



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.

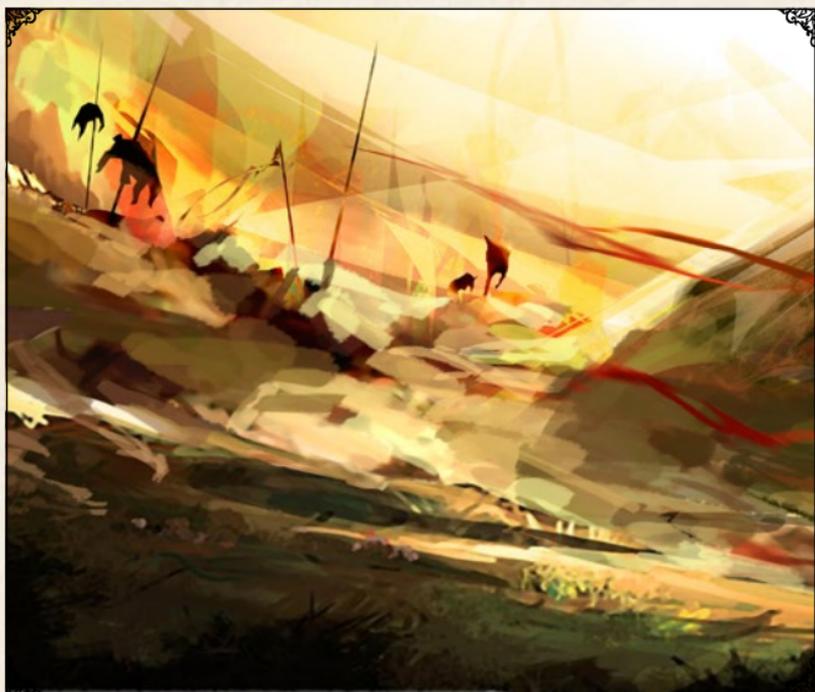
Hesitation. Uncertainty.

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

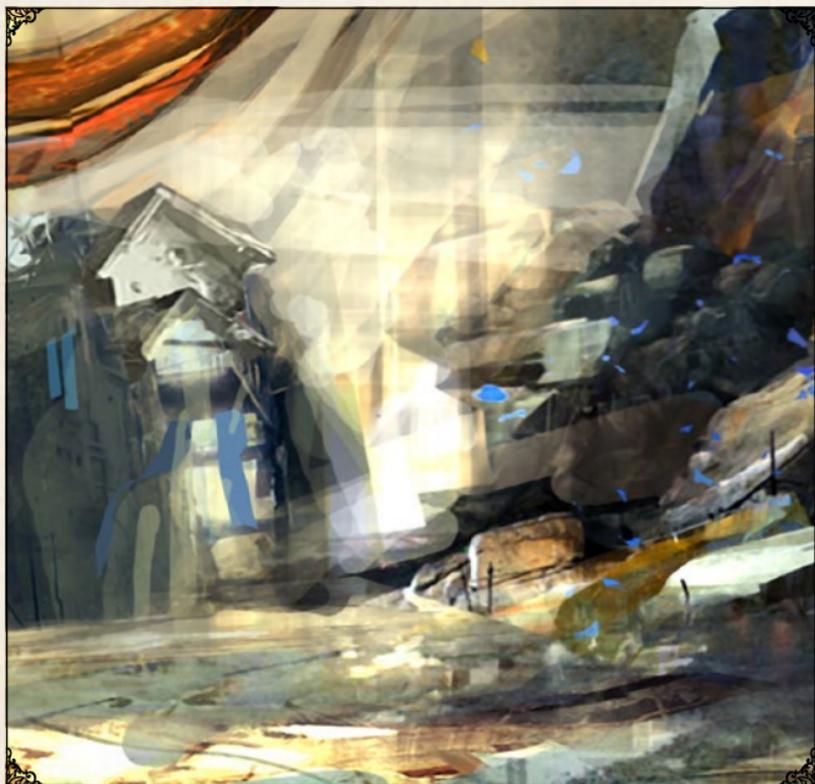
truth broke him a little more, nearly as much as the pain that had been inflicted upon him did. He lay in the foetal position weeping, cradling his stumps, too afraid to touch them, scared even of his dreams.

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.

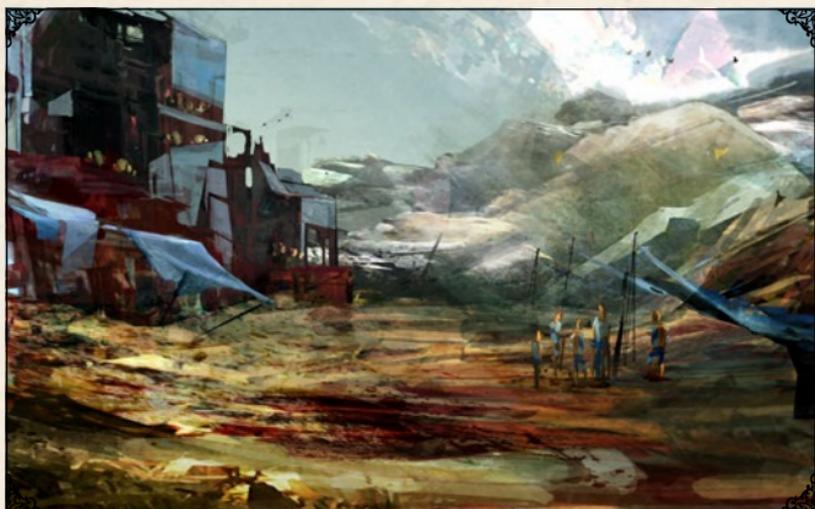
The knife snarled through the air as he thrust it into the Lord Chamberlain's stomach, viciously twisting it upwards to carve out the maximum amount of damage inside. Eyes never leaving Laurentis', Ox tore it out and repeated the brutal action twice more as blood spurted out all over them both, staining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