieved to see them running until she realised they were moving in the opposite direction of the confrontation.

For a moment confused reigned until she saw frantic figures climbing the pens separating the crowds from the pitch, uncaring of the spiteful barbs awaiting them at the top. Her eyes widened as she took in the adjacent row, where an immense tide of bodies rammed repeatedly into the aged iron grille, making it rattle with each impact.

Men and women from the Watch busied themselves along the sidelines, shouting ineffective warnings to the spectators, some going so far as to strike the metal bars with truncheons. As Brisket watched, horrified, one stick was grabbed by a set of hands in the crowd, and the Lawkeeper was pulled into the bars, his own weapon lashing back out at him. The man fell to the ground with a bloody face just as canisters and vials thrown by figures in Alchemist green began to explode, great clouds of billowing smoke rolling across the pitch and obscuring Brisket's field of vision.

Knots of brawling spectators surrounded them on all sides, the men and women in the Order stands having proved themselves just as willing to invade the pitch as those from the Farmer stalls. With so little wind the smoke refused to dissipate, adding to the chaos. Screaming voices echoed through the gloom, disconnected and directionless. Over it all a crashing sound announced the collapse of another section of fencing in the distance.

Brisket remained close to Fangtooth, the hulking brute revelling in the chaos. The Monster strode across the pitch with impunity, a trail of broken bodies left in his wake where the mob had attempted to drag their nemesis down. Even now, a wall of angry men formed in front of the two Order players, each clutching either a rusty shank or a truncheon stolen from a fallen Lawkeeper.

Fangtooth laughed at them, the sound nothing more than an ugly rasp.

With an angry scream they came at him. As her teammate's face slipped into a sneer and he began to swing his mace around in wide sweeps, Brisket ducked away and sprinted off to her right. Glancing over her shoulder she was glad to see just one pair of thugs following her, the only two sensible enough not to join their fellows in the suicidal charge. She spun on her heel and addressed the lead figure, long knife in her hand held out and pointed at the shaven-headed youth like a duellist.

'Are you so stupid to test me? I have gutted men and women for less offense!' Her words were snarled, her blood running hot from raw adrenalin and fear. She was confident one opponent would present no challenge.

Two was another matter entirely, which was why she knew to end this in a hurry.

She leapt forward without waiting for a response, her voice raised in an old Butcher war cry she hoped might break their nerve. The lead figure nervously stood his

ground, but behind him the other man turned craven and bolted into the mist.

Her first slash cut directly across his body, forcing him to try a clumsy dive out of her way. His reaction was too late for him to completely escape the wicked steel, and the blade drew a deep stripe across his arm. Mewling like a child, the man staggered away from her and into the fog, joining his comrade. Brisket allowed herself a satisfied smirk and kept going. Soon enough Watch reinforcements must arrive, but until then, her best chance for survival was to reach the dugouts.

Assuming, of course, they hadn't been overrun.

Another three paces and her luck ran dry: the second man waited for her with three others alongside. He grinned stupidly, his resolve apparently bolstered by numbers. In his stubby fingers he wielded the neck of a broken bottle, the jagged glass vicious enough to match his expression. Wearing spiteful leers, the thugs began to step out in a wide circle, keeping Brisket in the middle.

She decided not to let the thugs take any more advantage than they already had. Knife slicing through the air threateningly, she tried the same trick as before, charging the man directly in front of her. Built strong with wide shoulders, he obviously felt far more confident than her previous assailants, even coming at Brisket in response. She didn't slow her pace; his action merely meant she would feint away and kick his knee out. With her next step she oversold the build-up

to a lunge, noting his eyes flicker towards her blade.

Something hard hit her in the back of the head before she could continue the movement, flooring her. Through her daze she kicked at the arms which tried to grab her, her fingers scrabbling to find the hilt of her weapon. She heard a grunt as one boot connected with something solid, but then a rough hand belted stars back across her vision.

‘Union bitch!’

‘Order, my arse. This one’s a Butcher brat.’

The voices floated close by, tones barbed and cruel. If her wits could have fought their way to the surface, she might have been afraid of what might come next. Rough hands held her arms and legs fast, and dizziness robbed her strength.

‘Well, I don’t care what you are. You’ll bleed like a stuck pig all the same!’ Brisket could feel breath on her skin, reeking of sour mash and rotten vegetables.

Rattling armour and a heavy crunch stole the thug’s next words. Suddenly the pressure from her arms and legs was released and she fell roughly to the dirt. Her head cleared in time to see her attackers retreating, leaving one of their number in a crumpled heap. A mounted Watchman sat astride his steed nearby, wheeling back around to her.

The end of his polearm was covered in blood.

Her saviour apparently recognised her as a player, and he reached down to haul her back onto unsteady feet. ‘Damned scum.’ He spat in the direction of the

downed man before turning to her. 'Are you injured?'

Brisket shook her head, still collecting her senses.

'You still don't look so good. Step up here, and I'll get you out to safety.'

Brisket nodded wearily, shaking the rest of the cobwebs away. One foot gingerly found an empty stirrup and she vaulted behind the rider.

From her elevated position she could see the dense clouds were at last beginning to thin out, revealing a scene which more closely resembled a battleground than a Guild Ball pitch. Pockets of fighting remained, with white-robed Order supporters pitched against Farmers in yellow and orange, the colours of both sides now stained with blood.

Judging from the trail of dented armour and bloodstains leading back towards the sidelines, the Lawkeepers appeared to have been beaten back once, but reinforcements were now arriving. As Brisket watched, a unit of mounted Watchmen charged into the pitch from one flank, chasing down a group of Order supporters. The crowds dispersed almost immediately before the disciplined cavalry, though flailing hooves caught one or two unable to escape the press of bodies quickly enough. The downed figures remained prone on the grass, even when a line of Watch on foot caught up, iron shackles in hand.

The rider kicked his own mount in their direction. Most had the good sense to flee before an animal easily twice their size, and those foolish enough to deny their

progress were soon bludgeoned by the Watchman's polearm or kicked by vicious, iron-clad hoof.

Before long they reached a thin line of advancing Lawkeepers in dark blue. As the horse slowed to a trot, Brisket offered her thanks and dropped to her feet, saluting the Watchman as he wheeled his mount and sped back into the fray. A couple of the Lawkeepers gave her dirty looks, but they parted to allow her through nonetheless, closing their ranks seamlessly behind her.

Suddenly Brisket was safe again, and she almost dropped to her knees, relief and tension all draining from her body at once. Now the feeling was upon her, she realised she'd been threatened the moment she stepped out of the dugout at the start of the game. It was a terrible sign of how severely the violence had escalated.

The Order had earned this day of lawlessness by themselves. The death of Venin in their previous game had crossed a forbidden line, one never trespassed upon without great consequence. She almost didn't recognise the game she'd grown up playing when they took to the pitch, despite her best efforts to keep them honest.

This was something quite different.

The sun had begun to fall from the sky by the time control was finally reclaimed, the remaining rioters cast in an umber shade as the Lawkeepers led them away. Unruly crowds absent, quietude descended and

left Brisket feeling utterly disconnected to the world around her, the scene so surreal compared to anything she'd seen before.

The Betrayer took a deep breath and looked around in silence.

The stretch of ground where she stood had been the Farmer sidelines during the game, where she'd seen the first fence fall. The iron grille rested as a mangled ruin a few feet away, rusted metal bent and split. Nearby several prone figures lay on the ground, unmoving. Most wore the dark blue of the Watch, a handful yellow or orange. Brisket knew with certainty they were corpses. The match apothecaries had already passed through administering aid where they could. All that remained now was to take the bodies away for the Spooks to perform their grim duties.

Her eyes found one victim wearing the cream and blue of the Order, and Brisket found herself instinctively padding toward them. Whoever it was had clearly been the target of the Alchemist supporters, judging from torn scraps of green discarded nearby.

A sinking feeling took hold as she approached close enough to spot a familiar hood. She slowed, her steps suddenly weary. The final paces seemed to take an age, the strife of the whole day coming to rest in her limbs. When eventually she arrived, it was all she could do to kneel by the body sadly.

Mist lay in a curled foetal ball, his lifeless body kicked and crushed by a horde of trampling boots after being

brought down. Rich scarlet blossomed over Order white around the Shadow's abdomen, pooling on the soil beneath. Given how much of it there was, Brisket wasn't surprised to find a hilt protruding from within the robes, the weapon piercing through the binding around the chest and belly. Reaching delicately around a metal cross hanging from a thin chain around her teammate's neck, she gave the hilt a sharp tug and pulled it free, revealing a crude metal shiv.

Brisket sighed. Weapons like this were as popular with outlaws and mercenaries for their anonymity as much as for their lethality. She tossed the blade away. It wouldn't tell her any secrets.

A sense of emptiness threatened to take hold, sorrow creeping around the edges of her thoughts. She didn't particularly care for any of her teammates, and she certainly held little allegiance to the Order. Her servitude here was only to buy the life of the Master Butcher, one of the few people she still cared anything for.

Mist had been a mercenary caught up in the machinations of the Solthecian church, just like her. But for all they hadn't shared many words, their partnership on the pitch had begun to breed a confidence and familiarity she now realised.

The loss cut far deeper than she could possibly have suspected it would.

Mist's eyes had closed to agony in the end, Brisket saw. Her gaze landed upon the cross she'd navigated around a moment ago, spotted with blood. She didn't

know whether Mist truly believed in Solthecius but felt it her duty to open the striker's eyes regardless. Mist's spirit deserved to greet the August Lord as any of the faithful might. And if her suspicion was unfounded, she doubted the corpse would much care. A soft smile her farewell, Brisket reached towards her fallen teammate.

'Stop.' Grace's voice was as clipped and taut as it ever had been. If the Saint had been affected by Mist's death, she hid it well.

Brisket's hand stilled, although she didn't withdraw it. She looked back over her shoulder, surprised to see only Grace. The Saint was nearly always accompanied by Benediction, her constant shadow.

'Give me a reason beyond your spite, Saint.' Brisket was too tired to keep up any pretence of politeness, drained both physically and mentally by the day's events.

'Your ignorance offers the unbeliever blasphemy, a holy passage I will not permit be sullied by his filth.'

Brisket rose to standing, hands dusting her trousers. 'And you make that distinction based on what, exactly?'

'I am the agent of the August Lord. His voice when dealing with scum like you...' Grace's head tilted sideways, to indicate the body behind Brisket. '...or that.'

Brisket wanted nothing more than to slap the smug grin from the Saint's face. She could all too easily imagine the gloating expression hidden behind the mask. She felt her hands clench into fists at her sides and forced a deep, calming breath.

‘Fuck you, Grace. I’m captain. I choose to honour the fallen. You will acquiesce and fall in line.’

‘Or what?’ The other woman framed her reply with plenty of aggression. ‘I see you playing with a paper crown for the first time, Betrayer. It doesn’t suit you. Better you remember you are only another mercenary, just like that pathetic pile of rags beyond.’

Brisket could almost taste the venom lacing her words. ‘Or I will carve the arrogance from your hide. Betrayer I may be, but I am still a Butcher, and you would do well to remember your faithful dog does not stand at your back now. Are you so brave without him?’

The words seemed to have some effect upon the other woman, who stepped back a pace. ‘I have no further time to waste with insignificant wretches such as you or the miserable corpse you seem to care so much for.’

Brisket offered a predatory smile, quite deliberate and entirely honest, as the Saint backed away another step before turning on her heel. Much to Brisket’s satisfaction, her movement revealed more than a hint of hurry.

Alone once more, she returned her gaze to Mist, returning her hand to its duty.

A least the Shadow might find peace this day, even if Brisket’s struggle would continue.

—FORGED FROM STEEL—

The old courtyard had served as a meeting ground for opposing gangs for generations, since even before the wars. Although it was technically part of the undercity, the people of the depths normally avoided it, not because it was out under the open air but from an intense and enduring fear of being haunted by those who had fallen here. Their superstitious culture only exaggerated the myth, and the ominous stains long seeped into the cracked tiles did little to dispel their fear.

For so many Vermin to assemble in this cursed place now spoke greatly of the power Piper held over them.

To the Brewers, this land was merely a battleground. A place where disputes had always been settled out of sight of the Watch and where the law of reprisal was blood alone. There could be no mistaking why they'd assembled here, the purpose always the same.

Only seven of them remained now. Although not a true Brewer, Lucky had almost come with them, but Stave had gruffly forbidden it in no uncertain terms. The lad had seemed genuinely upset, enough to leave Friday feeling sentimental herself. She'd waved to him as he stood in the street in front of their temporary lodgings, his hand stroking Quaff's fur.

She couldn't tell if he was saddened because he couldn't join them or because he knew he might never see them again.

It didn't matter either way. There were some places

a person should never step if they could avoid it, and this was one of them. Better he stayed away. Gods only knew he'd already seen enough misery in his lifetime.

The Vermin filled the space all around, easily two of them for every Brewer, likely more waiting in the shadows. Some raised their voices in discordant song, a terrible reverie of missed notes which mocked their foes as much as united their own kin. Lurking behind a hulking great bodyguard in the centre stood the Tyrant of the Undercity. His gaze swept over the line of Brewers, a dangerous smirk plastered over his jaw.

Friday had never been prouder of the men and women who stood either side of her, defiantly displaying the kutte. In the past, they'd all held their grudges or even come to blows with one another, but in the face of a common threat they'd united without a second thought.

Above all, they were family.

Her mind strayed from the scene for a moment, wishing the Grand Brewer stood with them. She knew she wasn't alone in the thought. Hooper, Decimate, and Stave had all remained loyal in their hearts. She could tell each missed their leader's presence. Even PintPot, surprising them all, had voiced his displeasure at marching without Tapper.

Friday stole a glance at Esters. The older woman was a hard read, her unrelenting hatred for their enemy turned into a bitter mask. She betrayed no sign of whether she desired the Grand Brewer's leadership

now they were faced with a real fight, though Friday suspected she might have done. The Guv wasn't just a fearsome brawler. He held an aura of command which was unmatched throughout the Empire of the Free Cities, inspiring his side with confidence. Tapper was the rock which had never broken, no matter the hardships they'd endured.

The same couldn't be said of Esters, still clearly affected in the aftermath of her escape from the fire at the Drunken Seamstress. It was a miracle she'd lived through that night at all. Friday remembered seeing the woman's unconscious body wreathed in smoke, breathing reduced to a shallow rasp and bloody spit dirtying her lips. For days after, Esters had lain unmoving on her cot, attended by the best sawbones the Guild's coffers could buy. Rumour had it that when eventually she did rise and discover the fate of her husband, she fell back to her bed all over again, refusing to speak for another two days.

She'd emerged another woman entirely. Seething fury had settled over the Matriarch, silent intensity replacing strident and boisterous words. It matched a drawn face with skin turned ashen pale since so much life had been smothered by smoke. The rest of her had seen no less change. A long cloak of dark fur hung over a body which had turned leaner, making her broad shoulders as intimidating as her ferocious expression and the long axe she kept by her side. Sinister markings painted the skin around her face, sharp black lines

contrasting with her pale flesh and the frozen hatred in her eyes.

Esters looked ready to sell her own life at the cost of vengeance.

Friday smiled darkly. If she were honest with herself, none of them would likely walk away from this. At least Esters had embraced that.

Her attention was drawn back to the moment as the Vermin began to spread out in response to some unseen signal, their eyes alight with violent anticipation. Most wielded heavy cudgels or lashes, the metalwork too precious and rare in the undercity for scum like this to lay their hands on without blood. Opposite Friday stood one notable exception, at least, a young girl no older than she whirling an aged and rusted chain around herself with lethal intent.

The Brewers kept their line, every one of the final seven holding their heads high.

This was their last stand.

Still a coward hiding behind his massive protector, Piper raised his flute to his lips and let free a long, piercing note. Friday had time to be minded of the horn blown at the start of Guild Ball game before the denizens of the undercity came at them in a snarling tide, voices raised and long strides eating up the ground.

The chain barely missed, whistling through the air where Friday had been standing a moment before. Before she could toss one of her knives in retaliation the wiry woman dragged the metal violently backwards once more and the Brewer took a frantic step back, breaking her aim. Friday launched the blade as she moved anyhow, hoping for respite to press an attack. Bold as brass, the Vermin only laughed as the spinning knife sailed well wide.

Friday swore. She couldn't escape without turning her back, which most likely would earn her the brutal lash of hard iron against her skin—and worse if she were tripped. Going to ground now would be fatal. Unlike the pitch, this ground had no rules and no apothecaries with their icy sponges.

At least the length of rusted metal seeking her was keeping Friday from being dragged down by other assailants. With the chain swinging around so wildly no other dared approach them lest they be hit. Even so, her limbs had started to burn from dancing around, and her breath was fast and short from the constant movement. Sooner or later Friday knew her stamina would run dry. Hoping the other woman would falter first wasn't an option. She had to either find an escape or finish the bitch first.

Another wide swing arced through the air and Friday ducked under it in desperation, trying to dodge closer. Panting as she found herself inside what had to be the useful range of the chain, she drew another blade and advanced on her opponent as quickly as she could.

A moment later, Friday felt the repercussion of her gamble, a crack across the back of her head staggering her and driving a lance of pain through her skull. As she blinked away the daze the chain struck her arm, forcing her hand to spasm and drop the knife to the ground with a clatter. The pain was incredible, her bare skin already raised in an angry welt. Instinctively she cradled the bloody limb as the woman opposite her snarled victoriously, whirling the long chain around her head in a wide loop before launching it forward.

Terror rooting her in place, Friday could only watch.

A tall shape barrelled into Friday from behind, toppling them both. She landed heavily, gasping from the shock, but it at least broke the spell. Next to her the other figure lay unmoving, facedown in a rapidly expanding pool of blood. One of the undercity scum, he was rake-thin with diseased skin stained by dirt. Horrified, Friday forced her eyes from the body to look at the woman who now stepped into the fray beside her.

Steel axe bloodied by untold Vermin, Esters was a vision of vengeful fury. The Matriarch's eyes were lit with bloodlust, the charcoal paint adorning her face smudged and running like great blackened tears. Heaving with her heavy breathing, the immense fur draped across her shoulders moved like a wild beast with its hackles raised.

Esters launched herself at Friday's assailant in a headlong charge. The chain snapped out, striking the Matriarch in the face and leaving one cheek a

bloody mess, but it couldn't stop her momentum. Esters' axe brutally cleaved into the other woman's neck, breaking it in a tide of gore as the Vermin's head flopped backwards and fell with the rest of her body.

Still holding her arm to her chest, Friday struggled to rise until a strong hand hauled her up again, bringing her face-to-face with Esters. She almost didn't recognise the woman. The side of her face was bloody and swollen, lending the savage cast of her features an increasingly primal feel. The Matriarch still didn't speak but only fixed Friday with an intense glare and spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground before pushing past her to join the fray elsewhere.

Glancing around, Friday realised the fight had moved away from her and she stood mercifully alone for the moment. As she caught her breath, she tried to make out where the other Brewers stood in the brawling mass of bodies, only to feel her hopes fade and her shoulders slump in defeat. In spite of their determination and Esters' berserker rage, they were losing the uneven struggle.

Decimate was surrounded by fallen Vermin, those not crawling away lying unmoving, life likely extinguished. The rest attacked en masse. Even as Decimate's long claymore bloodied one foe and sent them to the ground, another would step in to press the attack.

PintPot fought a similar horde, his chest heaving from exertion as he struck anyone close with a broken

bottle. Even in his element, the strain showed on his face as exhaustion took hold. Elsewhere, Stave slumped against a wall, kutte torn and one flank bleeding heavily. Hooper fought to protect the older man, but even his powerful arms looked tired.

She couldn't see Stoker at all.

Movement drew her eyes to the ground over by Piper, where sewer grilles had been thrown aside and yet more thugs climbed out from the depths, fresh bodies for the assault. Friday counted twenty before losing track, their numbers still swelling.

She felt hopelessness sink in. Pinned down as they were, backs almost to the wall, the Brewers couldn't flee. They would be cut down here in the darkness, their corpses left out by their killers as a grisly message.

Esters had apparently caught sight of the new arrivals too, for she stepped forward into their path with arms outstretched and axe blade held aloft.

The Valkyrie was ready to embrace death.

As the swarm came at her she finally broke her silence and began to sing in a voice low and mournful, a keening note for the dead. Her voice raised in pitch as the enemy thundered over the ground, a screaming tide of murder sweeping into the lone woman and overwhelming her.

Esters disappeared from sight.

Another group headed for Friday, three men and a woman, brown and yellow teeth bared as they snarled like rabid dogs. Before she could react a drum

of footsteps sounded behind her, faster and heavier than those of the mob. She turned her head just as a warhorse clad in full plate thundered past, rider already sweeping a long mallet back through the air and ready to strike.

The stallion crashed into the group a moment later, momentum dashing two of the men to the ground. The rider's hammer found the knees of the final man, the blow shattering his kneecap and bending his leg in a horrific direction. One of the others tried to rise to his feet, only for the mighty horse to rear back and crush his chest beneath its hooves. Blood streaming from his mouth, he fell, joining the other downed Vermin. Friday wasn't surprised to see the woman turn on her heel and flee. The rider wheeled her steed around to Friday. She recognised the familiar face at once. 'Lady Justice.' Faris had patrolled more than her share of Brewer's Guild Matches over the years. 'Esters—'

'Will be fine, child.'

With a composed nod Faris indicated Friday return her eyes to the swarm, where the Matriarch had been joined by a cohort of Blacksmiths. Anvil led from the front, his immense tower shield warding off the Vermin as they stabbed at him with crude shivs or bounced cudgels off the unyielding steel. His hammer struck out at any within range, easily driving them to the ground. She recognised Sledge alongside, the apprentice's face excited as he laid into the undercity

scum with massive blows that hurled his victims through the air like old rags.

Turning around in astonishment, Friday saw the rest of them.

Bright flames lit the scene as Burnish's Dragonthrower belched fire into a heaving mass of Vermin, his apprentice a whirling dervish dancing through the burning ranks. Iron was more direct, bulldozing through the tight scrum, punching through the air with mailed fists as muffled laughter sounded behind his mask. Not far behind Ferrite knelt on the back of one downed thug, tongs cruelly hobbling his ankles.

She'd have likely seen the others if she'd looked, but another figure stole her attention. Long strides propelled him confidently towards Esters, followed by those Brewers still able to fight, mouths moving in the same aria as their Matriarch.

Tapper smashed into the Vermin with a bellow, no longer a man conflicted but instead the Grand Brewer she remembered. Every strike lashed out with brutal efficiency, first tripping the opponent and then beating them bloody. When two wretches inside the reach of his polearm tried to drag him down, he grinned and headbutted one away, then punched the other hard in the face.

At his flank Hooper laid into the thugs surrounding them with renewed fury, following his leader's example and finally unleashing his pent-up angst. On the other side Decimate danced around, her long blade cutting

a bloody swathe through their enemies. Friday felt her legs moving her closer, a knife drawn and in her hand. The Grand Brewer's aura was magnetic, drawing his family around him.

Eventually the Brewers reached Esters. The reverse of Tapper's hooked pole hit her final assailant in the jaw, knocking the scum backwards and towards Decimate, who ran him through without a second thought. The rest of the Vermin's nerve had broken, their backs plain as they scuttled towards the safety of the shadows.

At last the two leaders of the Brewer's Guild stood together.

Bleeding from more cuts than Friday could count, the Matriarch was unsteady on her feet, fury temporarily beaten from her. The side of her face was an angry purple, one eye swollen closed, and a mass of red smeared around her mouth signified she had either vomited blood or bitten one of her adversaries.

Tapper placed one heavy hand on Esters' shoulder, steadying the woman. They remained that way for a long moment until eventually he leaned to her ear, lips moving, passing some message Friday couldn't hear. When the Grand Brewer withdrew, his hand remained, joined by Esters' own. The younger woman was stunned to see the Matriarch's eyes turned wet.

After a pause, Esters nodded.

Tapper was apparently satisfied. He turned to the rest of his family, barking orders. 'Decimate, Hooper,

run down this piss-poor scum. Make sure stories reach the sewers of what happened here today.'

