



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 Ghast, 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 ghoul, 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 Ghist was still being sewn back together.

They scored again just as Ghist 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 Ghist 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 Ghist'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 Ghist'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.’

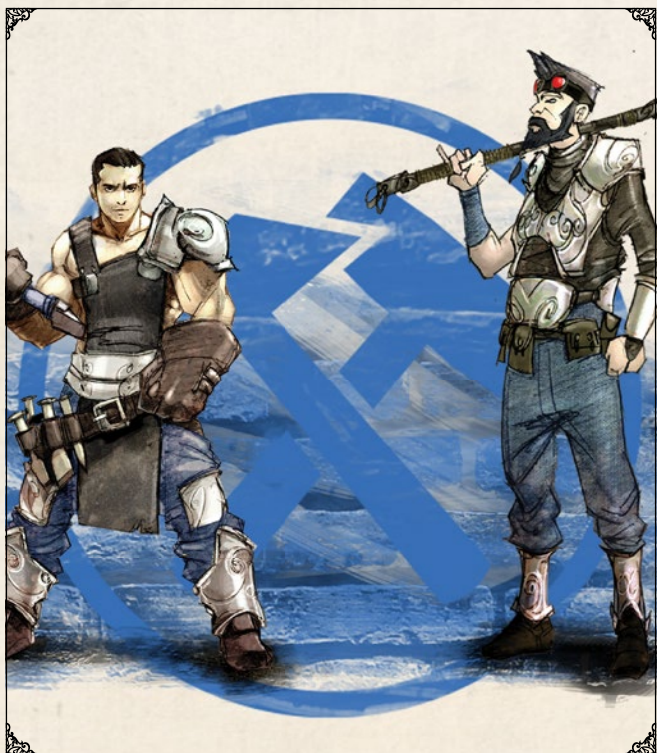
Mallet’s eyes held a far off look for a moment as he took a particularly long draw on his pipe. It was a tawny old wooden thing, pitted and scratched from time and use. He exhaled loudly, a stream of smoke puffing out between the two Masons. Tower tried his best to maintain eye contact despite the obscuring 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.