Friday looked to where the Piper had stood, signalling the onslaught. She wasn't surprised to see the Tyrant had long since fled. The fight was over. Maybe even the war too. She doubted Piper would raise such support again anytime soon.

Tapper turned to address the assembled Blacksmiths, their heavy steel a stark contrast to the bright kutte of the Brewers. 'You have done a good thing this day, my friends, and we are in your debt. I know your price. It will be done.'

Anvil nodded. 'See that it is, Grand Brewer. The outlaw has been on the run for far too long, and his crime is unforgivable.' All the Blacksmiths but Iron grunted their agreement. Anvil and Tapper shook hands and clasped shoulders like old comrades.

Friday wondered at the meaning. Looking around at the other Brewers, she saw only equally blank faces. Stoker was still conspicuous by his absence, not that it mattered much to her. She didn't care if he'd been killed or not.

The Grand Brewer turned his attention back to his people. 'Time to go home and rebuild, lads. It will take more than undercity scum to bring us down.'

The cheering that met his words was tempered by exhaustion but no less genuine for it. Their questions about the day's events could wait. The Grand Brewer was back.

SNAKES

The wind rattled eerily through the old graveyard, cold and lonely fingers reaching for the warmth of the living. Moonlight lent the stones a silver gleam, their edges sharp and jagged with shadows, what little lettering remained outlined by foreboding darkness. Brisket sat atop one such stone and observed the scene in quiet contemplation. Her feet kicked back and forth, idly punting small stones and watching them tumble over the hard ground. She had thought she'd never to return to this place, where she'd bid a final farewell to Ox and accepted the inescapable truth that she'd never be called a Butcher again.

Why she had climbed this lonely path remained a complete mystery to her. Indulging depression and wallowing in misery wasn't in her nature, nor was wasting time working over past mistakes. Perhaps, she grudgingly conceded, she was simply more comfortable here than anywhere else. It wasn't the first occasion her feet had led her along the aged dirt track that ended here; her perch wore several fresh scrapes from previous visits.

Brisket frowned. If a person no longer felt they had a place among the living, why should they not find refuge among the anonymous dead?

Gods, she sounded no better than the most morbid Spook. She hurriedly cast the thought away and turned her head to the lantern, hoping to find refuge from the

darkness threatening her thoughts. Moths fluttered around the warm glow, with only the dirty glass preventing them from finishing their lives by reaching the naked flame beyond. It was a tiny oasis against the ruined surroundings, a small pool of amber straining against the moon above.

The air was chill this far past summer, any residual heat now fading each day alongside the shortening light. This year the warm days seemed to have been all too brief, marred by storms turbulent enough to match the violence insidiously creeping throughout the Empire of the Free Cities.

Brisket saw hint of it in every game, doubtless filtering down from the Magisters and Chamberlains of each Guild. Players tackled harder, swung their weapons with far less reserve, and stuck the boot in more gleefully than she'd ever known before. She'd seen smashed fingers from downed players being trodden on, felt the dull ache of bruises which persisted long after their colouring abated, and watched the opposition kill the ball on more than one occasion.

Off the pitch the stands reacted with increasing intensity, bloodthirsty cheers becoming more commonplace alongside stories of open brawling in taverns and pubs before games. The tension had reached heights previously unknown, leaving her feeling fatalistic. She had become utterly convinced she was somehow at the heart of a storm which had been brewing for some time, spearheaded by the renewed spirit of the Soltheician faith.

The worst part was feeling so helpless. Her entire life she had been able to fight her corner, backed by her teammates or not. Now she was merely another pawn in a larger game beyond her understanding. Grace had accused her of delusions of grandeur, and despite Brisket's best efforts to dismiss them, the words remained.

Her captain's mantle was a joke, some cruel farce from a mummer's play.

She sighed. A great weariness had built up within and broken the barrier, and now she found herself unable to ignore the truth or fight the sadness which came with it.

Desperately searching for some salvation in this forgotten and silent place, she kept her perch, numbly staring at a world she felt entirely absent from.

Light gave away the Ferryman's approach below long before she heard his footfall crunching over the grit path. Brisket watched his winding progress, steps unhurried as the lantern at the end of his tall staff swung from side to side, and the feathers in his cloak ruffling like a flock of birds about to take flight. Another time, she might have felt apprehension or leapt to her feet to challenge him. Now, in this moment, she was only tired. Obulus knew she was here, clearly, and had made the effort to come to her. She would at least meet with him.

When eventually he completed the climb to her eyrie, she'd abandoned her seat and waited with her arms folded across her chest. He offered her a polite nod and raised one hand in greeting. 'Brisket.'

For a man of his age, the silver-haired Ferryman showed surprisingly little fatigue after his ascent, his composed aura undiminished. She'd never spoken to him previously but found his voice to be exactly as she'd expected, venerable and deep.

Guarded.

She offered a curt nod back, not feeling the need to use his name.

Obulus turned to survey the vista, eyes trailing upwards to the skies. 'Another storm lurks on the horizon, ready to rain into the streets of every city across the land. I trust you are not so ignorant as to have missed the signs.'

'I'm too tired for clever words and games, Ferryman. Why did you come here? If you think to toy with me like one of your puppets, you can cut the shit and go elsewhere.'

His eyes swung towards her, dark pools of shadow the light had no hope of reaching. They pierced her soul and rooted her in place. When he spoke again, it was with a tone of admonishment. 'Do not dare to test me, Betrayer. I would think nothing of casting you from this ledge, nor otherwise ruining what little remains of your career.'

Brisket shrugged off his words, holding her ground

in the face of his unrelenting stare. 'Yet you won't. Because now there is a bigger player in this game than even you.'

When next he spoke, his voice was uncharacteristically quiet and subdued. 'Yes.'

She hadn't realised she was holding her breath until he replied. Giddy, she tried to keep her expression hard as she exhaled and released the pent-up tension. For a moment she'd dared to speak as the Ferryman's equal, the same way the Master Butcher might have. Brisket didn't know where her courage to confront him had come from.

Was she refuting Obulus, or Grace's bitter words?

The Ferryman watched impassively, apparently unaware of her relief.

'I won't pretend to offer you salvation. We both know I cannot grant such a boon.'

'Then why are you here?' More than anything, Brisket was tired of being used by others. Becoming an agent for the Ferryman held little appeal.

'Your new masters are unlike any other adversary. They will see the world burn if it furthers their agenda. They care little for those caught up in their machinations, even less than those who dare oppose them.' Obulus' free hand emerged from his robes clutching a pair of simple metal crosses, flecks of dried blood staining one of them.

Brisket immediately recognised the sullied piece of metal, having last seen it suspended around Mist's neck. The Ferryman noted her eyes widen.

‘I see you are familiar with the token. It was indeed taken from your ally. The other was found on the corpse of one of my agents... a man who dared betray my trust.’

Brisket returned his stare evenly, wondering where Obulus was leading.

‘Do not mistake the simple appearance of this icon. This is no simple badge of the Solthecian faith. This is the cross of the Crimson Order, a secretive conclave which operates within the highest echelons of that corrupt institution. Mist was a knight of this order, leading an elaborate masquerade within the Union for years.’

‘So, you had Mist killed, as well as your own man?’ Brisket refused to believe this was a confession. Obulus didn’t give such information for free.

His eyes narrowed. ‘Are you so blind, Betrayer? Mist’s true identity was known all too well to me, as was that of the fool attempting the same infiltration among my agents. My mistake was allowing their masters to discover this knowledge. In their fear they executed both, before either might become a liability.’

He continued, voice calming to a more even pitch.

‘Three days before Venin’s murder, the Alchemist brat broke into the Shadow Council’s chambers and attempted to murder one of the twelve, on orders of the Solthecian cult. He failed. His death was retribution from his masters, absolution purchased in pain and lifeblood. But when the Alchemist’s Guild spoke of their own retaliation, the Solthecian faith saw another

opportunity. There is no place in the light for a Shadow, especially not one which has outlived its usefulness.'

After a pause he continued. 'They led the violence in your last game, Betrayer. They let Mist's life expire, and in a way which would accelerate the violence between the other Guilds.'

Brisket raised one eyebrow. She quietly considered his words, remembering the venom Grace had directed to Mist's broken body. There was some truth in the Ferryman's accusations, although she had no doubt that more yet remained hidden. 'And now you seek to use the violence to turn me?'

'You are on the inside already, Brisket, the same as Mist. Untrusted, worth as little as vermin scuttling through the sewers. Do not earn the same fate as your teammate through inactivity, languishing in self-indulgent misery.'

She offered him a smile. Her answer was easy.

'No. I will never be another one of your puppets. You cannot use me to further your own agenda.' Just speaking the words made her realise she was replying not only to Obulus but to Grace and the Order too, claiming her rightful mantle and turning at last from the brink of despair.

Obulus' lips slipped into a gentle smile. It was an unfamiliar sight on his countenance, surprisingly void of malice. He paused and looked about, eyes lingering over the ancient stones surrounding them. When his gaze returned it wore the same stern fatherliness she had

seen all too often in the Master Butcher. His expression softened, disarming against the lantern's glow.

'Once, this meeting might have been to further such an arrangement, for all that you could well be the most stubborn soul I ever have known. Now we cannot afford to waste time with such games, however. If you do not act soon, it will be too late.'

An earnest sympathy had crept into his voice, to match his features. It sat strangely with the legend preceding him.

'We have never been enemies in the past, but now we must become allies, united against a common foe. Neither you nor I can stand against this new danger alone. Given time, the isolated violence facing the select few shall grow to threaten us all, and the world beyond. Stand with me now. Together we shall cast back the encroaching darkness before it overcomes everything we hold dear.'

She searched his eyes, looking for any trace of duplicity, and found none. Still, she did not trust him.

'No.'

Brisket's cold tone forbade further entreaty.

A moment of silence passed, marked only by the wind rustling through the dried grass. Eventually, Obulus nodded. When at last he spoke, an impossible sadness had sunken deep into his voice.

'Then look now to whatever gods you hold dear to save us all.'

Footsteps echoed over the hard stone, each one clipped and precise. Scalpel waited patiently, betraying little of her displeasure at the invasion of her crypt. She knew it would be an outsider, even had the spirits not whispered such secrets to her. None claiming allegiance to the Mortician's Guild would be nearly so brave as to enter here without permission. Only the Ferryman was permitted to cross the threshold unannounced, and he was not so foolish to announce his presence with heavy boots.

She rose from her cross-legged position and padded across the floor on bare feet, fingers casually brushing over the hilt of a skinning knife as she palmed it into her hand. Aethyric energy surged in the air around the Spirit Weaver, ghosts of the interned dead enthralled by the potential to gorge and lessen their endless hunger.

Ghast's shade watched impassively from the opposite corner of the room, eyes blazing like balefire in the gloom. Unlike the others, Ghast was content to stalk like a predator, prowling the dark places with animal cunning. His spirit was remarkable and terrifying. Not only had it proven to have retained an increasingly sinister sentience without a host, but it actually appeared to be growing ever stronger. Even now it drew in the ambient light from the torches, tiny embers trailing towards its hideous form.

Shades were not visible to those unattuned to their plane, yet Ghast had by now accumulated enough energy to make the unenlightened quietly uneasy

while nearby, even if they did remain unaware. In crowded places Scalpel continued to watch with curiosity as others inexplicably changed paths to avoid the Silent Terror. She'd never encountered a soul with such vehemence to so affect the living.

It seemed Ghast's story was yet to be finished.

The Spirit Weaver ignored the mocking stare at her back. She was no such mortal, easily cowed or intimidated. The footsteps were louder now, accompanied by the slither of material dragging over the smooth tiles, and reflected light appeared along the walls beyond the alcove. Curious. Her visitor clearly didn't intend to hide their presence.

Scalpel lost the knife in the folds of her sleeve. It would be there if she needed it once more.

A young woman vested in Solthecian robes swept boldly into the vault. Scalpel was not unused to such figures from her duties and immediately recognised the eggshell white and azure blue of the College of Virgin Sisters. If nothing else, the Solthecian church had an eye for grandiosity which often left an impression. Unlike her chaste brethren, however, who were often quick to shy away from the Spirit Weaver, this woman regarded Scalpel with imperious eyes. The sternness of the stare suited the upward turn to her nose and high cheekbones, all entirely at home with an austere tight bun of hair.

Surely this could be none other than the Saint. Scalpel wondered if the woman would still be so

adored if the faithful could see the cruel stare behind the mask.

Grace didn't wait for pleasantries. 'Your kind have brought chaos to the world, Witch.' For all that the Saint was well spoken, the words seethed with vicious intensity. 'By transgressing against the Inquisition's new rule, you have unleashed a tide of Vermin to choke the streets with blood. Even now, they still rise up like a torrid and desolate blight, a disease which will never rest.'

Scalpel felt the hairs rising on the back of her neck, the spirits gleefully gibbering at the edge of her conscious. She forced herself to remain silent. In truth, the Saint was undeniably right. Drawing the Ratcatcher's Guild into the affairs of the Mortician's Guild had been a severe and unforgivable mistake.

'Yet even a heathen like you cannot be held in contempt for this sin. Our agents are all too aware that the misguided introduction of the minor Guilds is to be blamed on the Ferryman. In this, at least, you are blameless.'

Grace's head tilted to the side, the action condescending, the same way a mother would talk to an errant child. 'I put this to you, Witch. How long will you be content for Obulus to ruin your destiny? Your Guild has already failed under his leadership. How many whispers have you heard of people infuriated that the Morticians seem never to claim their due? How often have words reached you speaking ill of the Ferryman and his motivations?'

She raised one hand to drum her fingers along the edge of a stone slab, revealing soft milky skin under her tabard's sleeve, the faint blue trails of the blood in her veins running invitingly for the spirits clustered around them. 'And how often have you caught yourself entertaining those same thoughts?'

Scalpel glared at the Saint's smirk, wishing nothing more than to cut it from her face and feed the rest to the spirits until only a husk remained. Once again, she couldn't argue with the spiteful diatribe. Obulus had seen all too many failures in recent times. Whatever bond of fealty the Hunter's Guild owed appeared to have been forgotten, the Mortician's Guild even humiliated by their former vassals when the feral had been stolen from under their noses. Arrangements orchestrated with the Butcher's Guild had come to nothing. The Ratcatchers ran free of any leash, rabid and demented, and provided little strength or influence to their masters. Hemlocke had been one gain, but Scalpel cared little for the Soul Seer. An unwanted refugee was no boon.

And then, there was Ghast.

His eyes bored into her aura, the malevolent shade unwilling to forgive his death. Scalpel had spent too many hours ruminating upon Ghast's demise, vividly reliving the violence and the moment the Ferryman's machinations had begun to unravel.

To hear her frustrations given voice was the collapse of some final barrier within, the dam holding back a tide

of accumulated vitriol and discontent broken at last. For the first time since the meeting began, she spoke.

‘And your interest here is what, Saint?’ The words were as alien as the intended parley. Scalpel only dealt in absolutes. Questions and uncertainty were both for others.

The smile grew wider, even if the frost in Grace’s eyes remained.

‘Let us suppose that the Order has tested our incumbent captain and found her... lacking. Now consider that if this miserable state of affairs were to continue, how likely it might be our faith would be searching for a suitable replacement, should some misfortune strike the Betrayer from the roster.’

‘I see.’ Scalpel was careful to remain neutral. She cared little whether the Order might murder Brisket or not, but the suggestion that the Order sought concert with her was a strange turn of events. ‘I will not adopt your god, Saint.’

Grace appeared to find the concept amusing, mirth suddenly exploding across her features. ‘And I wouldn’t seek to steer you into the path of the divine light, Witch. I am not possessed with folly enough to think you could ever return your heart from the abyss. But lacking as your creed might be, you do offer a particularly merciless quality which my masters and I can appreciate.’

Scalpel waited, her mind racing with new possibilities unlocked by the Saint’s words.

‘Your Guild has become impossibly weak, driven near

ruin by the Ferryman's poor decisions and misguided ambition. The hand you hold is a rotten one, absent of any sort of future, and Obulus' failed attempts to regain influence and power have proven the futility of fighting against the tide. The Order would see you free.'

The other woman wasn't laughing anymore, her expression deadly serious. The flickering light lent additional gravitas to her stern and commanding features.

'Our patience is not infinite. Brisket's fate is sealed. Yours is yet to be written, and is in your hands.'

'And what is your price for my freedom, Saint?' There was always a price, Scalpel knew.

Grace smiled at the question, her expression no less cold for it. 'How astute you are, Witch. Our price is simple.'

She leaned forward and the spirits around them recoiled from her aura, which blazed into a brilliant corona of white flames fed by righteous passion. Her voice dropped to a low hiss.

'Bring us the Ferryman's head.'

FAMILY

The storm lurking on the horizon had yet to break in full, its ominous grey clouds visible even after night had fallen, blotting out the stars and moon above. As the two Brewers leisurely made a path over the cobbled streets and through close alleyways a light rain began to fall, a precursor to the inevitable. Not yet heavy enough to form puddles in the shallows and potholes, the drizzle was nonetheless enough to wet Friday's head as she followed the Grand Brewer. She didn't know why Tapper had insisted she come with him this evening. When she'd asked he'd dismissed the question, only indicating their destination.

The Smithy's Forge was an old tavern in the Blacksmith's quarter, deep in the heart of the city. Although she'd never before set foot in the unfamiliar district, Friday had heard plenty in passing from older members who'd found reason to visit over the years. She marvelled at the architecture as Tapper led the way, so remarkably different to the rustic homeliness she was used to. Tall metal spires soared upwards from the top of every other building, and intricate latticework graced windows and doors. Bronze statues waited on corners and at the centre of plazas, depicting a host of different heroes and villains as well as monstrous creatures of legend.

At least twice Friday had caught herself gawping like a starry-eyed child at the clever metal shapes

and artistic stonework before forcing her jaw closed. With every lamp lit and the streets wide enough for two carts to pass each other, this was another world she hadn't even known existed, barely a stone's throw from her own.

Eventually, their journey through the exotic ward ended, the Grand Brewer pointing out the pub with a nod.

Its appearance was far less grandiose than Friday had imagined from the tales she'd heard, a narrow frontage sandwiched between traders to either side, as was typical of inner-city buildings. The sign swinging from the chain was dull, unpainted metal only, more akin to an embossed shield than what she knew as a pub sign. Listening, Friday couldn't hear drunken voices raised in song or discussion, sounds she normally associated with people enjoying themselves. With only the steady patter of an increasingly heavy rain surrounding her, it was near quiet as a grave.

For all that, the Smithy's Forge wasn't unwelcoming. Warm light glowed from inside, creeping around the criss-crossing bars covering the windows and colouring the metal umber. The pub was a blazing hearth in the centre of the city, and compared to the cold rain it offered just as much sanctuary as the Drunken Seamstress did in Friday's bittersweet memories.

Tapper loudly knocked on the door, knuckles playing a staccato message, before opening it and stepping over the threshold.

Warmth immediately rushed up to envelop Friday as she followed him through the portal, far more than she had been expecting. Firelight danced in just about every corner and upon most walls from heavy iron braziers, brighter still in the fireplace around which the tables were set. Metalwork objects of every conceivable purpose and colour glowed richly in the light along the walls around each flame.

She realised the building was far larger inside than she'd thought, the width easily forgotten considering the expansive depth of the room in which they now stood. Friday looked up at the rafters high above and her breath caught at the sight of a large dragon all in polished silver suspended from the high ceiling on long chains. Features graceful and proud, it was as if the beast were absorbing the light and reflecting it from its body.

Friday found herself shaking her head in simple wonderment. Even the scent here was unique, laced with sulphur and charcoal to mask spilt beer and smoky pipes. The stories she'd heard didn't do the place justice.

Blacksmiths truly were a completely different breed to Brewers.

Along the far wall a bar topped with heavy wrought iron stretched back into the shadows. Tapper led confidently along its length, walking past similarly adorned tables. Most of the patrons ignored the Brewers, the one or two who did acknowledge the

strangers in the midst raising their tankards in salute. The Grand Brewer returned the gesture with a smile or a nod each time, an unsure Friday following suit.

A tall young woman blocked their progress at the back of the room, whipcord lean under a loose jerkin which bared muscular arms and broad shoulders. Her scarlet hair was shaved down to her scalp at the sides, the top worn long in a thick mass which trailed behind her head. Her eyes wore an aggressive look to match the severe undercut, combining with the rest of her appearance to cast one of the more intimidating figures than Friday had ever seen.

‘Grand Brewer.’

‘Blaze, you look hale, lass.’ Tapper nodded at her hair. ‘I see you’re still wearing the apprentice cut. Old Auger yet to see the light and make you a Master?’

‘No chance.’ Her face softened slightly. ‘Bless the old boy, I don’t know what he’d do without me, really.’

Tapper clapped her on the shoulder warmly. ‘Aye, you’re a good lass. Don’t you worry. He’ll see sense and step you up soon enough, the day he retires from the shop himself.’

She snorted good-naturedly. ‘You mean the day he draws his last breath, then? They’ve been trying to drag him out for years now—that’ll never change.’

The Grand Brewer laughed heartily, sharing her joke. Friday felt decidedly awkward, an interloper to a discussion between friends. She waited patiently, averting her eyes.

As though sensing her discomfort, Tapper nodded in her direction. 'Friday, meet Blaze.'

The Blacksmith turned her eyes upon Friday, a mischievous grin lifting her lips. 'Friday, eh? Brewers, you lads have all of the comely lasses, I swear.' She spat on her palm and held it boldly forth. When Friday took it, Blaze near shook her arm out of joint. She was likely the same age as Friday, but a foot taller and far stronger.

The other woman turned her attention back to the Grand Brewer. 'You're here for the traitor?' Friday noticed the friendly camaraderie had slipped from her features.

Tapper nodded. 'Bad business, that. For both our houses.'

'That it is. The Exile dragged the wretch here earlier.' She moved aside. 'Best you go and offer any last words. He won't be long to hear them.' The Grand Brewer nodded and stepped past without further reply, disappearing under the archway behind. Friday followed, feeling Blaze's eyes on her the entire time.

'Make the bastard suffer if Master Anvil lets you put the boot in.'

Cool air waited at the bottom of the long stairwell, the blistering warmth remaining above. Cold hues of granite and limestone replaced vibrant red and brass,

the tone entirely different now they'd descended beneath the earth. Friday could hear trickling nearby where rainwater had found a way in. Candles burned low along the walls, their wax spilling towards the ground in streaks as flames near exhaustion flickered.

Tapper apparently knew the way. The clomp of his heavy boots echoed loudly off the plain walls, as did the sound of him splashing noisily through a puddle at the end of the grimy corridor. He ignored a left fork and took the right instead, heading towards a row of doorways set into one wall. As she approached Friday saw they were cells inside, each with a stout wooden door recessed into the entry, relieved only by a small square window covered with iron bars. Dark patches marred the ground where blood had been spilt and left to congeal and dry, and the sickly scent of stale mould rose to assault Friday's nostrils.

Decimate awaited them, leaning against the wall next to the closest door. Her mask hid most of her expression, but her body language suggested boredom as much as anything. When Tapper and Friday appeared, she offered both a curt nod in greeting but didn't otherwise move.

The Grand Brewer turned to Friday. 'Inside the cell, lass. You'll want to see this.' His voice had turned hard.

Friday followed the command and ducked into the first cell. She had to squeeze past Anvil, the formidable Master Blacksmith standing just inside. He was stripped to the waist, and his tattooed skin glistened

with sweat in the lousy light, tiny beads running over arms as thick as a bull's neck. His expression stern, he didn't acknowledge her, eyes fixed instead on the figure that cowered in the opposite corner.

The captive's wrists were shackled together by heavy iron, but he didn't look like he would be mounting an escape anytime soon. He might have tried previously, if the purple hue and swelling of his brutish features were anything to go by, and blood from a split lip stained his beard. Still Friday recognised him, in spite of his injuries and the layer of dirt which covered his skin.

Stoker.

Anvil took a step towards the chained Brewer to make way for the Grand Brewer, and she wasn't surprised to see Stoker shrink away, any hint of defiance long beaten out of him. Friday didn't have to look much further than Anvil to see who had busied himself with the task. The Blacksmith's huge hands were capped by knuckles scraped ruddy red, and Friday paled just imagining how hard the impact from one of his fists might be.

'You're a piss-poor wretch, for a man who calls himself a Master.' Tapper's voice was absent of any warmth, entirely unforgiving of whatever crime had brought him here.

'Master? That's a poor jest.' Anvil took another pace closer to Stoker, grasped the man's ragged hair in one fist, and roughly dragged him to his feet. 'You're no Master, whelp. Killed the man who was and threw his bloodied body into the forge, didn't you?!

Stoker was sent crashing into the wall, landing shoulder first and losing a patch of skin to the abrasive brickwork.

Friday wouldn't be feeling sorrow for the Eisnoran anytime soon. He was a disease that crept into any room he entered, once dangerously close to the heart of her family. There could be no way he'd be welcomed come back into the fold after how he'd baited Spigot. If someone else didn't do the deed, she would gladly slide a knife between his ribs to prevent it.

'Pl-please. Tap... Tapper. I'm— you can st-stop this.' Stoker was weeping pathetically as he lay face down on the floor. 'I'm... I'm not the tr-traitor..'

Anvil cast an inquisitive eye towards the Brewers. Tapper strode across the cell through the dust and filth, kicking up great gouts of powder. He lowering to his haunches next to the downed man. 'Aye, you're not. At least, not to the kutte.'

He patted Stoker's arm, eyes sympathetic when Stoker flinched. 'I know the traitor, the man led by the gold in his pockets. His due will come in time, when he has outlived his usefulness. But traitor or no, you are scum, barely a step above the Vermin. What you forced me to do to Spigot was unforgivable.'

The Grand Brewer glanced back at Anvil and Friday before returning to Stoker. 'And your blood brought me salvation for my family, probably the only good thing you've ever done with your worthless life.'

He stood again and kicked Stoker in the ribs. The other man groaned in pain and rolled onto his back, helpless as a beached whale.

Tapper fixed Friday with a searching look. 'I'm done with him. Friday, lass. You can choose his fate. I trust you to make the right choice.' The Grand Brewer broke the stare and left the cell without further ceremony, joining Decimate outside.

Anvil remained, waiting for her word.

She realised she'd been staring at Stoker the entire time, only vaguely hearing Tapper's words through a cold veil of hatred. The venom was ice coursing through her veins once more, tempting her to the same bloodlust she'd seen so possess Esters.

Friday forced herself to look away. The urge to kill this wretch with her own hands didn't sit well with her, threatening to twist her into someone neither she nor Spigot wanted her to be.

Her eyes strayed to her surroundings, taking in the miserable cell. The stench of urine and dried blood was overwhelming, and the rotting straw in one corner likely crawled with lice and mites. Damp crept up the walls, spotting them brown. Once Anvil's torch had been taken, the only light would be a sliver bleeding through the door's tiny window, assuming the Blacksmiths didn't take that also.

It was a wretched hole in the ground, worse than any bolt hole or den she'd known. Nothing came here to live, only to die.

Friday offered Stoker a final look. His eyes pleaded with her.

Her blood still ran cold. There could be no forgiveness.

She turned to Anvil. 'He's yours.' The Blacksmith nodded, respect clearly written in the gesture. 'And when you're done with him, burn his kutte. He never deserved it anyways.'

Stoker screamed inarticulately as she turned on her heel and followed the Grand Brewer, a raw croak which became a strangled sob once Anvil's hand found his throat. Her final memories of the man would be the sound of heavy fists striking his body over and over. The Blacksmith would be in no rush to finish the traitor when his agony could so easily be prolonged.

Tapper and Decimate waited for her outside, as she knew they would. Both of them wore fiercely proud expressions.

This was her family.

And they stood united, strong, and proud.



— PUPPET MASTER —

Hood pulled firmly in place to hide her identity, Scalpel stalked soundlessly through the ancient hallways, her slippered feet gliding lightly over the old stone tiles. Unable to penetrate the darkness of her cloak, the candlelight illuminating her surroundings revealed only explosions of fine dust as she passed under its muted glow.

Although her body moved with surety of purpose, inwardly her mind raced.

The deed upon which she now embarked was a betrayal not only to her Guild, but her mentor, the individual responsible for her rapid ascension through the ranks of the Mortician's Guild. She was one of only a few the Ferryman trusted with his thoughts, privy to secrets rival to those whispered by the very spirits themselves. The act she was about to commit would utterly sever that communion, but compared to the severity of the likely aftermath, her treachery meant nothing.

This eve she would irrevocably alter the destiny of her Guild—and the Empire of the Free Cities.

At this hour none but the guards prowled the corridors, their minds blunted by boredom as they aimlessly patrolled. Even in the wretched depths of the Mortician's Guild, the magisters and chamberlains had to sleep, their business meetings typically held during daylight hours. The spirits remained, of course. In a great swathe they swept along behind her, a vortex of

excited energy and vague skull-like faces half formed in the broken light.

Strangely, it seemed Ghast had abandoned her. His absence was keenly felt, although not unwelcome. For months the violence and hatred in his gaze had plagued the Spirit Weaver. Respite now was refreshing in the extreme.

A sound echoed from around the corner ahead, alerting Scalpel to sidestep neatly into an alcove. She could have simply brushed past the guard—it was not unusual for her to find reason to visit the Ferryman's chambers, even at this hour. But Scalpel wanted neither to risk a witness to her presence nor to be informed Obulus was not entertaining visitors. In the darkness she waited as the guard's heavy footsteps came ever closer.

Soon he appeared, a heavysset man with a long moustache covering his top lip. As she suspected, his eyes were glassy and dull, the monotony of his duties having long won the uneven struggle against his better instincts. Guards walking the interior rarely knew the barest hint of activity. His paunch strained against a chainmail shirt, and his heavy breath stank of soured wine. Scalpel's lips curled at the edges. With such figures employed as guards it would be easy to blame their incompetence in the sober light of day.

Eventually the guard's uneven gait took him away, and the sound of his boots reduced to a dull thud. Scalpel stole out from hiding and set off again, hurrying

to her destination. She was not eager to commit her sin, but the sooner her blade cut into the throat of the Ferryman, the quicker the doubts in her mind might be silenced.

The surrounding furnishings had grown increasingly more elaborate and exotic as Scalpel drew closer to the heavy door marking the entrance to Obulus' den. Her memory recalled an early lesson, when she had dared to question the pointless extravagance. The Ferryman had chuckled at her words. In retrospect she knew he had likely been amused by her bold impudence.

'In truth, these trappings mean nothing to me. But they do to others. I allow them to think they are indulging me, or somehow courting favour.' She remembered his voice, even and humourless despite his smile. 'Let them waste their time. Fear will keep these gifts coming, and I am content to appear arrogant by displaying them instead of fortifying my rooms against assassins.'

She had raised an eyebrow at the sentiment. It had not gone unnoticed.

'Protection can be bought with more than coin, Spirit Weaver.'

This evening would prove the folly of those words. She returned her head to the present, shaking away the memory, and placed one palm on the aged wood leading to his chambers. Old hinges let out a barely perceptible creak as the door swung inwards.

The grand decorations ended immediately. The

Ferryman's rooms resembled a cell similarly sparse to the one Scalpel kept herself. The plain grey walls stood cold and foreboding, their hard surfaces void of fabric, ornamentation, or paint. The floor was no better, with dust and cobwebs choking the corners. Scalpel made quick time through the nearest alcove, familiar with the layout.

She found the Ferryman in his study, as she had known she would. Simple wooden bookshelves lined the walls, the spines of their contents cast ruddy amber by a crackling fire. Obulus sat facing away from her as she entered, his hooded vestments matching hers to similarly stave off the chill. His great feathered cloak lay next to him drying, likely from the storm raging outside. Her moment could not have been better; his attention was entirely given to the tome he was poring over.

She took a single step into the room before halting, her head turning to face the darkness of a corner behind her. There, a tall silhouette stood a deathly vigil. A tremor passed through Scalpel as its head slowly turned to face her.

Ghast's shade no longer wore the mask, just as the man hadn't when he passed. It remained only in shards of broken metal hung around the spirit's neck, rusted from the rot creeping through his form. For the first time since his death, the shade's face appeared animated, mouth opening and closing, as though speaking with the sound stolen away. His skin stretched and warped with the movement, a hellish

nightmare in the bloody light. His eyes burned no less malignantly than the last she had seen him, although in this setting his haunt had shed its mocking aura and taken on one of cruelty. The other spirits recoiled, banished to the farthest corners. Scalpel fought the compulsion to do the same.

Yet Ghast was not staring at her. His gaze was instead reserved for the figure huddled in front of the fire.

Scalpel took courage from the Silent Terror's approval, doubts finally laid to rest.

Three quick steps took her to the Ferryman. One hand snaked around his temple before her presence was known; the other grasped the knife which sliced through his neck. Blood blossomed against the bright metal for an instant and then sprayed freely into the air, and the heavy book dropped to the ground as his limbs began to twitch wildly, fingers splayed outwards. She held on, fingers forcing his eyes closed, deliberately keeping his face away from hers. A single glance might be all that it took to unravel her resolve.

His mouth opened and he gurgled something, trying to speak as blood spilled outwards, staining his vestments. It was drowned out as the spirits found their resolve and swept upon the struggling mortals in a writhing torrent of aethyr. For a moment Scalpel was lost inside of a storm as their hunger drove them forward, endlessly lashing them to steal the vestiges of life which exploded outwards.

As suddenly as they had come, a fright took hold and

they scattered once more, although not at the Spirit Weaver's bidding. Ghast now surged forward, she knew, his hateful vengeance tainting the air like ink spoiling water.

Some rational part of her mind screamed to make the warding, to banish the ghoul lest it consume her along with the Ferryman. She felt the pull of Ghast's soul with horrible certainty, powerful and malevolent. His anger was a raging inferno, consuming her as it burned into her skull like wildfire, smoke obscuring her conscious thoughts. For a moment the rush nearly overwhelmed her, threatening to tear her mind asunder. With supreme effort the Spirit Weaver resisted, hurriedly shielding herself.

Her victim wasn't so lucky.

The Ferryman's aura shrivelled and cracked as it was transformed to a dry husk, all traces of life wrenched away into a cavernous maw which had broken across Ghast's face, a great rent in the world. Scalpel felt dark glee rising within it as it drank of its victim, a glee as terrible to behold as its seething fury. Despairing, she released her hold and kicked the body hard, pitching it headfirst into the flames. Obulus had needed to die, but he didn't deserve the fate Ghast would have visited upon him.

The Silent Terror howled in frustration and dissipated, unable to match the fire's hunger as it quickly began to consume the corpse. Ghast's crimson eyes were the last to ebb away, vengefully turning upon her before they, too, faded.

At last, she was alone.

Scalpel nearly fell to her knees and wept. Wept for Ghast's revenge. For the Ferryman, her mentor.

For her betrayal.

For a moment she remained in a stupor, committing every detail to memory. She knew this would be a memory revisited time and time again in the days and months to come. Then, with slow purposefulness she picked up the Ferryman's cloak and gently lay it upon the body to cover the smouldering and blackened figure.

It was done. She alone had possessed the strength and daring to change the fate of the Mortician's Guild. A canker had set in, had rotted away the institution like worms through a corpse. But now, that would all change. Grace had been right. The Ferryman had done enough damage.

Outside, the storm raged.

The Spirit Weaver didn't care. It would pass. Now was the time to be reborn anew.

With Scalpel wearing the mantle of puppet master.

A FREE CITIES CAROL

Obulus was dead, to begin with. There was no doubt whatsoever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the Lord Chamberlain and witnessed by the chief clerk, and the undertakers had carried out their grisly duty in full view of the professional mourners. Scalpel had signed it too. Inheritor of the Ferryman's mantle, Scalpel's name was now good to whatever she put her hand to.

No-one and everyone would miss him.

Scalpel had been the closest soul to Obulus, one of the very few he had indulged in any sort of confidence. Even then, she'd bore him little goodwill. Their interactions had been business-like and brief, with no confusion of affection or friendship. The respect she offered him was that of one predator acknowledging the apex predator and little more.

Others knew only to fear the Ferryman.

He'd never done anything to the contrary to refute that position. While he was alive, every shadow had eyes, each passer-by a pair of ears seeking the greatest of secrets. From the upper echelons of the nobility right down to the undercity scum in the sewers, Obulus' reach extended into people's lives and left them dancing like puppets. Regardless of your station in life, the Ferryman's talons had scratched at your skin or over your door.

No longer. Obulus was dead. Dead, as the common man said, as a door-nail. Not that a piece of iron could truly ever be dead without a soul.

The Spirit Weaver leaned back and rose from her perch, walking off the stiffness settled into her bones. Though she couldn't see the waning daylight, she knew from the absence of voices and footsteps echoing down into her crypt that it would be dark by now. It was the end of the year, the time when those of the Solthecian faith celebrated and gave gifts to each other, even the sternest of chamberlains and magisters retiring for the holiday. Most would be leaving early to go to places of warmth and cheer.

It didn't matter to Scalpel. Her haven was always cold and bleak no matter the time of year, the chill air stale and rank.

Across from where she sat lay several of the old tomes and ledgers Obulus had kept in his quarters, his secrets and lies laid bare at last. It was fascinating, if time intensive reading. For the last three days Scalpel had seldom stopped, her eyes poring over the words in the grave candlelight.

Her fingers found a crook in her neck, and she massaged it away with a grimace. Tilting her neck side to side with only the slightest of clicking sounds, the Spirit Weaver absentmindedly reached to the cold tea left by the side of her desk. She sipped it thoughtfully before taking a longer draught, wetting her dry throat. Over the top of the ceramic cup she surveyed the

space, searching the assembled spirits for the balefire glare of her tormentor.

She was relieved to see Ghast maintained his absence, lurking still in whatever depths he'd chosen to haunt following the murder. Once upon a time, Scalpel had feared nothing either alive or dead, but the Silent Terror frightened her to the very core. The shade had almost overwhelmed her and wrested control. His return would doubtless be equally as traumatic. The memory of his eyes burning into her left Scalpel with a shudder like feet over her grave.

Head suddenly muddy, Scalpel raised a hand to her brow, finding a layer of cold sweat. When she removed it, she was no longer alone. A fresh dread crept over her flesh at the sight of the grim shade now standing opposite.

'What do you want with me, Ferryman?' Her voice turned to a low hiss, filled with malice.

'Much. I have plenty to reveal to you, my trusted aide. My blade in the dark. My murderer.'

'Lies! Your secrets are all here, shade. Laid out in your precious books, scribbled by your own hand.' She turned away from the apparition, tottering uncertainly on feet that felt suddenly heavy and drunk.

The interior of the Ferryman's study awaited her, rich firelight dancing over the stone walls and wooden shelves. Eyes wide, Scalpel felt her heart racing in her chest as she recognised the scene.

'You cannot escape me, murderer. My legacy will always surround you.' Obulus' voice sounded from behind, echoing boldly from the walls.

She whirled to confront him, only to see the dreaded vision of the Ferryman hunched over in front of the fireplace once more, as he had been that fated and bloody eve. His shade stood patiently to one side, staring her directly in the eye.

‘Step forward along your ill-omened path, murderer. Fulfil the destiny of this violent past.’

Scalpel felt her leg moving, propelled by some otherworldly possession she was unable to resist, relentlessly drawing her ever closer. She opened her mouth to offer retort but no sound came, her voice entirely muted.

‘How does it feel, becoming the victim of forces beyond your control?’ Obulus’ voice was as even and dispassionate as she recalled in life, his tone somehow conveying a scathing rebuke nonetheless.

‘I was afraid.’ Silence stepped out from the shadows besides Obulus, long robes soaking up the warm light until his face alone seemed to float disembodied. ‘Uncertain of myself.’

‘Craven? Or merely wearing a coward’s crown as a pretence?’

‘I was enthralled. My pulse racing, the blood chasing around my body.’ Silence replied where she couldn’t. ‘I am become the Thorn, the needle which draws the blood of its master.’

Scalpel tried to shake off her disbelief and pull away, rewarded only by a second footstep over the carpet. Another and she would be on top of the kneeling

figure. Her hands began to raise unbidden, long knife reflecting the light in a bright burst.

'He is coming.' Silence's voice couldn't hide the sense of fear she felt, as a third figure swam out of the gloom.

Riven by a festering canker, the shade bled more malevolence than ever before, stealing warmth from the air. Jagged teeth rose from the wreckage of a broken and rusted mask, fallen to reveal a stare absent of anything but hatred for the living.

Her body a deadened mass beyond her control, the Spirit Weaver nonetheless felt herself recoil from Ghast, her soul desperate to escape the apparition's gaze.

'You have betrayed not only me, but the creed of your people, murderer.' Obulus' mocked her, his lip turned cruelly upwards. 'A Spirit Weaver must never let themselves be ruled as they seek to rule others, lest their own destiny be stolen. That warning, passed by your ancestors, went unheeded this eve.'

Ghast leered out of the darkness, rotting flesh milky and pale despite the warmth of the fire. Balefire blazed in the depths of hollowed sockets, malignant and unrelenting. As her knife reached towards the Ferryman's throat, the Silent Terror's mouth dropped open in a scream, a wretched and hideous screech to match his morbid visage. The moment Scalpel's blade pierced the Ferryman's skin, the spectre vomited spoiled blood outwards in a tide, a stream of red choking the air.

Silence took up the wail echoing inside her skull, as the crimson taint in the air rushed towards her in dark and unholy ribbons, wrapping around her body and holding her fast. Scalpel felt the air strangled from her body, constricted and chased away. Over it all, Silence's scream reached a new intensity.

Death swam before her.

'Enough!' Obulus' hand slammed downwards onto her desk, breaking the scene and returning Scalpel to her crypt. Fallen to her knees and gasping for air, she could only listen as he addressed her. 'You are weak, murderer. Did I die... for this weakness?'

'N-no.' Her voice felt like it had been dragged across hot sand, cracking from the blistering heat.

'Then you are even more the fool than I thought.'

The world shimmered and changed once more, this time the cold grey hues replaced by a less severe glow, emanating from scores of candles. A murmured chorus rose to her ears, the gentle sound of hundreds of voices raised in carol. When she caught her breath and raised her head to see the world at last, Scalpel found herself in the aisle of a great cathedral, long rows of robed supplicants standing to either side.

The Ferryman's shade hovered as persistently as ever. 'In life, I was condemned as the evil corrupting the Empire of the Free Cities.' He offered a disdainful stare at his surroundings. 'This is the blight threatening you all now.'

Scalpel found the strength to rise to her feet, just in time for the shade to round on her, snarling his

recrimination. 'You say that I did not die for your weakness, yet you served these devils like a dog. Do not think that I was blind to the Saint's visit, murderer. They used you. And now look at their power! Their ranks swell beyond all comprehension.'

Scalpel's eyes roved over the ranks of devout followers, unable to comprehend the sheer press of bodies. This was an army more than a congregation, each figure wearing a determined mask over their features, eyes glazed from some mass delusion. At their head stood Grace, just as Scalpel recalled her. Azure blue and eggshell white gleamed in the light as the woman raised her arms and led the faithful in song, her expression triumphant.

'Before I showed you the past, and your infamy. This is the present, where the result of your pact is rejoiced by the Solthecian church, led by a figure more hateful and ignorant of your beliefs than I ever might have been.'

'I am no lamb, Ferryman. I stole your life in exchange for the future of the Guild.'

'You cannot cancel your sin by refusing reward, murderer. Still you have fulfilled their wishes. You would call yourself Puppet Master, yet you are little more than puppet.' He paused. 'If you had backbone... if you had backbone, you would be the woman who sits now alone in the lonely graveyard, one soul pitted against a hostile and unforgiving world.'

Scalpel didn't know who Obulus was referring to, but it didn't matter. Her cheeks flushed in shame. His logic was irrefutable.

‘No matter.’ The vision dissipated at his words, leaving the pair of them back in Scalpel’s lair once again. Scalpel looked around her, her mind calmed by the frozen stillness of the room and the low light. The spirits had fled, she noticed.

‘Tell me, murderer. What do you see now? Do you really possess the blind hubris to think your actions can possibly be your own?’

Scalpel didn’t offer him a reply, preferring to keep a sullen silence.

There was but a moment of calm between them in the sudden quietude before the Spirit Weaver detected a faint slither, the sound of leather scraping across hard stone tile. She turned back to the shade. ‘What do you visit me with now? More nightmares from this hellish present you have created?’ It was impossible to keep seething hatred from her voice.

‘We are done with the past, and the present. Now, comes the future.’

She turned back to the entrance to her cell, alarm taken root in her belly. Her feet a leaden burden, she watched with growing trepidation as a trickle of yellow light began to paint the rough edges of the brickwork surrounding the entrance. The slither had grown to scraping footsteps, scratching insidiously into her mind.

‘I refuse your future, Ferryman.’

‘You cannot.’ His voice was cold and dead when it reached her ear, a whisper from beyond the grave.

Before Scalpel could give retort, a figure lurched into view, but a child at first glance. Lank hair ran like long streaks of oil from her scalp, its dark hue a stark contrast to the deathly pallor of her skin. In a hideous parody of the Solthecian carollers, the girl held a large candle in the palm of an upturned hand, seemingly uncaring of the molten wax which dripped down to sear her flesh.

Horrified, the Spirit Weaver turned to speak once more to the Ferryman's shade, only to find him absent. Her gaze swept to the open pages of his tome, a single silver coin placed on its aged parchment the only indication of his presence.

She returned to the doorway just as the mournful child lurched through, the grave light illuminating the metal discs set into the vacant sockets of her eyes. Scalpel didn't need to look closely to know they would be one and same as the Ferryman's tokens.

The Murderer bowed her head.

Dead he may be, but the Ferryman's legacy lived on.



THE MINER'S GUILD



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REVOLUTION

The Behemoth didn't start on the first try, the heavy machinery misfiring with an angry whirring of gears, black smoke bursting from the exhaust to wreath the mighty engine. For the briefest moment, Ballista quite forgot himself and felt doubt settle upon his mind. The creation hadn't seen anywhere near the extensive level of testing he'd once have insisted upon, when furnished by a large purse and the luxury of time. Instead, he'd brought it down here into the mines relatively unproven, consoling himself there would be no better trial than surviving hard graft amongst this industrious folk.

Ballista could hear that the choke was pulled all the way out when the driver tried to fire the engine again, the sound of the ignition a throaty rasp. His earlier fears abated as a low whirring sound took root inside the engine block. It slowly gained tempo and volume until the entire chassis bobbed up and down, the movement reverberating through the ground to where the Lord Artificer stood with Shaft, the Miner's Foreman.

Fissure's expression remained set in concentration, eyes narrowed as she carefully balanced the fuel mixture and coaxed the Behemoth into firing on all cylinders. By the time the foul tar smoke had been completely banished by paler grey, Ballista was delighted to hear the machine ticking over at perfect

pitch. Not for the first time, he smiled at how quickly the young Numasai had learned her new trade, mastering the drivers' seat in mere weeks.

Fissure offered the rest of the crew a thumbs up, pulling a heavy set of goggles over her eyes before turning her attention to the sheer rock wall ahead. With a sudden shudder the entire engine began to lurch forward on its tracks into the gloom.

Never one to wear an easy smile, Shaft's mouth resisted the grin Ballista thought he saw creeping at the edges of his lips. Bright streaks betrayed the shorter man's satisfaction all the same, fleshy lines cracking through the grime covering his face. The Miner might have been a dour, dry-humoured soul, but the Lord Artificer knew there was plenty here for the average man to respect. The people of the Miner's Guild were fair and honest, even if they did hold their cards close to their chest among outsiders.

The pair looked on as the immense machine loudly trundled forward, barely meeting resistance as the drill struck the opposite wall and quickly shattered the stone into a shower of chalky dust. In moments the Behemoth was surrounded by broken lumps of rock and soil as it forged ahead. Spade led the other members of the crew in its wake, pitching the debris into a huge hopper lashed to Mule's long arms.

Shaft clapped Ballista's back in a comradely gesture, his smile threatening to break free at last. 'Not often you'll hear me say something like this, Engineer,

but—’ He was interrupted as the whole world began to shake violently, continuing for several seconds as a vicious aftershock thundered its way through the cavernous tunnel. A cacophonous rumble soon followed, emerging loudly from somewhere in the depths despite untold tonnes of rock.

Ballista took cover by instinct, no stranger to explosive munitions.

Only as the shuddering subsided did he feel confident enough to gingerly rise to his feet and dust himself down, a wary eye appraising the walls and ceiling for any trace of falling stone. He wasn’t surprised to see Shaft and the other Miners had kept their feet. Despite a shorter stature from so many years under the ground, they were a hardy breed, long familiar with the danger that came as part of their surroundings.

The Foreman was bellowing at his crew over the noise of the Behemoth, good spirits replaced by an irritated scowl. ‘Spade, get your arse down into five and find out what that damned fool thinks he’s doing! I hope for his sake that blast has taken his head clean off this time, or I’ll beat it bloody myself!’

The Lord Artificer didn’t doubt Shaft would be as good as his word. In the short time he’d known the man, Ballista had quickly become accustomed to the fierce loyalty the Foreman held towards his own. There wasn’t room in this mine for a maverick who endangered the others.

The Miners formed close knit communities. They

all worked together, drank together, and shared each other's burdens should they arise—and arise they often did, given the extreme working conditions. One look at their weary and lean cast, along with the variety of disfigurements they'd suffered was enough to convince Ballista of that.

It was another world compared to the ingrained isolation and competitiveness of the Engineer's Guild, where individual artisans jealously guarded their secrets with threats and hard words. Everyone was equal down here. If their labour bore fruit, everyone profited, not just those who were already wealthy. Ballista found the idea strangely appealing, and quite unlike anything he'd encountered before.

'Sorry about that.' Shaft shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

Ballista chose not to voice his own thoughts on the matter and opted for politeness. 'Not at all. Always one, eh?'

'Huh, not on my watch there won't be. Fuse was—is a good lad, but I don't trust or like recklessness.' The Miner paused, a sad look taking hold of his eyes. When he spoke again, he lowered his voice and sorrow snuck in. 'I need to find him a way out of here which saves the lad face, I think. Man and boy I've known him, and he's not getting any better.'

Ballista nodded, stroking his chin. 'War's like that. For some, the scars lie under the skin, and don't ever seem to properly heal.' They both knew the words to

be a considerable understatement. The first moment he'd laid eyes on Fuse, the Lord Artificer had seen the unhinged tint in the Sapper's eyes, and the devilry curling his lip.

Further down the tunnel the Behemoth at last resumed its passage, emitting a sharp metallic grinding sound as it struck a harder vein of rock amongst the soil. Ballista nodded appreciatively as he heard an undeterred Fissure change gears and the drill switch up to a higher torque.

Shaft saw his opportunity to change subject to something more comfortable, jabbing a thumb backwards towards the machine. 'That's one bastard monster you've made there. Never thought I'd see the like. Does the work of ten men, and doesn't even hurt the back of the driver neither.' He chuckled mirthlessly and patted the surface of his prosthetic arm. 'If we'd had one of them back in my younger days, I might not have the ol' jawbreaker here.'

'Jawbreaker?' Ballista raised an eyebrow at the unusual name.

'Aye, that's the name the lads gave this thing after I laid out one of those bastards from the Thatcher's Guild. You'd have laughed to see it. I know I do, remembering his feet leaving the ground and him coming back down on his arse. Deserved it though. No Thatcher will ever be welcome in a mine while I draw breath, Engineer, I'll tell you that.' As if to underscore the point, he spat a bitter mouthful of phlegm onto the tunnel floor.

The Lord Artificer decided not to question the man further. Inter-guild rivalries were nobodies' business but those involved.

'So, how comes you decided to come down to see us again today? Here to make sure we haven't broken her already?' Shaft raised an eyebrow good naturedly, and Ballista found himself returning the gesture with a smile. These were earnest people. It was difficult not to like them.

'I doubt you could. Five sheets of armour plating cover the Behemoth. Even a rockslide or cave in shouldn't much bother it. No, I came here with an entirely different proposal for you—and maybe one that'll solve your problems with explosives too.'

'I'm listening.'

Ballista chose his next words carefully. He knew that times were hard for these people. As the Empire of the Free Cities rapidly expanded during a new era of peace, the Miner's Guild bore the brunt of increased demand for raw materials more than most—yet their administrative class of magisters and chamberlains seemed entirely content to pocket the increased revenue without improving the lot of their workers.

Over a quiet drink in the mess hall, Shaft had privately confided of shortages in food, supplies, and new bodies to replace those who were forced into early retirement by injury. Appalled, Ballista had done his best to supply prosthetic replacements for missing limbs, and bent his continued mechanica research into

providing new equipment like the Mule and Behemoth. But for all this bold group embraced him with a heart-warming familiarity, his actions still fell shy of making the difference he'd hoped. The agonising hard labour continued, for longer hours, and with less people.

He'd not been surprised to discover protests were a common occurrence in the mines. The men and women that laboured in these terrible conditions were disgruntled and underappreciated. There had even been strikes, where crews threw down their tools until some reparation was made. In the aftermath of such events an uneasy stalemate had come into existence between the councils formed by the workers and the elites above. Even a typically reserved and taciturn figure such as Shaft was put on edge by the volatile situation. The Miners were ready for a call to arms.

It was precisely this sentiment Ballista planned to appeal to.

'In the cities, far from the isolated wilderness of the mines, the world continues without the slightest hint of your plight. From the lowest man in the gutter to the crown princes and monarchs, nothing is being done to either address or increase awareness of your struggle.' He waited for the foreman to nod before continuing.

'You and I both know that to be a travesty. I've never known conditions like this outside of the horrors I witnessed in trench warfare. We both know the situation cannot continue.'

‘But what do you suggest, Engineer? Our tools are blunted. The councils argue and bicker amongst themselves on the way forward, and short of a violent uprising, I cannot see a way forward. Even then, our numbers are so few that if we took to the streets, we’d quickly be lost amongst the throngs of people. You spoke yourself of our anonymity.’ The frustrated words were clearly hard for Shaft, his expression resigned.

‘I agree. But we can change that. It feels obvious to me your plight can reach a greater number of ears should you be given the opportunity—and after much consideration, I have decided exactly the platform to achieve this, and the body of people who shall take up your protest.’

Shaft wasn’t slow on the uptake. ‘Guild Ball? But what can we hope to achieve among the paltry audiences of the lower divisions?’ He snorted. ‘I have no confidence in the bastard elites parting with their gold in any case. We could never fund a team, despite the wealth they make off our broken backs.’

‘And that’s precisely why we’ll ignore them. I will fund you. And, my influence will assure you of a place in the Big Leagues, alongside the Engineer’s Guild. There, you shall find the voices you need and boots to march for your cause, united behind you. The revolution is coming. And this will be a new beginning for both of us.’

Shaft scratched his chin thoughtfully, gruff nature warring with optimistic excitement. In the silence

Ballista heard singing, echoing down the tunnel from where the crew still worked to dig out the debris.

The sound was inspiring and powerful. The sound of a bold future, that would reach across the simple boundaries of nations and sovereignty to unite the population behind a flag of equality.

On instinct and without hesitation, he thrust his hand boldly forward.

The foreman gave up the uneven struggle, and let a broad smile take hold at last. ‘We stand with you, Engineer—as your comrades.’





THE FREE CITIES DRAFT



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— RESSURECTION —

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

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

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

Until now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She didn't dare look back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amber guessed she was the latter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The gardens beyond were in an equally sorry

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

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

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

'Looks like a dosshouse,' Amber muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

her way down the central staircase with deliberately heavy feet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amber nodded absentmindedly, looking after Edge

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She thought she heard Edge snort beside her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What have you got to lose?

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

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

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

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

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

This was her time.

The road to the Free Cities Draft had begun.

— INSIDE THE CASTLE —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Edge.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The moment she saw Knuckles waiting between

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

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

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

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

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

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

No doubt such behaviour sat very ill with Champ.

As her head returned, Amber tried to catch up with

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

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

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

He made it look easy, every time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a sense only aided by her infamous past.

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

And then there was Cutlass herself.

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

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

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

After first seeing them sit down to dice, Amber had

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

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

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

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

Knuckles deserved far better than such an ending.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amber knew she had some natural aptitude, but

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

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

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

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

Not yet.

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

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

first hurdle, even if the trial did terrify her.

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

— FOOTBALL LEGEND —

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

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

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

softly breaking the stillness.

What a difference a week made.

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

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

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

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

He wasn't alone. They were all getting more

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Today, sadly, was not one of those days.

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

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

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

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

slightest opposition.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was broken from her thoughts by a quiet

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

have been.'

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

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

'Shall we go?'

— ABANDONMENT —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He laughed, a bittersweet sound.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A pulse swept through her like lightning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Better luck next time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A shocked silence descended.

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

No answer came.

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

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

'Don't turn your back on me!'

Champ raised one hand, primed to lash out with

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My future walked away in the other direction.

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

Away from Layne.

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

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

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

up to a whimper.

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

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

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

This wasn't Layne. Couldn't be.

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

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

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

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

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

His voice was barely audible over the turmoil above

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

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

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

'Amber.'

'Amber.'

'...'

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

'Amber! Wake up!'

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

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

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

The other woman didn't let her finish.

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

For once, Edge was lost for words.

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

the door without even asking where to go.

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

One which had left her with the heaviest of hearts.

'I needed you, Amber-girl.'

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

And now it was too late.

A DEVIL WALKS BEHIND YOU

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

Yet, a far more powerful fright had taken root.

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

He might never be again.

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

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

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

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

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

softly pulled the door closed and left.

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

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

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

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

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

She forced herself onwards.

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

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

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

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

It just couldn't.

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

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

She didn't mean anything to them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But, at least she knew where to start.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Thank you, Gaffer. I mean it.’

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

'Even Edge?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A gong sounded in the distance.

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

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

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

HONOUR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

lonely darkness.

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

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

A polite cough startled her from her reverie.

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

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

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

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

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

Amber looked away.

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

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

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

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

up for the Draft.'

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

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

'Damn, when did you get so strong?'

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

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

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

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

‘Almost all of us.’

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

Champ nodded. ‘So, what do we do?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amber blinked away disbelief. They had?

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

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

Another figure approached behind Bushel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A legend transcended the ages.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amber felt like applauding.

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

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

FAREWELL

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

Now it was most certainly upon them.

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

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

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

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

trial to overcome.

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

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

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

Unexpectedly, he caught her eye and grinned. The

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

She somehow knew what would follow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nothing.

I won't ever lose this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

First, though, there was unfinished business with Layne.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— A NEW FAMILY —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eventually, Amber understood the importance of the message.

You'll always be one of us.

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

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

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

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

She'd found a new family.

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

— FOR THE LIONS —

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

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

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

None of them were winners. Not like her.

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

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

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

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

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

Quite suddenly, it was her turn.

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

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

'I've never had to.'

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

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

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

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

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

But not Champ.

She was home.

THE RETURN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— FORESHADOWING —

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

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

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

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

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

no idea why they'd chosen him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both of you?

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

best if he slept it off.

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

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

APPRENTICE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But it still looked somehow wrong to his eye.

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

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

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

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

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

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

FATHER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FRESH INK

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

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

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

quickly focussed him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

bottom of the barrel.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— ENDLESS HORIZON —

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

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

Bliss and freedom.

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

and hanged at the yardarm by sunset.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Blacksmith's Guild.

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

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

LITTLE HAWK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Then why are you here?'

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

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

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

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

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

Her eyes grew wide.

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

LAST DAYS OF SUMMER

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tackle it head on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



TRIUMPH OVER ATTRITION



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It was almost exactly how she remembered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For a moment, the world stood in calm silence.

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



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

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

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

Apparently, Bushel had been listening.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That was the easy part.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Blood filled his mouth, coppery and metallic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It didn't look good.

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

Corsair simply laughed in reply, his mirth sinister.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





BURDENED



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The setting sun cast elongated shadows from behind the trees, each the silhouette of a dagger ready to strike. The row of blades was a stark reminder of the bleak shroud hanging over the Empire of the Free Cities, and the bloody deeds Brisket feared were all too commonplace in its murky alleys.

She sat cross-legged in the centre of the pitch, perfectly positioned so her body overlapped into both halves. Even here, in the old stadium that held so many precious memories, she couldn't shake her forlorn mood. The world was changing.

And not for the better.

Once, Guild Ball had been a unifying force. Of course, the Guilds had indulged in their petty squabbles and games, played out on the pitch as a masquerade of animosity. But that had all been from on high. Down on the pitch, the bonds and pacts, the scheming and shady deals, the lies and half-truths? None of that mattered. Every team had shared a strange sense of camaraderie. There had been purity in the challenge, in the competition. Win or lose, an opponent at the end of a match reached out their hand to pull you up from the dirt, and shook yours with respect.

Perhaps that had all been the romantic ideal of a young squaddie, she considered. She remembered the Master Butcher, and how his smile never reached his eyes. His mysterious meetings with any number of anonymous Longshanks and the presence of Guild officials at their matches, always observing. The latter

especially should have been a warning to her. Since assuming the captain's mantle herself, she had become acutely aware of an inescapable truth.

They were always watching.

Now, it seemed the rules had changed. Any hint of friendly rivalry between the teams had gone, replaced by a deep and unsettling spitefulness. It bled down from above; the politicking of Guild Chamberlains and Magisters like a fresh corpse suspended above each team, infecting them with the same rancour.

The rot didn't end with the players, though. The crowds fed off the same energy, the escalating violence on the pitch matched in the stands. It had even reached the streets now, supporters clashing before and after matches. There were no friendly faces in the stands anymore. Only blind fury and hatred.

It seemed so senseless. But for those learned in the history of the game and its origins, there was another concern, slowly building momentum. In the aftermath of the Century Wars, Guild Ball had been the binding introduced to hold the Empire of the Free Cities together, intended to prevent hostile conflict from breaking out once more. And now that bandage was beginning to fray under the strain.

Brisket feared where it could end. For twenty-five long years the Empire of the Free Cities had existed. The union had fought against prejudice the entire time. Rampant nationalism and weary bitterness ingrained from decades of conflict had only recently

begun to abate. It simmered under the surface of public consciousness still, a wound covered by a scab and not given time to heal.

It wouldn't take much to ignite once more. And what would that bring back? The Century Wars? Devolution of government and a return to feudal rule? Standing armies patrolling the borders, just waiting for any slight or insult as an excuse to go to war? Mass starvation and economic disaster as communities and traders saw free movement between states end, and taxation soar?

Behind the trees the sun had almost disappeared from sight, leaving skies turned bloody red in its wake. For a long while Brisket watched it and thought of the holy iconography of the Solthecian order. They were to blame for this unbinding. Their hateful sermons and violent actions on the pitch had spread to every corner of the world where their religion held sway. The numbers attending games had swelled like never before. But the Solthecian church was not building a supporter base for their team.

They were building an army.

No one knew what for. Maybe demonstrating their influence, exerting their dominance over the Guilds. Maybe something much more sinister.

Brisket sighed. The Ferryman had told her she'd been able to stop this, if she joined his side. She'd refused him on the spot, her mistrust and doubt too much to overcome.

A week later, and he was found dead.

Obulus had been one of the most formidable individuals in the Empire of the Free Cities, his puppet strings running into every institution and wrapped tightly around the throats of several major players. He should have been untouchable. Yet, for all his power and connections, in the end the Ferryman was proven just as vulnerable as anyone else. The tide he feared had risen over his head. Now even the most decisive action felt impossibly pointless.

Brisket had lost her opportunity.

And with it, all hope.



Usually, the night before the Sovereign States' semi-finals was a festival of bright lights and vibrant colours, rich scents of cooking foods, loud music and excited chatter. People travelled from all across the Empire of the Free Cities to see these matches each year, and traders of all kinds would line the streets, pushing their wares. People young and old and in varying stages of inebriation sat and talked, warmly welcomed old friends, or danced to one of the many tunes floating on the air.

This year, the streets were empty.

Brisket walked along one of the widest thoroughfares, her eyes chasing ghosts in the low lamplight.

A bittersweet smile for a memory from three summers ago, when Cornell the bard played in one of

these doorways, surrounded by a spellbound audience, a rain of coins landing at his feet between each song. Another for the old tinker that had brought his stall to the midnight marketplace since as long as anyone could remember, toothy grin wide as he demonstrated his clockwork toys to excited children, and more intricate gadgets to their parents.

Here and there she recalled meeting different people, or the lively events that had coloured her memories of these streets. The lad who would become her first love, over by the fountain when she was but a slip of a lass. The huge fight over by the Golden Fleece between the Butcher and Mortician supporters, an event that had led to the Watch patrolling these streets ever since. A dozen half-remembered melodies from musicians, singers, and street performances.

The cathedral's bell rang over the quiet city and broke through her thoughts as it did the eerie silence, sonorous and dominating. On the horizon, the building sat high atop a natural hill, standing sentinel over the rest of the city. It reminded her of a stern judge, intolerant and watchful for any hint of transgression.

Brisket stopped in her tracks and tried to muster the willpower to offer a defiant glare back, only to find she held neither the strength or conviction. She was defeated and had reached her lowest ebb.

Ashamed, she turned her head away, only to be confronted by a stalker emerging from a nearby alley. A long robe surrounded their frame, but the wind

wrapped it around them to suggest a painfully lean body underneath, spindly arms doing little to dissuade that image. As light found the figure Brisket recognised their identity, though it wasn't one that put her at ease in the slightest.

'Butcher, look here!'

Hemlocke's voice was wispy and ethereal, putting Brisket in mind of a mummer playing the part of a spectre in a street play. She didn't know the witch, and had never held a conversation with her either before or after she defected to the Mortician's Guild. She'd never even heard Hemlocke speak, and couldn't tell whether the tone was affectation or not.

Brisket offered a simple nod in greeting. She was more than content to let the witch do the talking.

'So angry, Butcher. Always so furious, your kind.' Hemlocke's face cracked open in a smile, revealing yellowed teeth. 'Do not concern yourself. I am not here to fight. I do not wish for enmity between us.'

She stopped pacing forward and held up her hands in a conciliatory gesture, palms open and empty. 'See? I offer no harm.'

'Why are you here, then?' Brisket was unable to hide her sense of mistrust, the words tainted with unintended aggression.

Hemlocke tilted her head to the side, offering a thousand-yard stare that bled deeply into Brisket as the witch's grin grew wider. Eventually, she spoke.

'I come at another's behest, come to offer you a gift.'

‘A gift?’

‘A promise, Butcher, nothing more.’

Hemlocke’s reputation had long preceded her. She was a dangerous heretic to some, an eccentric lunatic to others, and a drug-addled and confused vagrant to the rest. Brisket didn’t know where she landed, but knew enough to always be wary. Hemlocke had powerful new patrons who were convinced the Solthecian order had orchestrated the death of the Ferryman. Being approached by a Mortician in the dead of night would ordinarily be frightful enough; under the current circumstances, it gave the sense of even greater threat.

Brisket probably should have walked away. But there was something here in Hemlocke’s words. Strings and loose threads that Brisket couldn’t help wanting to pull on, despite her concerns.

Hemlocke read Brisket’s indecision and continued talking. ‘This will mean little to you now, Butcher. But your promise could change the world... if you are brave enough to fulfil your fate when it comes upon you.’

Her face suddenly lost all hint of mirth, smile receding and replaced by a frown, cracking the powdery paint around her jaw and mouth.

‘I know that you refused once. Do not make the same mistake once more. The Ferryman can reach beyond the grave for a short time only. After that, his spirit must retire from the world, never to be seen again.’

The witch’s eyes were full of sadness, visible even in

the low light. 'Already, he has outstayed his welcome, incurring the anger of the gods. Such a pity. He was a strong soul, once favoured. When I saw the omens of his passing, I...' her voice fell to soundlessness in her throat, face twisting strangely for a half-second, her stare suddenly aimless.

Brisket waited patiently. Despite Hemlocke's riddles and confused meandering, she sensed something hidden was being revealed to her.

'Never mind.' Hemlocke snapped back into reality, eyes focussing once more and returning to Brisket. Her bony hand reached into a satchel slung around her hip, and carefully withdrew a tiny silver vial, a metallic slither that gleamed when the light struck it. The witch bent down to place it on the pavement in front of her, the action further revealing how painfully gaunt she had become.

Brisket couldn't help but wonder if the Mortician was match fit, a thought quickly replaced by curiosity if the Mortician's Guild even had a confirmed roster in the aftermath of Obulus' death. She'd long understood the team were only tied together by pacts and bonds to their captain. With the Ferryman dead, their future seemed uncertain. Even Silence, the most predictable of their number, hadn't been seen for weeks. Like the others, he was rumoured to have gone to ground in the aftermath of the Ferryman's death, whether he'd return a total mystery.

And where this particular exchange sat was another

riddle entirely. Hemlocke's business and tone didn't feel like it was Guild sanctioned.

Having left the vial, Hemlocke ghosted backwards, foreboding expression still cast over her features. She raised a single hand to wave goodbye, and for a moment, Brisket thought she saw a silver coin in the woman's palm before the shadows claimed her.

For a long moment, Brisket waited in the silence, watching for any sign of movement, listening for any hint of an ambush. When she was at last satisfied that none would come, she approached the tiny vial, deftly snatching it into her hand before padding back into the light.

In her own palm it seemed even smaller than it had betwixt Hemlocke's frail digits. The vessel was plain and unadorned metal, but the liquid inside lent it a sinister weight. The lack of scent surrounding the cork betrayed the contents as a poison of some description; its complete anonymity something only desirable to such a substance.

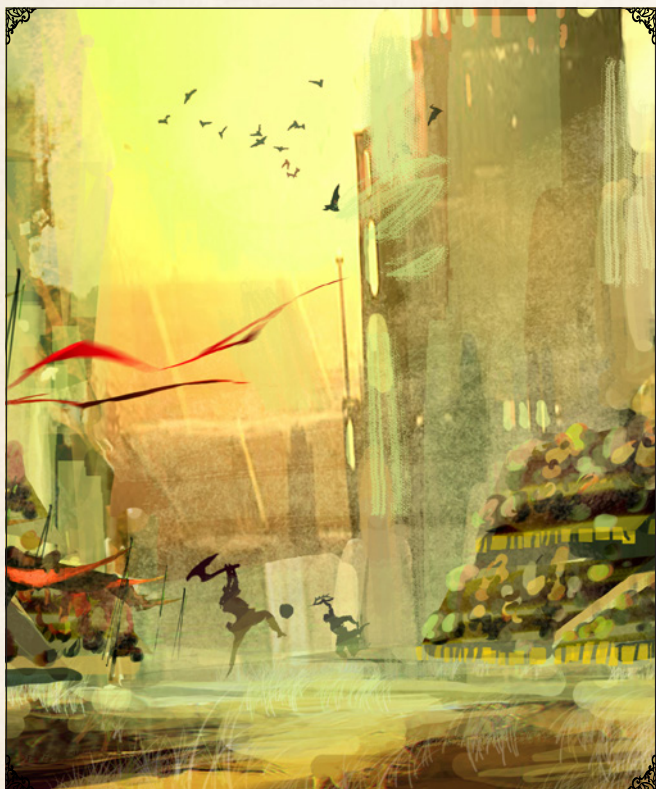
She pocketed it nonetheless, Hemlocke's words still echoing in her mind. She didn't know what to make of the meeting at this stage. Nothing ever was as it seemed in the Empire of the Free Cities; even less so when dealing with an individual as unfathomable as the witch.

Brisket finally cast her eyes over the cathedral sitting watch on the horizon, feeling the weight of the poison in her pocket like a burden hung around her neck.

Even as she cut the strings of one puppet master, another set wrapped around her from elsewhere.

There was no escape from the stage she had been thrust unwillingly upon.

With the memories of yesteryear chased away, all that remained was lonely darkness. Brisket resumed her quiet journey, entirely alone with her thoughts.





OLD UNBLOODIED



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

Yet, the Old Unbloodied managed to do so.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Boar was none of those things.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Honour doubted most even noticed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then the unstoppable force met the immovable object.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

underfoot turned crimson as the Blacksmith started to bleed out, and Honour realised the severity of the injury.

Boar was down, but Anvil wouldn't be long to follow.

Movement to Honour's side drew her attention away. Too engrossed in the fight, she'd lost track of what was occurring on the other half of the pitch. Now, a spectator to her side—a heavysset man wearing Blacksmith colours and looking for the life of him like one of their apprentices—was pointing. Further along the pitch, Bolt had claimed the ball, and dribbled his way down the field, keeping it safely under control. He need not have worried. The Butchers had left near enough an open goal without their safety player.

Meathook was heading back to intercept, but she was cut off by Ferrite, who deftly tripped the Butcher, and then stood between the two.

Bolt was on to get the first goal of the game. Without any pressure, Honour smiled to see the lad take his time and take his shot neat. The Blacksmith's Guild went ahead, and Honour wasn't sure that this Butcher side hadn't met their match.

But the question remained... where was Boiler?



GOODBYE



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A strange near-silence had settled over the Butcher end of the stands, any excitement from the start of the game quickly turned sour. A simmering fury sat thick in the air, most supporters wearing frowns or even outright snarling their frustration. Hostility reigned as the crowd vented its frustration with the game, the opposition, the heat from the afternoon sun, and even their own team. They were a beast with several heads, snapping at anything they could see, and each other to boot.

Below Brisket's place in the stands, a flustered official with a gammon red face collected the ball and booted it back into play. The man quickly jogged back to the sideline, head down, as the angry spectators began to pelt him with detritus.

Brisket snorted. She was already tired of this game, and now wondering what whim had possessed her to attend. She certainly wasn't scouting; the Order were long knocked out of the Sovereign States. She might have called it sentimentality for her past life, but that was a weakness she was uncomfortable with and would rather not face. She'd spent months trying to forget her ties to the Butchers. Wallowing in her memories now would be accepting defeat.

Besides, this was a terrible game.

Once upon a time, if you'd asked her what a team led by Boar might play like, Brisket would have laughed at the concept and then made a joke of it. Even at her most scathing, she'd have offered the Butchers a better account than a mindless charge, absent of any hint of a game plan. Yet somehow, that was exactly the scene below her. And for their troubles, the Butchers had conceded a goal, and the Beast was being stretchered off.

They didn't even have anyone in the backfield, to stop another shot.

Tenderiser was out of position and marked by two Blacksmiths but, strangely, it wasn't his presence that the team missed. Ox and Brisket had both played Boiler in the backfield as a counter-attacking player, the lad waiting for the opposition to expose themselves before gutting them. Unlike the relatively new goalkeeper role, Boiler had been a permanent fixture ever since he signed up, the Master Butcher seeing the boy's immense versatility and potential.

The team missed his presence.

And, so did Brisket.

Brisket would be the first to admit she had a soft spot for Boiler. They'd spent long hours on the road

travelling together in past years, the lad honest and carefree, lacking the wary caution older players had learned during their careers. She even missed the doe eyes he wore for her when he thought she wasn't looking. She'd never harboured even the slightest romantic feeling for him, mind, but it had been rather sweet.

Brisket snapped out of it. Enough time wasted. It wasn't particularly safe for her to be standing in a crowd of Butcher supporters either, even with her hood pulled up and a shawl covering the lower half of her face. It was time to go.

She turned and began to elbow her way through the crowd, shooting scornful glances at the people screaming and waving their fists. More than once, she ducked a clumsy forearm or winced at a particularly abusive burst of language.

She missed the days when the stands sang, and that was all they did.

The turnstiles below the stands were far quieter without the people crammed into the entranceways, the cries and stamping feet from above the only sound to break the silence. The game wasn't yet over, although she doubted the Butcher's Guild had long left. Then the space would be flooded by a furious

mob, just looking for an excuse to fight.

Better to not be around to see that happen.

Brisket had seldom been in sections of the stadium like this, and for a moment found herself distracted, considering how the match day experience of the supporters compared with her own. She'd always been a player, either out on the pitch or watching from the dugout. She knew several players scouted personally, but that had never been for her while she was a Butcher.

Brisket quietly continued her path over the stone underfoot, exiting the thoroughfare into a courtyard where the main gates were located.

There, on the horizon were cathedral spires once more.

They were inescapable.

Torn between the grim reminder of her present life and the bittersweet memory of the past, Brisket turned on her heel and stalked back around the courtyard, this time looking for an entrance to the team area. Following a path that led around the perimeter of the wall and under an archway into a second reception, she quickly found it. Two guards dressed in heavy

hauberks waited in front of a large wooden door, crossing their spears as she approached.

'Piss off, eh? Only Guild types allowed in here.'

'Trust me, mate, you don't want anything to do with them anyways. Snooty bastards.' His companion wore a kindlier expression.

Both wore the Solthecian sun painted over the cloth parts of their uniform. Brisket didn't much care for flaunting her identity even in her younger years, let alone now, but she'd also accepted her new status with the Order did at least have some perks. She reached up and pulled her shawl away from her face, shaking the hood free.

Ashen-faced, the first guard almost dropped his spear. 'Lady Brisket!'

The other guard held her composure, her lips pursed as she offered a curt nod. Only her eyes betrayed a hint of curiosity. 'Forgive me, milady, but I'm under orders to ask what business you have here before I let you through.'

Brisket kept her tone even. 'Understandable. Guild business. Scouting for next season. The Free Cities Draft are guests of the Butcher's Guild.' She had no

clue if they were, of course, but Brisket doubted the guards would have the slightest idea either. It might even be true.

The female guard didn't seem convinced, but Brisket could tell she didn't particularly care either.

The other guard was another matter. 'Illin, hurry up and let Lady Brisket through!' He shot his companion a sideways glare, and jabbed a heavy thumb towards the door.

The female guard offered him a longsuffering stare, before rolling her eyes and stepping to one side with a sigh. Brisket allowed a sympathetic smile for the woman's benefit, then quickly ducked through the door.

The moment it closed, her hood was drawn up once more.

She found herself in a huge hall fit for an army, tall arches soaring towards a vaulted ceiling either side, the opposite end at least half a pitch length away. A balcony interrupted the wall on one side, jutting out from the stone and proudly bedecked in red and blue curtains and banners, each showing the black eagle. At the ground level a towering statue of a knight broke an otherwise empty space, looking for every inch like it

would suddenly come galloping towards her.

All was still quiet with no officials to be seen, presumably all watching the game. This was the main entranceway for the teams, Brisket recalled, having been here once before some years ago with her former allies.

The entrance to the passages leading to the dugouts were on the opposite side, and it was in that direction she found her feet taking her.

The crowd was louder in the dressing rooms, softly emanating down the corridors that led to the dugouts. Brisket was surprised she hadn't been stopped before she got this far, in truth. Entering the hall had been one thing; here, quite another. Yet, somehow, the only figures she'd seen had been another pair of guards standing a lonely vigil over the entrance to what she guessed was the royal terrace, where most of the attending dignitaries would be watching the game.

Royalty held no interest for her. The handful she'd met had been contemptible fools, somehow unaware that they were pawns in the hands of the Guilds, even more so than she was. Nonetheless, their affluence could be felt. Old Unbloodied was magnificently dressed, even these quarters carpeted like the main hall, every surface dusted and clean, but for the scent of the players themselves still in the air.

Looking around the space brought back a flood of memories. Sweat smelled the same wherever it was, and the grey stone walls were anonymous enough, but the arrows and crosses on the chalkboard were a bittersweet memory from her past. Brisket smiled to see familiar plays and names. Towels and robes in Butcher red lay haphazardly on the low benches or protruded from metal lockers. A skinning knife protruded from one bench, blade sunk into the wood. Her grin grew wider.

Her family had always been a rowdy crew, ill-suited for a lavish venue like this.

A loud cheer drifted down from the direction of the pitch. It didn't disturb Brisket from her reverie. She doubted it was the end of the game yet; the sound wasn't nearly loud or sustained enough, even muted through the stone.

Much louder shouting followed, accompanied by several hurried footsteps.

She looked around frantically, pulse racing. The exit was too far away to reach, and the space open. Her eyes urgently sought refuge, eventually settling on a tiled alcove set in the closest wall. Tucked into the shadows, and with her plain robes offering little to attract attention, it would have to do.

Moments later her eyes grew wide as Fillet stormed into sight, a furious scowl written plainly across her face. Three magisters followed her, each babbling terrified apologies. Brisket's trained eye noted the Flashing Blade was a touch heavy footed, favouring her left leg.

'I don't know what you expected. The Beast has no business leading pigs to the slaughter, let alone our team.' Fillet snapped at the closest figure, her words

unforgiving. She pointed viciously, fingertip jabbing the man firmly in the chest. ‘And if Boar’s piss-poor excuse for leadership gets my little Erskirii injured...’ She shot them a venomous look. ‘I’ll slit the bastard’s throat myself.’

The man was visibly shaking, his words tumbling out in a strangled sob. ‘Lady Fillet, please accept our apologies. We did not have Meat—Lady Meathook on the roster for this match.’

His stammering earned him a spiteful retort.

‘Of course you didn’t. I sent her out because Boiler no-showed, and we were about to start with a player down—not that the Beast even bloody realised.’ Fillet turned her attention to the chalkboard. ‘I have no idea why he suddenly dropped Boiler. He’s there for all to see in the damned gameplan!’

Brisket followed the other woman’s gaze. She wasn’t lying. Boiler’s typical position was plain as day, an asterisk circled once, a large arrow protruding upwards from it.

The Flashing Blade’s blood was still up. ‘Can’t the bastard even count higher than the number of fingers on his hand to know he’s missing a player?’ She quickly shot down the reply. ‘No, don’t answer that.’

Another cheer erupted nearby.

‘Well, I hope you’re damned well happy. Your shitty decision cost us this year’s title.’

Fillet turned on her heel and stormed out the way Brisket had entered, her entourage tripping over their robes to catch her, leaving Brisket alone once more.

She hadn’t realised that she was holding her breath, releasing it at last, shoulders sagging as the tension left her body. Silence reigned, but for the sound of dripping water behind her. Noticing the tiles around her for the first time, Brisket realised she must have ducked into the showers.

Her gaze settled on the chalkboard as she processed the conversation she’d just witnessed. Intimately familiar with Guild machinations from her years watching the Master Butcher, Brisket had already suspected Boar’s appointment was due to the meddling influence of the men and women in the high chairs. Fillet’s words had not only confirmed that, but Brisket’s eyes had seen why—the Flashing Blade was carrying an injury.

It didn’t look like Boar would be wearing the mantle long after this, regardless.

Brisket’s eyes settled on the asterisk. And where was

Boiler? She thought back to the start of the match, curiously watching the arguing officials. She wasn't sure the Beast had dismissed the lad, as much as Boiler hadn't shown up. Boar might be guilty of many sins, but he was no fool to get into a fight outnumbered.

The drip behind her was distracting now she'd noticed it. An inexplicable feeling of dread settled as she followed the hypnotic sound around the corner, tiny pools of water splashing underfoot. The only light source was the domed glass ceiling above, heavy staining reducing visibility as much as the layer of steam that had settled in the air.

As she'd feared, there, lurking within the gloom was her answer.

Boiler.

His corpse sat propped up against a pillar, directly under one of the showerheads. A wicked shiv protruded from his belly and left a puddle of blood slowly circling the drain, but the bloodstain on the pillar gave away the true cause of his death. His head had hit the stone hard enough to leave the back of his skull a bloody pulp.

Where the water dripped on him it gave the impression the boy was crying, drops that could have

been tears rolling down his cheek. Brisket found her eyes watering. Unable to hold back the tide, she broke, mirroring Boiler's tears with her own.

For long moments she sobbed, the whole world reduced to the murky gloom.

She couldn't stay.

But her feet wouldn't let her move. Not yet. Not until... until what?

Boiler had been the last one to turn his back on her after the trial. She remembered the moment all too well.

This is for the good of the Guild. This is for the future.

Some fucking future.

The Master Butcher had returned, but the Guild were too afraid to truly let him back in. Fillet was hobbled, her mantle passed on. The Beast hell-bent on destroying their legacy one game after another.

And where was Brisket?

A traitor, running from corpse to corpse, caught in a nightmare. She thought of the trail of death that had

led her to this moment. She hadn't wielded a single blade, but it didn't matter. They all weighed on her conscience the same.

Are you willing to draw blood?

The words of the priest that set her on this path.

Brisket gnashed her teeth together in self-condemnation. The only time she'd bared steel was during the trial, and even then she'd been too much of a coward to finish the job.

Venin.

Mist.

Obulus.

Brisket had ignored every warning, every sign.

She recalled her final words to the boy.

You too, Boiler. Please forgive me.

Overcome in the moment, she let loose an anguished cry. A shriek, all of the pent-up frustration, fear, and tension unleashed in a deluge. When she was done, she felt lightheaded. Giddy.

Brisket was done running. She wouldn't ignore the omens anymore.

A scrap of paper had been left in Boiler's hand as a warning, doubtless threatening further retaliation, but Brisket didn't need to look at the words on soaked parchment to know the identity of the murderers. She crouched down by Boiler, softly stroking the matted hair from his forehead so she could lean in to tenderly kiss his now-cold skin.

After a moment's thought, she gently closed his eyes.

She was going to meet Solthecius.

Not the boy.

The crowd outside erupted. The game had finally reached its bloody climax. To Brisket, it was a portent of events yet to pass.



THE FINAL



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The final. It had finally arrived. The last game of the season, and for some dark reason Honour couldn't quite fathom, the feeling that this would be the last game of her career had settled upon her.

It wasn't rational. She'd been over her preparations as thoroughly as ever; more so, even. This was the most prepared she'd ever been for any game, ever. Yet, no matter how she tried to brush it aside, a tiny, whispering voice had plagued her for days.

The First Lady took in her surroundings, hoping to drown it out. The excited faces in the crowd, each waving a scarf or banner in a fluid ribbon, like a colourful waterfall cascading down the stands towards the pitch. Voices raised in song and feet stamping a tattoo, easily overpowering the faint strain of music leading them. The wind rustling through her hair, softly caressing her skin, cooling the brand from the warm sun.

For the second year running, the Farmer's Guild had made it to the final. Last year, she had been the coach, on the sideline. This year, she'd joined the defending champions on the pitch, where she truly belonged. Perhaps that was it, Honour considered. She might be match fit, but she knew she wasn't the same as before. Running was that little bit harder, tiring her quicker. Long hours spent drilling shots on the proving grounds still hadn't quite returned her right foot.

She'd always maintained the importance of the younger generations as the future of the game. Now that she saw a hint of age and fatigue in herself, was

the voice merely the threat of obsolescence, a portent that would grow ever louder? And what would she even do without the game?

Not being able to answer that question had killed veterans. The Old Man, for one.

But now wasn't the time for this.

The air in the stadium was like bottled lightning; magic just waiting to be unleashed back into the world, one last time, to decide the most important game of all.

Honour smiled to herself. If the voice spoke true, and this was to be her final performance, it would be a good one to bow out on.

She shook her head clear just in time for Grange to nod at her, before he returned his eyes to the pitch and dribbled the ball forward for the kick-off. On the run up he held up his left arm aloft to salute the royal box.

Although awning hid the watching figures from scrutiny, Honour knew it was occupied by the Bacchus himself, the ordained head of the Solthecian order presenting this year's trophy to the victors. That in itself lent this match an even greater air of pomp and momentous occasion—it was the second time only the Bacchus had ever done so, the first the inaugural event the other.

The First Lady thought she saw one of the shadowed figures rise out of their chair and offer a hand in return, before Grange's boot struck the ball and she snapped her head back to the opposition line.

Fresh from their victory against the Butcher's Guild,

the Blacksmiths had quickly gone from the object of curiosity to serious contenders in the Big Leagues. Pundits everywhere were talking about their measured performances and versatility on the field. No game was easy, least of all a final, but this promised to be even more of a challenge.

No sooner had the ball passed the halfway line than the Farmers sprinted into position alongside their captain. Bushel ran her out wide like a winger, chasing the kick, while Windle loped along in support. Honour kept up the middle, sitting back from Grange, her eyes on the opposition to see what they intended on playing.

After his exertions in the semi-finals, Anvil appeared to be sitting this one out, his absence changing the line to a more offensive one. Ferrite and Iron moved to retrieve the ball, while Bolt sprinted to stay alongside Lady Judgement as she galloped down the opposite wing.

The other pairing gave Honour pause for thought. First, a shaven-headed young woman with a determined stare, that took her an age to recognise as Cinder.

It wasn't just the haircut; the apprentice had replaced her customary crossbow with a long polearm, the tip glowing brightly as though fresh from the forge.

Honour expected to see Furnace accompanying this strange vision but instead, the final figure was a woman she didn't recognise at all. Tall and exotically dressed under her plate, the final master wore a tricorn hat and wielded a sabre that might have made her more at home on the Tyrant's old team.

Honour didn't like the unknown at the best of times. She shouted a warning to Grange, who seemed to shrug it off. His indifference caused a flash of irritation, but Honour wouldn't let that put her off her game. There was a reason she felt most comfortable shadowing the young captain, after all. He was as strong as an ox, tougher and more stubborn than a billy goat, and even had a good head for the game. She had yet to teach him patience, though.

Their first goal didn't take long in coming.

Grange's kick had been short and barely rolled over the line, quickly collected before the Blacksmith side could pick up any pace under their heavy armour. Grange got to it first thanks to his head start, but passed back to Honour, who dribbled it forward three paces before sliding it out to Bushel.

The younger woman barely lost a step as she caught the pass and swiftly dodged forward, as cool and crisp as she might have been on the proving grounds. Seconds later—and what might have been a risky shot to a less capable striker—and the Farmer's Guild had their dream start.

As the crowds roared their approval and Bushel raised her hand to salute them, Honour felt a wave of relief wash over her. A clean strike like that had been exactly what her side needed to settle their nerves—and hers as well.

It had been simple and straight out of the playbook, putting them up before some of the Blacksmiths could leave their line, and before the Farmer backfield had

even broken into a sweat. The rest wouldn't come as easy, she knew. But her time as a Mason had left a profound appreciation for solid foundations.



The goal kick soared through the air, landing with a hard bounce and rolling into open field. Bushel had already been tracking it through the air, jogging back after her goal, and her instincts had served her well.

She wasn't the only one though; heavy clanking sounded from behind, forcing Bushel to get her head down and sprint until her legs ached like they were on fire. She reached the ball first, but only moments before her pursuer, who turned out to be Ferrite.

With a delicate punt Bushel rolled the ball and backpedalled as fast as her feet would take her. Having the ball was one thing—dodging past this heavily armoured opponent would be quite another.

The Blacksmith followed, and Bushel marvelled at how easily Ferrite moved despite the weight, using the momentum to help her shift from foot to foot.

Somewhere to her left she could hear an unmistakable huffing and puffing sound getting closer, which she knew to be her brother. His presence was extremely reassuring. If Bushel could just keep the ball a touch longer, Windle could easily tip the balance of this exchange in favour of the Farmers.

Relief quickly turned to dismay as Iron beat Windle

to the fray, his huge frame intimidating in an entirely different manner to his Master. Ferrite was agile and moved like the wind in spite of her uniform, making herself as wide as the pitch; Iron was so huge, he might as well have been a barn.

He didn't dance like Ferrite, instead barging roughly past his teammate with a huge gauntlet held out in front and head down ready to charge.

Bushel was reminded of bulls fighting in the fields. For all her match experience this and last season, her mind went blank, and she stood rooted to the spot. As Iron thundered towards her, fear left her feet like heavy stone.

Before the charging Blacksmith could reach her, Windle's swinging fist caught him under the jaw. Iron went down, but not without dragging her brother into the dirt with him, where the pair continued to fight like wild dogs, rolling over and over as they struggled.

As Bushel watched, Iron's helmet rolled off to reveal his face, nose broken and bloodied, lip painted red but smiling sadistically as he pounded Windle with heavy punches.

Even if she'd thought she could somehow help her brother, she couldn't afford to get involved. Ferrite hadn't let herself get as distracted by the exchange as Bushel, and pressed the advantage, feet snapping out to tackle the ball away.

Bushel resorted to a desperate shove with both hands, catching Ferrite off guard and giving the Farmer the opening she needed to snap a pass away,

back towards Grange.

Her heart sank as Farris intercepted, long mallet skilfully putting the ball to the ground then deftly moving it alongside her horse's thundering hooves. Bushel's view was interrupted as the sky wheeled overhead, her mind tumbling after with the realisation she'd been tripped. Breath whooshed from her lungs as her back hit solid earth, the shredded grass doing little to cushion her fall.

Ferrite loomed above, kicking Bushel's weapon away. Disarmed, Bushel immediately rolled to her left, eyes pinched and body tensed for the inevitable knockout blow.

When it never came, she snuck a look up to see Ferrite wink at her.

'Nice move, lass. But that's still my ball!' The Blacksmith leapt over Bushel, sprinting hard towards the Farmer goal.

Bushel's muscles relaxed and she found herself wearing a lopsided grin of her own. Ferrite reminded her of the First Lady, straight as a rod up and down. Looking to the side for her brother, she saw him scramble unsteadily to his feet, Iron face down and unmoving.

'Sleep it off, bully-boy.' Windle offered the apprentice a hard kick in the ribs, then seemed to immediately regret it as his toes painfully bounced off the steel plate. The crowd closest to them chuckled, their mirth shared by the apothecaries that had arrived to treat Iron.

Bushel dragged Windle's arm as he stared balefully at his tormentors.

'Come on! You can set them to rights later!'



Grange anticipated Ferrite's pass to Farris before it happened. He was too far away to intercept, but could easily reposition ahead of Lady Justice's path downfield by leaving his position and dropping into the centre back role.

Unfortunately, his current opponent had other ideas.

He'd encountered Cinder several times before now, the apprentice a familiar figure in the Blacksmith side, pelting the opposition from afar with her crossbow. He'd even admired her inventiveness with the weapon—whilst he couldn't think of any take-outs she'd caused, he could all-too-easily recall the number of times she'd punctured the ball and forced a new one to be kicked into play, or created a weak spot in an opponent's armour with a superheated bolt.

Despite how irritating others found her particular approach to the game, Grange had never been able to deny a soft spot for Cinder—she wore a mischievous grin, and kept a cool head under pressure.

The young woman standing across from him now was near unrecognisable from that easygoing memory. She whirled a long polearm around her, the molten tip leaving a bright trail seared across his vision. Her expression

matched the deadly intent of the weapon, stony and cold, absent of even the slightest trace of humour.

Truth be told, Grange knew he'd underestimated her. He could feel his leg burning from where her weapon had lashed out and punished him already, souring his mood. He deflected another thrust with a saw blade and kicked her feet away, sending the Blacksmith into the dirt. He didn't have time for this.

Millstone watched Lady Justice approaching through narrowed eyes. Far behind her, the rest of the players were all marked, fighting it out. Grange was closest and might have put down Cinder, but even at a sprint he had no hope of catching Farris. Buckwheat had been with her, but the mule had taken one look at the towering stallion and bolted.

It looked like it was down to Millstone alone to stop this goal.

She might have smiled. It was always this way.

Although, it had been a fair while since she last brought down a runaway horse. And lazy carthorses were a world apart from Judgement.

'Come on then!' Millstone didn't budge an inch. Even so, she wasn't in a hurry to step into Farris' path. No sense in being trampled. She'd have to play this like a goalkeeper and try to block the shot.

Lady Justice had the advantage and she knew it. If anything, she urged her steed on faster, the heavy barding slapping furiously against Judgement's flanks. Her mallet rolled the ball alongside, keeping it away

from her steed's hooves.

The pair were probably in shot range, but Millstone guessed the Blacksmith would want to get close enough to tap it in, rather than risk a punt at longer range.

Millstone felt her back soaking through with sweat. She had once chance at this.

Farris second guessed her and took it early, the mallet unexpectedly making contact and hitting the ball towards the goal. On instinct alone, Millstone reached out with a hand to punch it clear and succeeded, the ball ricocheting back towards the Blacksmith at pace. Her triumph quickly turned to dismay as Judgement leapt the ball but didn't wheel to collect, still hurtling towards The Farmer goal, and Millstone between the two.

The weight of the stallion would have been enough to take the wind out of her, but being crushed against her own goalpost did the rest, a loud crunch from her chest accompanied by searing agony. Millstone tasted blood flooding her mouth as she dropped to her knees, the last sight before she blacked out Ferrite collecting the ball and lining up a shot.

Mercifully, she never had to hear the crowd roar a moment later.



Honour wasn't happy to see a Blacksmith goal dent her team's spirit but, truth be told, she was more concerned about Millstone. It was fairly evident that

her teammate wouldn't be back during the match—she only hoped the sawbones would be able to patch the woman up.

Head back in the game, Honour reminded herself. They just needed one opening. The goal kick had landed at her feet, and she was quickly approaching pass range to Bushel. Ferrite and Faris were both on their way back up field, but with Iron out for the moment, Windle could mark one, and she would drop back for the other.

Ahead, Bushel waved her hand frantically, open and unmarked. She wasn't too far out, and Honour would have risked a pass once upon a time, but the gnawing doubt settled in her belly reminded her of a dozen missed kicks.

Her hesitation allowed the new Blacksmith master to step between them, making it that much more difficult again.

'Aha, The First Lady herself!' The Blacksmith actually offered a theatrical bow, a conspiratorial cast to her expression. 'It shall be a shame to defeat you in the field, my lady.'

'You and what army, Blacksmith? I am not one for being easily defeated.'

'Of that, I have little doubt.' Her opponent wore an amused expression. 'Alas, army I do not have. But Navy? Fortunately enough, that I can provide.'

The new master drew her sabre with flourish, holding it aloft for a moment. Spying her chance whilst this strange woman was distracted, Honour

passed the ball straight past her, rolling it to Bushel's outstretched foot with precision.

'Nicely done, just as I would have expected!' The Blacksmith didn't seem concerned. She swept in a circle, sword coming to rest pointing at Bushel, already running on goal.

Honour didn't get it. Her eyes followed Bushel, her path right up to the goal, leg swinging around to take the shot, and....

The Blacksmiths had turned their goal into a cannon.

As Honour watched in horror, a figure like a seadog from some ship or another lit the fuse, and then scampered back several feet. The First Lady opened her mouth to shout warning, but her voice was drowned out by a monstrous roar as the cannon erupted in a huge burst of smoke, the blast rolling it backwards over the ground.

Poor Bushel left her feet as though dragged by a wild horse, flying weightless through the air before landing in an ungainly heap. From where Honour stood, she didn't see her protégé moving.

Miraculously, the ball rolled into the cannon, scoring the final goal and winning the game for the Farmer's Guild, but Honour barely noticed, still staring at Bushel's crumpled body with incredulous eyes.

A horn sounded to end the match, but for the first time in their lives, even the crowd didn't know quite what to do.

Stunned silence reigned.

The Blacksmith offered her another bow. 'It appears the gods have seen fit to bless you after all. Well done.' She seemed amused somehow, as though she'd never really cared about the result in the first place. 'I am Culverin, First Lady. And I play a very different game to the one you do.'

Somewhere in the stands a slow clap started, the sound almost mournful to Honour's ears. She shot her opponent a hard stare through narrowed eyes.

'I don't care who you are. Have the decency to step aside, so I can reach Bushel. The girl doesn't deserve to die alone.'

Culverin ducked out of the way. 'Of course, although, do not concern yourself unduly. I am no Butcher, and use lightweight ammunition. A broken limb she may have. Death will elude her this time, you have my word.'

Honour spat on the ground between them. Then, without a word, ran to tend to her teammate.



Under that same brilliant sun, proud as could be, the Farmer's Guild side lined up shoulder to shoulder on the podium. Honour stood second in line, after Grange, dwarfed by his broad shoulders and puffed out chest. He wore a smile as wide as one of his saw blades, eyes sparkling in the light.

To Honour's left, Bushel leaned heavily on her good leg as she stood to attention, the other heavily bound.

The young woman's face was white as a fresh bed sheet, but she held her chin as high as her captain, her expression stoic.

Honour found herself mirroring them both. This was her fifth time receiving the champion's medal, but the experience hadn't grown tired. She imagined it never would.

The fanfare was deafening. Musicians stood either side of the team, flanking the deep red carpet that had been rolled out. The sound of their trumpets easily defeated the crowd, and the proximity of the sound caused her to wince when they hit higher notes. They were military players and not figures from the Entertainer's Guild, Honour noted. Each wore their own regimental dress, the disparate uniforms unified by the sash they all wore across their chests—a gold Soltheician sun pinned high upon the breast.

Suddenly the music reached a crescendo, and then abated, leaving a ringing in the First Lady's ears. It was soon joined by a drum, hard sticks ricocheting from a snare skin. At the entrance to the pitch the wide doors were pulled open and the Soltheician procession appeared, marching onwards in the simmering and hazy air.

It seemed the crowd couldn't quite decide whether they wanted to cheer or not, a handful of solitary voices and awkward claps soon lost in the reverent hush. Honour's ears detected a low murmur which had to be prayers.

She herself still wasn't sure what to make of this.

The presence of the Bacchus and his entourage should have been a momentous occasion; a sign of unity that the church was at last engaging with the architecture of the unification, and all that it stood for.

Instead, it felt uncertain and threatening. The approaching figures put Honour in mind of the emissaries that rode out ahead of an army, before the battle began.

The mood of the crowd didn't help. As the priests continued their path, elegant robes trailing behind them, the stands seemed to be cowed, faces lowered to stare humbly at their feet.

This wasn't the celebration Honour had seen in previous times.

The procession had finally reached a few paces away, and the First Lady saw the Bacchus properly for the first time. He wore the ceremonial headdress of his position, a large crown encrusted with precious jewels of all colours, arches trimmed with gold over silver sunbeams. His robes were purest white, lined the same crimson as the musicians' sashes.

The drums stopped.

Pious VI stepped forward, away from the other figures, followed only by a woman holding a small case. Honour recognised the Saint immediately, even without her mask. The mixture of authority and contemptuousness with which she carried herself was unmistakable. In a remarkably short period of time, everyone had learned to despise Grace. She played

Guild Ball, but clearly had no love for it.

Grange received his medal first, the Bacchus retrieving the round disc from the case and leaving it in her captain's hand. When Grange mumbled a word of thanks and held out his other hand, the Bacchus seemed amused by the concept, although the mirth from his smile didn't reach his eyes. The hand was retracted quickly, when it became obvious that the gesture wouldn't be reciprocated.

Honour found herself face to face with the head of the Solthecian church.

Pious VI had a patrician nose and high cheekbones sitting atop a long face, that would likely have trouble looking anything other than judgemental. He was exactly clean shaven, which lent him an air of sobriety. His eyes were cold when they met Honour's.

'You are the one they call the First Lady...' His voice was a hoarse whisper. Where there should have been other words, he only smirked; a deadly wolf looking at a sheep.

Grace handed him the medal. It caught the light blindingly, branding a multicoloured flare into Honour's eyes, and by the time she'd blinked it away, the Bacchus had pressed the medal into her hand and moved on.

Grace remained a moment longer, cruel smile cast over features that once might have worn a kindly expression. The Saint gave Honour a look that was a mixture of satisfaction and triumph, and then followed Pious VI.

Honour didn't know what to make of that.

Ordinarily, she would have remained staring forward as was customary and respectful, but her curiosity got the better of her, and she stole a quick glance at the coin in her hand.

Raised lettering circled the edge, with the year and the location of the finals, separated by wreaths at the bottom the same as ever. In the centre, the embossed Guild Ball badge was where it typically sat, but with a Solthecian sun shockingly stamped over the top.

The First Lady forced herself to look forward once more, and hoped that dismay hadn't etched itself across her face. Above, the sun disappeared behind heavy clouds, stealing warmth and colour from the scene.

Honour wondered how she hadn't seen them before, and how long the storm would be in coming.





DEATH OF
THE BETRAYER



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The storms after the finals had easily been the worst in recent memory—if not for their ferocity, then at least for their persistence.

For a week they had lashed Castellya and Piervo, a seemingly unending tide of misery tumbling downwards from the northern mountains. Merchants had been grumbling for days, floods forcing caravans traversing the trade routes to stop far short of their destinations and turn back towards home. It had even wiped the smiles from the Farmer's Guild in the aftermath of their victory, crops crushed or drowned by the unseasonal deluge.

Brisket liked it just fine. She didn't care much these days for bustling market streets, or loud evenings in taverns. The populace of the cities under this grey blanket preferred to keep to themselves, remaining in the dry sanctuary of their homes. Those who did dare venture out did so under thick shawls, walking quickly, their heads down and inattentive.

Besides, this evening it suited her purpose.

Wet from the incessant rainfall, she stood outside of the grand cathedral's outer walls and stared upwards. Her gaze was cool and calculating, her mind uncaring of the water soaking through her hair and outer clothes, and wetting her upturned face. At her side,

her hands were balled into fists, her body absent of any hint of the fear that once dominated her.

Ever since finding Boiler's corpse, Brisket found herself with purpose once more. She might have called it a sense of justice or duty, and perhaps in time some bard might tell her tale that way, but to lend her sentiment such notions would have been a lie.

A thirst for vengeance drove her.

Nothing else.

There were no guards standing at the threshold, each of them retreated to their pillboxes or having sought refuge from the elements at some dry station. The church didn't care much for their breed anyhow. Even under the strict new Bacchus, Piervo had never maintained a standing army. In their arrogance, they felt themselves untouchable.

Hidden under a veil of dark robes and shadows, Brisket slipped inside unnoticed.

The smell was the first thing she noticed. Hundreds of years of candles, slowly burning through each day and night, had stained the stone of this place. Their scent was mixed with a faint sense of damp, which was soon replaced with old dust; gritty sand threatening

to settle on her chest. The stone underfoot was dry, bare of any wet footsteps beyond her own. Only the faint drum of rain upon the tiled arches high above interrupted the silence.

She wasted little time picking a direction and stalking through the corridors. The outer walls circling her destination housed a ring of halls, greeting rooms, and holy cells for the servants and lower caste monks.

Knowing little of the grand cathedral, Brisket simply chose what seemed to be the most direct path, following where the tapestries and dressings looked most lavish or venerable, and avoiding corridors that wore a layer of dust and neglect.

The place was a maze of antechambers that seemed to have been constructed and decorated at vastly different times. Several passages hid doors that might have easily been mistaken for bland walls had Brisket not been familiar with the Soltheccian order's taste for impracticality and secrets, disguised in the open by the distracting allure of elegant domes and colourful murals.

Brisket cared little for the affluent display. It meant little to a Butcher. Of more interest to her were the candles lining the walls, their heights indicating when she might expect a servant to pass by to replenish

those that had faltered.

An abrupt turn in the path took her beyond the outer walls and chambers and across a courtyard into the inner sanctuary. Beyond here was the cathedral itself, standing in stark relief to the night skies, the windows coloured by bold candlelight from within.

The same light illuminated the trees and bushes in the gardens surrounding her, turning their twisted branches into jagged fingers, ghouls reaching out from the crypts that surely sat beneath.

Statues of forgotten priests and saints observed her passage silently, their faces cast in shadow. The statues were joined by a murder of crows in the eaves of one mausoleum, their tiny shadows unmoving, only distinguishable by the reflection shining over their eyes.

This time there were guards at the entrance, standing to attention under an alcove with bright sconces set into either wall.

There wasn't any pretence in Brisket's approach. She was an intruder, and there was no excuse for her to be here, even given her station as captain of the Order.

Neither man had a chance to ring the bell by their

post as she swept out of the darkness with her blade bared. She hurled her heavy cloak at the first soldier, the sodden cloth weighing him down whilst she drew a thin line of red across his surprised companion's throat. As her victim fell to the ground, hands groping at the red mess of his ruined neck, she leapt on the figure trying to free himself from the dark cloth and stabbed hurriedly.

Five, six, seven times, and he still struggled. On the eighth his strength faltered. The ninth robbed his legs of their ability to stand, and the tenth left his eyes glassy as the cloak fell away at last.

She left it with the corpses, a morbid tribute to the murder.



The moment Brisket stepped into the narthex, she knew she was no longer alone. The candles were much brighter here, and there were far more of them, all freshly lit. A low whisper intoning absolutions tickled her ears, the hairs on the back of her neck rising in tandem with her fury.

The wretched order might find forgiveness from their god, but Brisket would have none.

It was a long walk down the lonely nave, flanked by the

empty pews. Observing only a lone supplicant kneeling at the altar with their back to her, Brisket remained light-footed, but didn't try to hide her approach. By the time she reached the foot of the altar, the figure had finished her own passage, and risen to look down upon her.

The Saint's surprise was quickly replaced by disdain, her lips twisting into a cruel sneer. 'Why do you blaspheme this sacred ground, Betrayer? Surely even a wild dog such as you might understand the futility of the gesture? If you are here to cause me injury or raise diablerie, you shall be sorely disappointed.'

Brisket's only reply was to wipe her long knife clean, replacing a red smear with purest silver.

Grace's eyes narrowed. 'I am not some contemptible pawn, Betrayer.' Her voice was a low rasp, strained from long hours of prayer, made sinister by her words. 'Do not doubt that I will not hesitate to draw blood against transgressors and sinners, even upon this sacred ground.'

Despite her words, the Saint made no move to reach for a blade to defend herself. Brisket knew why. Somewhere in the depths Benediction doubtless stalked towards them both, ready to strike. Uncaring of the danger, Brisket began to ascend the altar steps

towards Grace. She didn't harbour any illusions of surviving this night's bloody deeds.

Benediction revealed himself as Brisket reached the top, dressed in holy vestments rather than the armour he typically wore, but no less an intimidating figure for it. Pale and milky eyes glared in her direction as he stepped smoothly between the two women and drew his sword, raising it in challenge.

Brisket knew speed was of the essence. She had no hope of matching strength with Benediction, and doubted Grace would be long in joining this encounter. Her first attack went straight for the large man's legs, feigning a dodge to the flank and away from his blade, before crossing back towards his exposed knee as he blocked.

Unburdened by his armour, Brisket underestimated Benediction's speed. As her knife inched towards his body, she was met with a weighty backhand that sent her tumbling head over heels, falling painfully onto the steps. Before she could right herself on the uneven surface a kick struck her flank, and sent her crashing to the bottom, her descent arrested with a jolt as she struck a pew.

The fight far from beaten out of her, Brisket leapt back to her feet, gritting her teeth at a spike of pain in her

ribs. She saw Benediction advancing cautiously down the steps, like a hunter stalking a wounded animal, waiting for it to lash out.

Somewhere beyond the cathedral, the sound of bells broke the air. At first a single tone, quickly joined by others. Brisket didn't need to see a clockface to know it wasn't the chiming of the hour. By the time Benediction had reached the bottom of the altar steps she could hear raised voices, and the familiar echo of spear shafts over stone tiles.

Brisket saw Benediction close his eyes to concentrate on the sound, a momentary flicker of uncertainty registered across his features. She took her chance, leaping forward, knife darting across his leading arm, slashing to bleed him rather than cut deep. The blade sank in and came away in a ribbon of blood, crimson painting the marble tiles. She didn't wait for him to react, sprinting up the steps and towards where Grace had been.

Benediction's hand caught her ankle and unbalanced her, causing Brisket to pitch forward, hitting her jaw on stone no less forgiving for the carpet trailing over the top of it. She kicked out and he released his grip, quickly snapping the hand back as she followed up with a wild knife slash at his outstretched fingers.

No longer content to let her hulking giant do all of her dirty work, or perhaps content that Brisket had seen enough of the fight beaten out of her, Grace was descending the stairs.

'Betrayer... unbeliever.' Her voice was scornful. 'Enough of your persistence!'

'I'm glad you saved that horseshit about illumination, at least. That's a sorry joke I'm long tired of!' Brisket struck upwards, taking Grace by surprise. The metal bit into the Saint's flank, blossoming blood forever ruining robes of pure white.

It didn't look like a deep wound, but Grace seemed stunned nonetheless, eyes moving from the rapidly expanding stain and then back to her assailant. She tripped a handful of steps as Brisket tore her knife free, leaving the Butcher with the higher ground.

There was commotion outside now.

As Benediction joined her, the Saint regained some of her colour, her mouth opening into a wide smile, teeth bared and bright in the light. Brisket wondered why, until she heard another set of footsteps. She risked a look backwards, deeper into the shadows leading to the antechambers behind. Her heart sank to see a tall figure wearing ornate and lacquered armour, blade

drawn and striding confidently towards her.

These weren't odds Brisket could ever win, but she'd take as many foes with her as she could. She turned her back to the figures below, and ascended the final steps, ready to face this new threat. Tasting blood from where she'd bit her lip hitting the steps, and spat it onto the altar.

'I don't know you. But I will not sell my life in vain, or cheaply.'

The paladin looked impassive. 'Your kind always offer empty gestures before the inevitable. It matters little. You have defiled this holiest of all places, and there can be but a single punishment.' A slight smile tainted his neutral expression. 'Prepare for illumination.'

'Piss on your illumination. She'll not die today, and not your hand, tin man.' The sounds of struggle outside had died, and a familiar voice took reign over the scene.

Ox. The Master Butcher.

Brisket felt adrenaline surge through her veins, replacing the lead that had begun to settle there from the fight.

Something else, too. A feeling she thought she'd forgotten entirely.

Pride.

'The Master Butcher himself. Do you remember me from before?' The paladin looked straight past at Ox, any trace of smile replaced by a deep frown.

'Aye—and we have a score to settle,' Ox snarled. 'I spent long months promising myself I'd find you and cut your heart out. Time to pay the Master Butcher's due, de Corella.'

Ox wasn't the only Butcher. Gutter danced past him, a whirling dervish of steel chain and vicious hooks. She charged into Benediction, glee all-too-evident on her face as her opponent tried to parry strikes that were far too fluid for a sword alone. Without Benediction's armour to protect him, Gutter's chain exacted a terrible toll, lashing his body and leaving him listing heavily within mere moments.

Each time the metal barbs hit, Gutter cackled viciously, taunting the inquisitor, and Brisket realised that the Union woman too had a score to settle here. The Sanguine Blade would make this hurt, beating all strength from her prey until he could stand no more. Only then would she execute him.

Quick motion dragged Brisket's attention back to her own surroundings and she was forced to dodge to one side, as the paladin charged past and towards the Master Butcher, baited by his pride.

That just left Grace.

Without her hatchet men, the Saint didn't look nearly as confident as she had before. Her wound appeared to be more severe than Brisket had first thought, red painted over Grace's belly and legs by now. As Grace backed away, each step came with a visible wince.

Brisket might have found some measure of sympathy for another soul. Death was no trifling matter, and a horrible thing to see approaching. But for this wicked devil, masquerading as an angel? No. There could be no atonement, no forgiveness, and no mercy. Brisket remembered the names of all of Grace's victims, the faces seared into her mind.

'Any final words, Saint?' Brisket strode forth to close the space.

Grace was unarmed, one hand outstretched to ward her assailant away, other arm cradling her body. 'I giv... give you n.. o, no satisfaction, Betray—'

She never finished the sentence.

Brisket sidestepped Grace's guard and plunged her knife deep into the Saint's chest. She snarled in triumph, batting the other woman's feeble hands away, grasping the back of the Saint's head with her free hand and pulling the inquisitor close.

'Meet illumination, Grace. May your god still find you, after I close your eyes!' She gave her blade a savage twist and the Saint shuddered violently, a broken shriek leaving her lungs. Satisfied, Brisket pulled the knife clear and kicked the body to the ground.

Grace looked pitifully small compared to her threatening presence in life, the robes of her order clinging to her flesh to reveal a wiry frame underneath. Remembering her promise, Brisket stooped over and roughly forced the Saint's eyes closed.

Grisly duty done, Brisket started towards the other Butchers, but Ox already had other ideas. 'Go! Finish the job—Butchers know better than to leave spoiled meat on the cutting board!'

The paladin seemed to realise what that meant and his face grew ashen, but Ox pinned him in place. 'Oh no, bastard. It's just you and me now. No band of thugs to beat me bloody!' Ox swung his cleaver in a wild arc, forcing a hurried block.

At the opposite end of the cathedral, shouting guards swept in.

Brisket nodded. There was other business at hand, and there wasn't much time. She broke away, heading for the doors that de Corella had emerged from.

The Bacchus would be there, waiting.



Decorated and furnished with the most extravagant riches over the course of hundreds of years, the opulence of the inner sanctum was staggering, even lit only by meagre candlelight. Brisket couldn't help staring as she stalked through, trying to make sense of the events unfolding behind her.

The presence of the Butchers was something she'd hadn't anticipated, nor were their motives entirely clear. Would they sell their lives dearly, or settle their own grudges and escape? Was it truly possible they'd come to her aid?

She felt a tear roll down her cheek and quickly brushed it away. Regardless of their intentions, time was desperately short. There would always be more guards, and her own escape wasn't likely. She was too deep in the bowels of this spiteful beast for that, and

had too much blood on her hands, even before this final and most heinous of crimes.

Brisket's body was at last beginning to ache from the bruises she'd sustained, yet blood still rushed through her temples to the beat of her racing pulse. Her eyes roamed relentlessly for any hint of movement or hiding place.

She eventually found him waiting in a large circular antechamber, illuminated in cold light from a glass dome above.

Quite unafraid, as though he had already seen the outcome of the evening long before, the Bacchus watched her calmly and with a straight back. It seemed that if this man would meet the August Lord, he planned on doing so with tranquillity and decorum.

Or not at all.

The thought had Brisket watching him through narrowed eyes, stealing glances at her surroundings for other assailants.

'I recall watching my predecessor, Galbratii, expire.' Pious VI's voice was strong and regal, doubtless refined during long years of diplomatic service to the highest quarters of society. 'It was a fascinating experience.

The man was not suited to this office. Day after day, hour after hour, he wasted away, borne low by the attrition of the role.

‘A pity really. He was a dutiful priest, and a kind soul.’ A slither of poison crept into his voice. ‘Piervo does not appreciate such men and women.’

Brisket didn’t care for wherever this was going. She had little patience for whatever words his confession might contain. She began to advance, eyes still cautiously watching the shadows.

‘Of course, Galbratii didn’t die anywhere near quickly enough. But the August Lord is forgiving to those that are able to discern his true duty.’

‘Typical of your breed. Empty excuses for crimes against innocent people.’ Brisket’s words bled hatred. Boiler’s face swam through her mind, eyes running, this time with blood as Grace loomed above, smirk writ upon her face. She blinked it hurriedly away.

‘Oh? Are you so different?’

‘No. But at least I have honour, despite you bastards trying your damned best to steal it from me.’

Pious VI laughed, deep, and full, taking her aback.

For a long moment, the Bacchus was quite overcome by mirth. As he laughed, he shuddered, as though he were expelling the final dregs of joy that lurked within his body.

Brisket studied him suspiciously. He'd become a wailing spectre in the moonlight, painted pale silver.

'We stole nothing, Betrayer,' the Bacchus wheezed. 'You were tested and found yourself wanting.'

'Not this time.'

She crossed the final few steps in a blur, striking out. Her knife sank into his flesh, gutting him. He caught the metal blade in one hand, pale and weathered skin turning a gory shade as it prevented the weapon from sinking deep into the hilt, but it was still a mortal wound. He staggered, then fell to one knee, looking upwards to arrest her with a stern glare.

Even now, his face regained a grim measure, features easing into distaste. 'Always... resorting to barbarism. Your... your breed is pathetically low. I would have offered you more. I was the future, the order to... this world.'

Brisket pulled her blade free and laid it at his throat.

'You, who are without mercy. You, who has brought the world to its knees, and threatened the union that thousands died in order to build. You, who murdered with ice in your veins, and all to see your own standard blanket the world and block out the sun you claim to worship.'

The sharp metal drew a hard red line. Pious VI let out a guttural sigh, and sank backwards. He landed with his face staring up at the moonlight, mouth fallen slack, and eyes closed. A dark shadow quickly pooled beneath him.

Brisket's shoulders sagged. It was over. She had defeated the demon that had so terrified the Ferryman, and claimed vengeance for them all.

More than that, she had found herself once more.

The Betrayer was dead and gone. In her place once more stood a Butcher. Her life might be forfeit, but she would die with a family, and honour.

As herself, and not some puppet.

The door leading to the sanctum burst open behind her, followed by loud shouting. Brisket turned her back to the Bacchus, and dropped into a fighting stance, ready to sell herself dearly.



RESURRECTION



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Heavy rain had washed a tide of drenched soil over the steep path winding up to the remote graveyard. Now turned to treacherous mud in the downpour's aftermath, it sat idly over loose stones, a trap for those foolish enough to risk passage to this lonely place.

As Hemlocke climbed, slipping and scrabbling at vicious branches and roots with her hands, she swore misery upon every Old One she knew from the domains and moons of water. It was their torrent that had been unkind to the shrubs, stripping away leaves to reveal sharp thorns and bristles that rubbed and bled her fingers raw.

Once, the Witch might have been too respectful to curse the Old Ones. But those ancient creatures had proven themselves impotent by now, either unable or unwilling to save her when false prophets had come for her skin. Despite the sense of betrayal, Hemlocke didn't blame them. Accusations and petty notions of were the preserve of mortals, and not the gods. She despised herself just as much, besides. Not for siding with the dead-men and adopting their funereal rites, but for accepting the Ferryman's cost of salvation.

She crested the footpath at last, and almost dropped to her knees from exhaustion. This high up, the wind buffeted her, an angry storm of sylph and djinn twisting her robes and trying to drag her to the edge where she might be thrown from the perch. The Witch banished them with swollen hands and wicked tongue.

This was truly a wild land of spirits and storms, and

did not welcome human intrusion.

In Hemlocke's experience, mankind was ever keen to demonstrate its folly, trying to tame the wilds. How little they truly saw. Even the cabal of hunters in the north had forgotten spirits like these. When her breath at last returned, Hemlocke placated the restless spirits as their host assembled once more, assuring them she would depart before the sun fell.

It was a pact she did not intend to break.

Hidden deep in a pocket Hemlocke wished was bottomless and holed, it lurked. A shard of midnight black onyx, carved and polished into a perfect oval; a dark and unholy tear.

To the foolish eyes of the ill-informed it was worthless for anything more than a paperweight.

Hemlocke was neither foolish, nor ill-informed. For a long time, the shard had tainted her soul, stealing her destiny and visiting her with dire omen. Even when it had been sated with a soul of its own, a sharp and jagged vein of hunger remained, taunting her.

At last, she would be rid of it. At last!

Then her bond would be paid, and her life returned.

Hemlocke walked between the stones, searching for the one she knew must be here. Strange souls sat atop some, watching her. They were all very old. Most were at the cusp of being forsaken. Their features had eroded to a skull-like visage, great sloughs of skin having fallen away to leave bleached bone beneath, or even empty voids where no hint of physical presence could sustain

itself. Such was the fate of souls that could not feast upon humanity to sustain their presence. No matter how powerful the desire, how vibrant or desperate the hunger, nothing could live without vital essence, either their own or something stolen.

Finally, she found the stone. The Ferryman's final resting place, where his remains had been banished far from the eyes of man. Unlike the other stones surrounding her, each home to a shade in some varying state of decay, Obulus' was bare. No soul dared to earn his ire by resting there, not even the mischievous imps that typically cared little for such things.

It was time. The storms had passed, the omens clear.

The Witch found herself fumbling at the last, as her fingers found the shard. She held it in both hands, slowly raising it over her head, and offered the lifeless grave a final, baleful glance. Then she closed her eyes, and smashed it into the grey stone with all her strength.



The gale outside tore at the Master Butcher's den, far stronger than usual following the unseasonal torrents of rain. Ox grimaced as it broke his vigil over the lad in the bunk opposite, and with his concentration waning, aches returned from complaining muscles.

In spite of the discomfort, he offered the sleeping boy a satisfied smile. Layne was another night free of night terrors, those nightmares increasingly as banished from

his mind as his addiction.

A wisp of wind found its way in through some open window, running over the Master Butcher's skin and biting to his very bones. Shaking it off, he slowly stood, feeling the blood rush through legs still fatigued from the previous night's work.

A mirror was opposite, and Ox saw in his reflection a tired old man, long overdue retirement from a brutal life. He wore a long gash over his left eye, from brow to nose, dark scab in stark contrast to flesh still pale from his long time served as a prisoner.

If Layne had never looked better, the Master Butcher had to admit he felt quite the opposite.

The wound was a final gift from de Corella, the final blow the paladin had struck before Ox's cleaver had done for the man. The Master Butcher had left the weapon embedded in the man's skull as repayment. Blood for blood, and a near eye for one destroyed by the metal edge. A sadistic part of Ox that he'd thought left in the darkness underground had enjoyed the fearful expression permanently etched in the bastard's remaining eye and set upon the corpse's features.

Another gust rattled the panes, causing a door to move on its hinges and then slam shut once more.

Ox stiffened as he sensed the figure in the shadows. His hand toyed with a skinning knife concealed at his belt.

'You'll have no need of that, Master Butcher.' The rasping voice was cracked and hoarse, but the words distinct enough, and their owner familiar all the same.

‘You’re hale for a dead man, Ferryman.’

‘We both are.’

Obulus stepped away from the corner, the light revealing pink and blotchy skin stretched far too taut across his bones. He scratched at his throat’s inflamed flesh with an emaciated hand, the nails grown to talons.

Ox nodded. The Ferryman’s point was well made. Even after his return, he’d counted himself a dead man—even more so last night, until he’d made his escape. ‘And what draws you to haunt me?’

There was a long pause, as though the Ferryman was deciding how much or little to reveal. In the end he shrugged the indecision away, turning to face the low fire in the corner, eyes watching the flames ebb.

‘My duty to the Empire is done for now, the union protected.’ He paused. ‘Yet, other trials doubtless lie ahead. They always do. And, Butcher, know I am ever appreciative of allies, even amongst the dead.’

Ox scratched his beard and raised an eyebrow. ‘You expect me to sign on with you?’

His comment was met with a strange hacking sound, which he only belatedly realised was Obulus laughing through a ruined throat. ‘I expect that I won’t leave you much choice, Master Butcher. Such is always my way of things. But I would much prefer you to willingly follow. You are far too hard a man to have as an enemy, and we have never called ourselves such.’

The Ferryman’s eyes settled upon the sleeping figure in the cot, and his eyes lit as warm as the fire. ‘I am

relieved that you found a home for that one. When I founded the academy and established the Free Cities Draft, he was always the vulnerable one, always the deeply troubled genius. Had my former colleagues adopted him... he would have been needless lost down in a hole, soul and wings denied.'

His sudden change of subject was startling, although nowhere near as much as his intimation. Ox stroked his beard thoughtfully. 'You've controlled much, Ferryman. Did you orchestrate the breaking of the Union, also?'

'Oho, no. That alas, was the work of Pious VI. The despicable man was, for all his faults, certainly adherent to his adopted title. He couldn't endure the stain on the Solthecian Order's creed, by all accounts. Yet, at least he had the good foresight to let some slip through his grasp, with a little aid from my agents.' Obulus stopped to cough, the sound sharp and hard. 'The Witch especially, was instrumental. I had plans, too, for another of your accomplices, until he stole Brisket instead.'

Gutter slept upstairs, equally as exhausted as Ox after the previous night. She too had shed some of her demons in past hours, dark silhouettes left dancing over Benediction and Grace's corpses.

When no reply came, the Ferryman continued. 'You should be proud, Master Butcher. You breed your people well. Brisket was no simple pawn for me to control.'

A saddened cast struck itself over his features, turning his eyes back to the fire. 'So many lost souls, their blood on my hands in the name of defeating this threat to

our way of life. I can only find justification, and indeed, solace, in the knowledge that the church would have sacrificed many hundreds more in their inevitable wars.

‘I have little sorrow for spiteful agents like Venin, or Mist.’ His voice was a mumble. ‘Yet I am deeply sorry that the boy was the one I needed to finally convince her, to serve as her call to arms.’

No matter the twisted logic, Ox felt his blood boiling. His mind raced with thoughts of throttling the life from the Ferryman, and leaving him dead in the streets for all to see. ‘And Brisket?’ he forced the words through a clenched jaw and grinding teeth.

‘She might have lived, had she poisoned the Bacchus as Hemlocke suggested. Of course, I knew she never would. She was far too stubborn, too proud.’ A pause, then a sideways tilt of the head to regard the Master Butcher. ‘I’ve been told you joined her for the murder, reliving your former life as hatchet man once final time. I can tell it was no simple feat from your appearance. I trust that she sold herself dearly?’

‘Ask her yourself.’

Ox had the satisfaction of seeing Obulus entirely undone, as a weary Brisket appeared in the doorway, eyes still bleary.

‘Ask me what? Who are you talking to?’

‘No one. A ghost.’ Ox didn’t need to turn back to the fire to know that the Ferryman had departed. ‘He’s left now. I imagine he has business yet elsewhere.’

Dead men told no tales, after all.



The members of the Shadow Council squabbled. Once, they had been a proud group, each figure composed and seemingly immune to irascibility. Although animosity had ever sat in the room, clogging the air as much as the pipes that several of the men and women smoked, the measure of the room had been dignified no matter the venom behind the words.

Such times seemed sadly passed.

Pious VI had achieved many things during his tenure. The most insidious had been stoking the hatred felt by the Guilds towards one another beyond the traditional exploitative bonds and pacts. Over the months, they'd been pushed first to thinly veiled threats, then eventually open violence. Despite the Bacchus' death, the hourglass had apparently been broken, and the grains of sand already spilled out. It would take something quite remarkable to seal them back inside once more.

The loudest voice by far came from the figure in the seat stamped with an old numerical "11" stamped on it, spittle exploding from his mouth and running through his beard. The Lord Chamberlain of the Butcher's Guild was a powerfully built man, with shoulders most privately joked were broad enough to pull a wagon, and a bull-headedness to match. He smashed his fist into the table repeatedly to underscore each word, the impact spilling his goblet and sending the glass vessel

plummeting to an untimely demise on the floor.

In the seat to his right, the Lord Huntress looked entirely uninterested with the current state of affairs. Ever since the Fisherman's Guild had lost their seat and the Hunter's Guild had reclaimed their position on the Shadow Council, she had held her voice. During each meeting, baleful eyes stared across the table from under hood at each figure, as though seeking to skewer them in place.

At least for now, most ignored her. The Lord Chamberlain of the Mason's Guild was arguing with the High Artificer from the Engineer's Guild, who had surprisingly offered a full-throated defence of the representative from the Messenger's Guild, cowering in their seat.

By and large the others watched curiously, either waiting for a moment to shout their own agenda over the din, or already having done so and been drawn into a seething war of words with their neighbours.

The only figure to truly retain their calm was the Grand Master of the Blacksmith's Guild. A wizened old man near atrophied to extinction, he was the longest serving individual here by far, and very far from his best. His voice was too frail to best any other present, even if he had chosen to raise it.

Silently, a side door slid open at the back of the gloomy room, unnoticed by all.

The Grand Master felt a hand descend upon his shoulder, the clasp firm and unfriendly. Irritation

wrought upon his features at the intrusion, the man looked upwards through cataract-ridden eyes, mouth already framing a scathing rebuke. Upon seeing his tormentor, the voice died in his throat and his rheumy eyes blinked, averting themselves and finding a better home on the floor beside his chair.

‘Oh, Otto. The years have not been kind to you. I remember you a far more formidable man.’ The voice was a snake’s slither, deadly and sinister.

Despite its low volume, it carried to the furthest corners.

One by one, the voices broke away, or stalled in the owner’s throats. Their eyes all turned to the shadowy figure standing behind the Blacksmith, fingers still rooting the Grand Master to his seat. As each recognised the figure’s pale garb, the colour escaped from their faces, leaving them ashen and corpse-like.

The true Masters of the Shadow Council had finally returned to the chamber, after their long absence.

The Physician’s Guild.

Satisfied to have cowed the room into submission, the hooded figure finally released his grip and began a slow circuit of the table, striding confidently towards the chair marked “XII”. As he passed each figure, they sank silently into their chair, where they sat numbly, watching under lidded eyes.

Finally, he took his seat, a thin smile barely visible under the hood when he saw the glass that had been left for him. If any present felt relief at the gesture, the sentiment soon fled when he began to speak.

'Enough of these petty squabbles. You chatter like children, and I do not suffer fools amongst my vassals.' One hand brought the wine to his lips, the deep red liquid inside brushing against his lips for the merest moment. 'I am the Master Chamberlain of the Physician's Guild. Do any of you doubt me?'

Silence reigned.

The General Secretary of the Astronomer's Guild shook their head, gulping, and even the fierce Lord Huntress dipped her head in submission.

'Good. I had assumed compliance.'

A silver coin appeared in the hand of the Master Chamberlain, his fingers twisting it until it was mesmerising in the light. 'And now I have returned, we shall resume our control over the Empire of the Free Cities. A reasoned, measured, and considered reign. And your institutions shall not fail or test me, lest they and their members meet the same fate as the late Bacchus.' He chuckled. 'Yet, none of this is of your concern.'

He reached up with one crooked hand, and pulled back his hood to reveal his face before continuing. Several in attendance gasped.

'My true identity is at last revealed. And now it is time for you to pay the Ferryman his due.'

Unseen agents had already descended upon the room, figures robed black, wearing long beaked masks. In unison, they reached into their robes and withdrew long knives, silver muted black by grease and oil.

Each dropped a bright silver coin in front of their victim.

And then the blades fell.
As the screams began, Obulus smiled and took another
draught of his wine.





EPILOGUE



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Hard and unforgiving, the sun beat down over the arena. As the day had worn on, it had warmed the bleached walls until they were too hot to touch and baked the surrounding jungle until the air above the trees simmered, anything beyond the threshold a murky haze.

The inhospitable heat did little to diminish the crowds' enthusiasm. Each figure was tanned from many such days, and their faces were flushed not only from the heat, but also the bloodlust of the spectacle before them. As one, they ignored their burning flesh and screamed at the top of their lungs, bellowing at the desperate plight of the souls below, in the sandy pit.

Each fighter was armoured like a gladiator of old, snatches of chainmail and sections of interlocking plates only partially covering their bodies, to leave the rest exposed and unprotected. They were armed with a selection of barbaric weapons, spotted with rust as well as bloodstains new and old.

The people in the arena warily watched each other with cold eyes, most wearing faces that had long since given up any sense of joy, and now knew only viciousness. Several of their number had already fallen, expanding pools of crimson staining the sand beneath them.

The lucky ones were still. Those less fortunate screamed in agony. Even in their torment, they did not cry out for the aid they knew would not come.

High atop the stands, sitting in his grandiose throne, the ruler of this violent place watched the melee unfold with interest. Barely visible after so many games, he

could only faintly make out the familiar circular badge painted onto the arena floor. He alone had brought the game to the shores of the new world, this wild and untamed frontier, entirely unknown by any in the Empire of the Free Cities.

Here it would be reborn.

In the pit, a wiry woman gutted another gladiator with a wicked trident, twisting the blades and unleashing a spray of blood, before pulling it free. The baying crowds screamed her name in excitement.

A smile fixed across his lips, under his bristles. Rage like hers was something he knew all too well. The tyrant let his cigar fall from his lips, stamping it into the sandstone with his boot.

The silent curse was with him no longer.

He had created this savage dominion, and his blackened heart had found home once more.





The Blacksmiths Guild

Time was the Blacksmith's Guild had deep, near bottomless pockets. Their coffers were rumoured to be full even before the Century Wars, and they must have made a small fortune in outfitting armies during the conflict. But then, that age has passed by, and the years since have been far less kind.

The unification of the Empire of the Free Cities ushered in a new age of peace and prosperity, but with it also came a host of sanctions to protect the uneasy alliance. Most have been either forgotten or overlooked, but the laws limiting the sale of weaponry remain as strictly enforced as ever and have hurt the Blacksmiths harder than you can probably imagine. Their continued presence is no mistake. Drafted behind a pretence of peacekeeping, the laws were once spiteful measures orchestrated by the other Guilds, enviously eyeing the influence amassed by the Blacksmiths – and that has never changed.

Didn't stop the Blacksmiths though, they're a hardy and pragmatic breed. The least skilled of them still earn their way as armourers or by shoeing horses, but the most experienced masters now tie themselves to an institution and work under exclusive contract –those who are too haughty to deal on the black market, at least. Plenty a pretty penny to be made there for men and women of flexible morals who've no regard for the Lawkeepers. And the rest? They roam the land plying their trade, proud people too independent to be tied to a single place.

I've never seen the like when it comes to their Guild Ball team, though. The Guild stand a perpetually open invite to masters from all over to come and represent their trade, and those who make the journey are on the squad, master and apprentice both - as simple as that. With so many of equal rank competing for the captaincy, you'd think there would be a real clash of egos,



wouldn't you? In my estimation it's a wonder that kind of arrangement doesn't end in bloodshed.

Regardless, it works. Your average Smithy is not only intensely proud but also traditional to a fault, and very few will lower themselves to bickering. Instead, the choice of team composition is left to the Guild officials and their internal politicking, something no master wants any part of. Once the decision is made? The team just get on with it, irrespective of how well suited the candidate may be. Madness, disguised as respect and professionalism.

It makes for a very varied playstyle though, I'll grant them that. You'll never know who you're going to face. Clever way of keeping your opponent guessing, but I don't know it's not their own worst enemy too. Must be hard to plan out your game when you don't even know who the team will be, let alone the captain...

- Honour, Farmer's Guild Head Coach



Furnace, Forsaken Swordsmith

In the war's aftermath I have no purpose, an obsolete man with no duty to devote myself or my work to. My very craft is stolen, my weapons littered across battlefields, rusting slowly in the soil, never to be raised again by those with solemn honour. Life without conflict is beyond pity, one of the greatest travesties of our time and the denial of the sovereign birthright of all nations.

I am not alone in these thoughts. I see them reflected in the eyes of each of my old comrades, hollow despair mired with the sorrow of acceptance. Even the great teachings of Solthecius cannot provide serenity, no matter the countless hours spent in prayer. I fear the gaze of the August Lord has turned from us now that proud armies no longer march across the fields under bright and sacred banners.

No matter. Honour demands I continue to serve the Blacksmith's Guild, and so I shall, as best I can in this forsaken new world.

Once I was renowned as the greatest swordsmith of a generation, but from this day let it be known that never again will I complete a blade, forever denying the world the true and deadly weapons for which I was famed. I shall exact my wrath with steel which remains molten and unfinished, my retribution borne by the unforgiving flames of the furnace itself. The same searing heat that once took my eye and scarred my face shall be turned upon those who have punished us so severely, a weapon tempered only by our righteous vengeance.

Though paltry compared to the vast wars of the past, Guild Ball is the only conflict which remains in this new empire, the sole enterprise left to those who would seek the purity of trial by combat. Through it I will remain true to the ideals of my noble caste, and in my deeds once again usher in prosperity for my house. It is time to forge a new future, one in which our sword arms may remain strong, and our hearts turn to bitter iron.

- Furnace, Blacksmith's Guild Master



Cinder, The Fated Urchin

Not everyone from behind the tall white walls bends the knee to the Bacchal throne. Piervo is like any other city with its dirty streets and forgotten alleys, no matter the boastings of the holy men and their contemptuous order. In these places my kin dwell, the abandoned and runaway urchins for whom every day is a battle for survival. Priests are not kind with the scraps they throw to such children, and most of us starve before we reach our tenth name day. The ones that don't get gutted by the undercity scum, at least.

I never once believed that fate could be mine.

Even now I am not possessed of the foolish pride of my peers, nor was I too bashful to hound the man I now call master into accepting me as apprentice, following him like a pup with her tail between her legs. For as far back as I can recall, whilst I prowled the streets I wanted nothing more than to escape, and Master Furnace has delivered me precisely that salvation. Under his tutelage, I have been shown his resolve, patience, and determination, coupled with selfless devotion beyond anything I encountered amongst priests towards their church.

While I dare not hope to emulate my master's untold skill, I do at least offer other appreciable talents to my Guild, born of a desperate childhood surviving on the streets. It is with these I am best able to serve, a simple fact not unnoticed by Master Furnace, for he in truth is as pragmatic a soul as those forced to live the life of the destitute. I may never truly attain the hallowed title of master myself, but service at least affords me a full belly, and my nights on a soft bed rather than unforgiving stone.

And in all honesty, I could ask for little more.

- Cinder, Blacksmith's Guild Apprentice



Anvil, Noble Patriarch

Amongst all of the Smith masters, Anvil is about the closest to a real leader the Smithys have. He's been around just about as long as time itself, and every man jack of them bends the knee in respect. Those steely eyes of his betray nought but years of experience and wisdom, matching the words he speaks when he offers advice or answers a question. If you might look to Furnace for honour, Burnish for pragmatism, and Farris for dedication to duty, it's in Anvil you'll see pride - the true rock, the immovable object against which his enemies break.

Anvil might look intimidating with his scarred hide and stern expression, but he's never been one for putting out the pain himself. Oho, don't mistake that for weakness, lad. He's tough as old nails, more than capable of sending a man to the dirt and keeping him there - but setting up the apprentices is really how the old boy prefers to work. Even when he's playing the game Anvil is teaching the young 'uns something about the trade, showing where to strike for the most effect.

Woe betide anyone foolish enough to go after the Smithys' patriarch on the field. That's a grave mistake, likely to earn a whole world of hurt - Anvil's apprentice isn't the only one devoted to him. Several of the other masters were once apprentices themselves under Anvil's steady eye, learning their trade thanks to his stewardship. The Blacksmiths are an old Guild which values tradition and respect, and most take severe affront at anyone hounding such a revered figurehead.

Besides, it's difficult not to like a man with a willingness to take a seat and break open a bottle of mead with you after the game, even if you don't care for the rest of his kin. I've called him friend for a fair few years myself, and I don't see that changing any time soon. Trust me, underneath his long beard is a warm smile, the kind that belongs to a man proud of his work, and secure in what the future will bring after his days are past.

- Tapper, Brewer's Guild Captain



Sledge, Tempered Steel

'Aye, he was an ill-tempered bastard when he first arrived with us, I doubt even he would dispute that. Some rooks just have a little too much fire in their belly for their own good, and that's all there is to it.' Anvil stood with the other masters at the edge of the proving grounds, watching the apprentices sparring over the dry dirt. Sledge towered over his peers, the lad's sheer size intimidating even at distance. 'But you can take that kind of man and turn his mettle to good use, with careful guidance.'

Farris and Ferrite both nodded at the wisdom of his words, and Burnish grunted in agreement. Furnace alone did not seem convinced, a scowl written across his scarred face. 'Pfft. There is only so much to be achieved with flawed material, only so far that a bent blade can be beaten into place.'

Anvil stroked his beard thoughtfully, remembering Sledge's wild anger and resentment during the early days. It had taken long hours to teach the boy to master his rage and impetuosity. Just stopping him from smashing the metals to the point of ruin took far too long, before tutelage could truly begin. Anvil had found even his prodigious patience tested more than once. Yet in spite of this, Sledge's hulking frame had always hinted at a rich natural talent, and his raw strength was second to none. Anvil respected Furnace and his oft-vaunted experience but knew the man to be wrong here. The boy was phenomenal. It had just taken extra care to shape him was all.

Out on the field, the ball came loose before being quickly snatched up by Iron, Ferrite's burly apprentice. Before the lad could use his bulk to shoulder his way free from the scrum, Sledge was on top of him. His oversized hammer clipped and unbalanced Iron with his first strike, before Sledge stepped firmly into the second blow, swinging his weapon into his opponent's helmeted jaw. Iron crumpled to the ground in an undignified heap, and Sledge snatched the ball away with surprising deftness. Before any of the others could tackle him, the lad made for the goal himself, long strides propelling him up the pitch and leaving them in his dust.

Still observing from the grounds, Anvil chuckled, although not maliciously. The hulking Eisnoran had unknowingly proven his master's point very concisely. Sometimes, with a little patience, a dulled metal could be tempered to shine just as bright as that which was master crafted after all.

- Anvil, Blacksmith's Guild Master



Burnish, Old Soldier

It wasn't just the people, or their culture - Burnish had come to realise that even the air was different in the north. It was light and breezy here, free of the dry heat of Sultar, or the close warmth that plagued the distant east. Yet as much as he could breathe easier in this climate, the aged Numasai found he missed the oppressive heat of his homeland. There was a strange honesty to it, something that focused the mind to the task at hand, like working next to the sweltering forge. Enduring sweat had been no problem, but here he found the clean air distracting.

He knew he'd have to adapt until the late season regardless, until the caravans turned south and crossed the border into Indar. It would still be a long way from the familiar coastlines of his homeland, but the humid jungle terrain would be a step in the right direction at least. If he wanted a good night's sleep before then he'd just have to bed down next to a hearth in the workshop.

Still, Burnish was glad he'd made the step into the world of Guild Ball. It beat working his fingers to the bone for the military - or dealing with the ungrateful oafs that led them. All too often he'd forced himself to bite down a retort at their impossible requests, given limited timeframe or lack of materials. It had been easier during the war, when everyone's backs had been against the wall, and they were united against a common foe. In the aftermath, with no enemy to fight, it had all just seemed pointless. Petty politicking and bureaucracy ruled the day, no matter how poorly that sat with him.

But the game was urgent, vibrant even, and a man could find a sense of purpose and duty on the field.

Although Burnish was long a master, he wasn't fool enough to think he could advance himself through Guild Ball. He was old, and had no backer amongst the Guild officials besides, an arrangement he was entirely comfortable with. The Numasai knew he was no captain, something better left to more capable figures like Anvil or Ferrite. He didn't even like the lads acknowledging his title. Out on the pitch he was just another man on the team, covering the others with his Dragonthrower. Off the field?

A simple Smithy, nothing more. He knew his place in the world, and it wasn't being called "sir".

- Burnish, Blacksmith's Guild Master



Cast, Fiery Dervish

Burnish watched Cast sparring out in the yard, darting between several wooden poles set into the ground. Hanging from each on a thin piece of string was a slim metal tube, coloured copper in the sun. As the young woman danced around the posts, she would deftly clip the tubes with the sharpened edge of a buckler, each impact emitting a sharp metallic chime. She had obviously been at it since dawn, her dark skin covered in sweat and her thin tunic spotted with wet patches.

Burnish was not surprised. Whenever his apprentice put her mind to something, she did so with remarkable dedication. It had been the same back in the days he worked the ships, Cast taking up with the mechanics despite her obvious indifference to her duties. It was of considerable relief his surrogate daughter had taken much more wholeheartedly to Guild Ball, the game seeming to suit her fiery temperament more. He owed her that much happiness, his debt to her blood father.

The lad had perished during the Century Wars, during the great siege of Burdana. Young and wet behind the ears, he'd nonetheless held an aura of honour about him that most could only dream of. When the rest of the soldiers manning the walls fled, he'd chosen to stay alongside Burnish to repel the invaders. For long hours they'd remained, the two of them comrades to the end. When eventually their position was overrun, the boy's efforts had earned him a spear in the belly as a reward. Burnish had thought to apprentice the boy come the end of the wars, but instead the lad had died far from home, staining the sand red under uncaring skies.

He left behind a daughter, a beautiful crying babe. Her mother had died in childbirth, and the lass was completely alone. Burnish had never once regretted adopting the child in the aftermath. Her father lived on through her, and his duty was met.

He was snapped back from his memories as Cast let out a shrill cry and launched herself into the air, coming down hard against the centre pole. Shields extended before her, she snapped it in two, her dance ending with a shower of splinters. Burnish smiled grimly. Guild Ball certainly did suit her much better. He only hoped it wouldn't lead her to a similar fate as her father.

- Burnish, Blacksmith's Guild Master



Ferrite, Rising Star

Ferrite? She's a good, honest woman if ever there was one. Straight down the middle, and no bull to her. If she had been around during the wars, you can guarantee she would have been a career soldier. The type that wasn't afraid to get stuck in and muck in with the men and women under her command, if that's what it took to get things done. Stems from a solid upbringing, a very stern and proud family.

See those bars on her breast, and the badge on her sleeve? Ferrite used to be a Lawkeeper once upon a time. Always had an affinity for iron in her heart though, took to working it when she was but a wee lass. After signing up for the Watch she soon wound up spending most days in the shop with young Farris, learning as much of the trade as she could. Didn't take long for Lady Justice to recognise a natural talent and apprentice her proper.

Ferrite achieved her rank in record time, the youngest master we've ever known.

You can tell her roots in the way she plays the game, methodical and practised. Those tongs she wields have snapped bones more than once, just as I've seen them puncture armour or bend a blade out of shape. She always hobbles her opponents first, just like the Lawkeepers do, preventing their marks from getting away. Old habits, I guess. I don't think the woman has a malicious bone in her - it's just the most efficient way of taking advantage of her trade. That's precisely what you'd expect from a lass with a background like Ferrite.

I tell you, if she'd discovered the game before the iron? Well, she might be in the Watch still, playing on their team. Their loss though, and our gain. She's a real asset on the field, and a hell of an inspiration to the young 'uns - even that big bastard apprentice of hers. I'd say she's the closest to a natural captain we have, and I'm not alone saying it either. Her star is on the rise, both in the stands and the eyes of the men and women behind the scenes.

Here's to the lass, and the years to come. May her future be as bright as the metal she works, and her dedication rewarded with success to echo down the ages.

- Anvil, Blacksmith's Guild Master



Iron, the Battering Ram

I know his story all right. Comes from royal blood somewhere down the line, a third or fourth son to a minor baron, far enough down the succession to give the lad a real hefty chip on his shoulder. I don't doubt it's where his vindictive streak comes from, as broad as his bloody great shoulders. That he's as ugly as sin probably doesn't help. It's best for all of us he wears that helmet most of the time. I'll tell you, tread carefully around him. He doesn't care for anyone much, friend or foe, and he'll shove both out of his way just the same. Not a bone of respect in his body, not a one.

I have no clue what possessed the Guild to lumber a good lass like Ferrite with an oaf like Iron. It's scant reward for her contribution to the team. I mean, the man refuses to even play the game like most people, insisting on making a scene and carrying the bloody ball instead of kicking it. To hear him explain, he prefers some other game, old and forgotten by all except the nobility in his homeland. Rugger, they call it.

Raedlanders and their bloody sports - I lose track of how many they've invented. No wonder their empire fell, all too busy playing games instead of manning their stations I shouldn't wonder. Never a day passes that I'm not thankful my ancestors forced them from our lands. I couldn't stomach being associated with the weakling southerners.

But ach, that's another story.

At least Iron has sense enough to listen to his master. I wonder how many of the arrogant pig's bones she had to break before he learned that lesson, eh?

- Anvil, Blacksmith's Guild Master



Hearth, Bitter Matriarch

Hearth, eh? Never been a name less suited to the owner. A hearth is warm, welcoming, and comforting, a place a man can rest by after a hard day out on the fields and enjoy a quiet drink. Don't expect anything like that from the crook-backed old crone. She's a real bitch, and always has been. Vindictive, spiteful, and cantankerous? All that and more. But there's far more to her than harsh words. The old crone is not one you should cross, in this lifetime or next. She has a mind sharp enough to rival that of the old Ferryman.

Hearth is at least like her namesake in one sense of the word - she's the heart of her Guild, another old hand like Anvil. They're as different as night and day though. Anvil, strong, proud, and patient, respected by all. Hearth? Oh, I'm sure she has the good of her Guild in mind, but her position has been achieved through scheming, manipulation, and guile. Her rivals fear her, for the word of the Bitter Matriarch can be the end of your advancement at best, or death from the shadows at worst. Even a master learns to treat her with caution, and treads carefully enough not to earn her ire.

A familiar figure to the denizens of the undercity and the scum hanging around the black markets, I hear she can't work the iron anymore, down to how frail she's become in her advanced age. I can believe that to see her hobble about, but if you ask me, there's more than a hint of pantomime in how she uses her weapon like a stick. Never let it stop you from putting the boot in if you get the chance, gods know she deserves it.

She might be old, but there's plenty of life in her yet, more's the pity. The day can't come quick enough when she slips from her perch. I doubt the world will miss her, either.

- Tapper, Brewer's Guild Captain



Alloy, Huscarl

It is a unique kind of warrior who does not seek glory or renown in their duty, preferring instead to strike silent and unseen from the shadows. Those men and women will never know adulation or recognition of their feats, nor shall the tomes of the Scholar's Guild recall their names for future generations. It is in darkness they live, and in the same darkness they remain when they die.

Alloy is of such a brotherhood, belonging to a family which has pledged fealty to the Blacksmith's Guild since time immemorial. His servitude will only end with death, his calling unable to earn him prestige enough to be granted a house of his own, nor pay the debt of honour that he has inherited.

I am sure those from outside of our lands might call his bondage cruel, but Alloy surely does not understand his servitude as anything other than duty. Few amongst our number truly comprehend the necessity of such individuals alongside the more traditional disciplines, but the knowledgeable few at least have always accorded them respect and coin enough.

Aye, I have heard the stories that he is my watchman and no bodyguard at all. Know that I spit at those amongst you who call him gaoler, and name me his prisoner. Alloy might be taciturn, yet do not mistake that same spirit for indifference. Of the man himself, I could ask for no greater companion, one as far from an enforcer as can be. He is a guardian and a protector to me, and only that. Where I go so too shall Alloy, no matter his misgivings or opinions, my loyal shadow at all times.

- Hearth, Blacksmith's Guild Master



Farris, Lady Justice

Farris looked about her workshop, taking in every minute detail. As usual, the space was immaculately clean, Bolt having led the servants in their duties with his usual diligence. Farris found his character remarkable. In every task, he could be guaranteed to devote himself to the utmost, irrespective of what it was. The boy would become a remarkable master one day, just like Ferrite before him.

She was disturbed from her thoughts by drunken shouting out in the yard. Obnoxiously loud and coarse, it broke through the calm like a blade through bare skin. Farris sighed. If society shared only a fraction of the obedience or zeal of Bolt, there would be no need for Lawkeepers at all. She didn't need to go outside to know how the scene would look, another old drunk dragged in from the streets, his ruddy face a tale of a wasted life spent in the gutter.

Her time attached to the Watch had been well spent, a civic duty in which she had served justice above all, but that era was coming to an end. The pitches of Guild Ball called to her as much as service to her Guild. She was wearisome of riding out on match day, her intimidating stallion aiding the Lawkeepers in marshalling the crowds peacefully, only to see lawlessness unfold on the field. Once the games began, Farris would always remain astride the towering animal, watching with enough irate displeasure to dampen the enthusiasm around her. The last time, during the Championship final, Farris had finally seen enough. The sight of Hammer openly throttling his opponent had pushed her too far.

The next day she had formally accepted her Guild's open invite, spending the weeks since casting steel barding at the forge, preparing for the trials ahead. The Guild officials had tried to wave her down at first, hiding behind regulations prohibiting her from taking a mount to the field, but were quickly cowed. Farris would ride out atop Judgement regardless and refused to take no for an answer. Her higher purpose demanded it.

It was time to ride out and bring law and order to the Guild Ball pitches, rather than leave it at the sidelines. Justice had to be served, at all costs.

- Farris, Blacksmith's Guild Master



Bolt, the Winner

The afternoon sun beat down exhaustingly over the proving grounds, as hard and unrelenting as it was blindingly bright. Sweat soaking through his clothes and blurring his vision, Bolt ran alongside Farris as she circled the pitch, her mount kicking up great explosions of grit. It was an impossible exercise, trying to beat the horse's canter. Whenever he threatened to overtake, Farris simply drove Judgement into a soft gallop until Bolt dropped back again. Her apprentice didn't care, refusing to give up. He wore a huge grin despite his fatigue, unable to keep the excitement from his face.

Bolt had always been driven this way. When the going got tough and others fell by the wayside he would simply push himself harder. It wasn't hubris which drove him, though. It was determination. Determination to be the best, to win. For as long as he could remember, he'd always wanted to achieve victory at the expense of all else. He always had to be the last man standing, to win the race.

Guild Ball was his new outlet for that focus. When his master had announced they would be joining the team, Bolt's expression had lit up with glee. At the forge he had been unhappy, pitted against inanimate and dull metal, with no victories in sight. But in this new world he would be afforded real opposition – challenges to overcome, opponents to defeat. Bolt hadn't known true competition like that since winning his place as an apprentice, rising above his rivals.

He could barely wait.

Alongside, Farris dug her spurs into Judgement's flank once more, causing the beast to gallop away in a sudden burst of speed. Bolt filled his lungs with a sharp intake of air, before reaching deep and hurling himself forward in a dead sprint, the spiked shoes on his boots giving him extra purchase in the baked dirt.

No way he was going to be beaten. That was for losers.
And Bolt was anything but a loser.

- Bolt, Blacksmith's Guild Apprentice



Culverin, Silver Admiral

Culverin has made her fortune and fame far from the pitch as the Silver Admiral, a well respected leader of a fleet powerful enough to rival that of a Sovereign State.

She arrived to the pitch to command her Guild Ball team instead, heralded by the titanic blast of cannonfire and a deadly burst of grapeshot.

- Flint, Mason's Guild vice Captain

Cutlass, Sly Privateer

Drafted to the smiths in the Free Cities Draft, Cutlass might not have been the Blacksmith's Guild's first choice, but she's certainly aiming to establish she was the right one!

Working in tandem with Culverin to protect her team's goal, the Sly Privateer apprentice is a perfect accompaniment to her master.

- Flint, Mason's Guild vice Captain

A young woman with a hard past, the kid cut her teeth on the seas, a pirate who signed up under the new tyrant. I'd laugh that off from another, but the fierce look in her eyes? I can tell it's true.

The way she tells it, the life wasn't for her. Too much blood shed under the Pirate King's lash, and no where near enough plunder and romance I imagine. I just hope her past won't earn her a pair of shackles, or worse, a bloody end on some cutthroat's knife.

She's a keeper, and believe me she's been tested. There are some damned strong players around, but that hasn't stopped her facing them down each time, with success enough to hold her head high. In the keeper position, this kid could become a maverick.

Don't mind admitting I'm real sweet on Cutlass. You couldn't tell her dark past from her confident grin, and she always wears an approachable air. First to break out the wineskin after practice, she's the glue that binds others together after a rough day, and and the lass who drinks them all under the table on a good day. If she has any scars from her time at sea, she hides them well. This kid is worth the investment.

- Free Cities Rookies Draft Scout



The *Freebooter's Bounty* turned towards port with understated elegance, the helmsman gently steering the sleek craft through waters gleaming in the sunlight. The deck creaked underfoot as the crew hurried about their business, their shouting easily heard over the breaking waves and the clacking bird in the crow's nest. Even after so many weeks at sea they were practised and efficient, with little sign of fatigue or wasted movement.

Windfinder wore a relieved smile. It was good they'd found solace in their duty. Her shipmates had seen enough misery to have dipped the head of even the most stoic in defeat.

One last ocean wind swept over the caravel as she changed trajectory, whipping the sails and leaving a handful of crew atop the rigging clinging to the ropes, white knuckled and cursing. Their captain chuckled and took a deep draught, savouring the familiar scent. The brisk air swept a chill through her lean frame. Windfinder was not particularly well attired for this cold climate, her tunic was light and goose bumps covered skin deeply tanned from long months around the Numasai and Indarii coastlines.

She fought down a shudder not entirely borne from the cold. The hue burnt into her flesh was a reminder of too many memories for the weary young woman to count, both good and bad.

Near all of the bad had come from the last few months.

Once, running the waters out on the frontier had been a romantic adventure, each day filled with new discoveries. For three years Windfinder and her crew had plied their trade between coastal cities on the fringe of chartered maps. The sights offered by such places rarely disappointed. Majestic spires and palaces soared upward into the skies, wonderous new creatures and landmarks waiting in the wilderness beyond. The people of these distant kingdoms were as warm as the climate and generous to boot, eager to exchange their exotic goods for silver and gold. As stories of such places passed from one port to another the ships and crews in the buccaneer fleet had enjoyed steadily growing fame and riches, the *Freebooter's Bounty* no exception.

But then the *Silent Curse* had returned. And in her wake came only shadows and despair.

It had taken mere weeks for the Pirate King's heir to exert his bloody mark in these waters, the way a brawler used his fists to batter an opponent. Fantastic tales of the unknown were completely forgotten before long, replaced by morbid news of ship after ship being sent to watery graves, their crews either slaughtered or sold to the Numasai fighting pits.

Those who tried to fight back were no match for a true fighting vessel, nor her villainous crew. The buccaneer fleet was intended for exploration and trade only, the men and women manning each ship ill-prepared for bloodshed. Likewise, the local tribes and principalities cared little for the conflict. To these peoples the war at sea was the business of a foreign world and bore no impact upon their lives. Gates and ports closed, kind smiles become stern frowns. There would be no salvation offered for the outsiders.

Faced with such daily despair the surviving explorers fled, Windfinder and her crew among them. She did not harbour a craven heart, but news of so many friends sunk to the bottom of the sea was too severe a warning to ignore.

Even then, the *Freebooter's Bounty* had barely escaped.

The *Silent Curse* had caught up with her as she made her way about the Cape of Old Iron, a stretch of peaks jutting out from the land to mark the boundary of Sult waters. The *Gargoyle* and the *Valentian Banshee* had been with her, both fellow buccaneer craft sailing in line. The warning from the lookouts came too late, drowned out by a deafening volley from their tormentor. It fell mercifully short of the *Freebooter's Bounty* but near crippled the *Gargoyle*, a lucky shot snapping the mainmast and dragging the craft to a stall in the ensuing confusion.

The sight of the *Banshee* turning still haunted Windfinder, the memory of her skipper still fresh, signalling for the *Freebooter's Bounty* to hold course as his own ship raced to the aid of their stricken comrades. It had been a clearheaded yet heartbreaking decision from an experienced hand, Windfinder knew. There was little sense in both craft sacrificing themselves when one might buy enough time for the other to escape.

That understanding still did little to appease her conscience.

Windfinder doubted she would ever forget the faces of the men and women she saw as the two ships passed. Some looked resolute, determination drawn across their features; the rest terrified, pale and shaking, their fear plainly visible in the slow and disorientated way they moved about ship. Their captain had simply borne a grim smile and saluted her, his message clear.

Farewell.

Borne by powerful offshore winds, the *Freebooter's Bounty* had quickly left her allies to their fate. As she passed beyond the cape the cannonade between the two ships had begun, loud enough to make Windfinder wince, even at distance.

She hadn't dared look back.

None of the crew had grumbled at their captain's decision. Even those with fiery blood running through their veins saw little sense in remaining. Near overnight, the coin rich east had become a graveyard roamed by a dangerous and unassailable predator. They were survivors, yet in their eyes Windfinder saw only defeat and exhaustion.

But new promises awaited. The Lords of the Deep had blessed Windfinder and her crew during their flight, and she did not intend to squander their benevolence in a skinful of rum and drunken rumination.

Even before the return of the Pirate King, news had reached Windfinder of new developments in the world of Guild Ball, a hint of new possibilities for those of enterprising spirit. As her ship made its way ever westwards, she contemplated what such rumours might mean for her beleaguered Guild. Something had to be done, she knew. Her Guild's power base and fleet had been irreparably shattered.

By the time the *Freebooter's Bounty* had reached the true safety of western waters, Windfinder had long made up her mind, word already sent to the Captain's Assembly ahead of her. It had cost nearly every coin to her name and several favours beside to convince the aged seadogs that the Guild's future lay not on the boundless ocean, but on dry land. But convince them she had.

And so, here the *Freebooter's Bounty* was, coming in to dock at Boujonte for her meeting with the Fisherman's Guild.

Choosing the Fisherman's Guild as partners for this venture had been obvious, although still a carefully calculated and much discussed gamble. Ties had existed between the two institutions for years longer than Windfinder's own, with little animosity to sour the arrangement. And like her own Guild, the Fishermen too were presently adrift on a calmed sea, the continued absence of a Lord Chamberlain eroding their political influence among their rivals. Alliance with a minor Guild offered them a convenient proxy whilst they were rebuilding – both internally and on the Guild Ball pitch, where the team's importance and popularity had slipped significantly.

And for Windfinder and her Guild?

Opportunity, glory, and adventure. More crucially, capital for their coffers.

Capital enough to rebuild and rearm the craft of the buccaneer fleet as mighty warships, fit to hunt down the Pirate King if any amongst their number were bloody minded enough for the deed. There had certainly been a call for vengeance amongst the younger members of the Captain's Assembly, although Windfinder doubted the older skippers much cared for anything so petty. The riches of the eastern seas and their settlements were likely already plundered and lost, and their coasts now well charted besides. There was little sense in returning to a place become a haven for outlaws and tyrants. The wisest knew the real future was in the far west instead, across the ocean beyond Ethraynne.

With the pact made today and the victories ahead, Windfinder would secure that future for her Guild, and personal fame everlasting.

She was broken from her thoughts by a hail from the shore. Leaning over the rails, she picked out Horizon, cocksure smile plastered across his face.

Unlike his compatriots, Horizon had never once tried to hide his smuggling activities. He brazenly came and went under the Lawkeepers' noses, evading the most dutiful and slipping enough coin to the rest for them to look the other way. His lack of interest in exploring the uncharted seas set him aside from Windfinder and her crew, but for all his faults she knew him as a trustworthy man with no lack of backbone at least. No matter how much she wanted to dislike the outlaw, his roguish personality had kept him in her better graces time and time again.

Today she decided to return his grin. She was just as likely to curse it tomorrow.

She recognised the larger man stood next to Horizon all too easily, the same sneer written across his features as when they'd last spoken. Corsair had never much cared for the buccaneer fleet. If Windfinder had to guess, she supposed there was some grudge long in the past which the pirate still harboured. Knowing him, it was something born at the card table.

The final man she didn't know at all, more was the pity. As unlike Corsair as could be, the stranger was tall and well built, taut muscles visible under his jerkin. Blonde hair bleached pale by the sun trailed over his shoulders, sharp eyes set into a handsome face appraising the *Freebooter's Bounty* as it came into port. This could be none other than the mysterious Shark she had heard mention of. Windfinder decided on the spot to make a point of his acquaintance. If more Fishermen were like him than like Corsair, anchoring herself to the soil might be that much more tolerable after all.

They had grown close enough to port now for other sounds to have become increasingly evident; several voices raised in song or shouting instruction, mixed with the dull sounds of cargo being moved about. Windfinder's curiosity tore her eyes from Shark to take in the docks about her. It had been a long time since last she stepped ashore in the west, much less a capital city at that.

Craft large and small were everywhere, most unloading at this time of day. In several places lithe fishermen upended great nets, spilling a slimy tide of writhing silver across the decking. Elsewhere, burly workers unloaded cargo from merchantmen in long trains leading to tall warehouses, dark shapes blocking the skyline. Gulls overhead chattered and added their voices, doubtless circling in wait for a careless fisherman to leave some of their haul unattended.

Satisfied, Windfinder turned to bellow instructions to the crew, making herself heard over the din. Despite the rumours she'd heard, it was clear to her the Fisherman's Guild remained alive - and strong, to boot. The men and women it employed still toiled under the sun, and still bore the rich fruit of their labour irrespective of the stagnancy felt in the upper echelons of the Guild.

Far from a Guild in decline, they were simply leaderless. A ship adrift without direction.

She grinned. Direction she could provide, and she did not intend to miss this opportunity.

It was time for the Navigator's Guild to take to the field at last.