



SEASON 4
COLLECTED STORY



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PROLOGUE

The storm raged through the heavens, ravaging the landscape as the gods' anger thundered through the skies. Intermittent streaks of lightning stabbed violently at the earth below, stark bursts of light which briefly revealed the world suffering the onslaught. Amid open fields populated only by an occasional tree, the graveyard suffered the full force of the storm. Lashing rain had crushed the grass between the old gravestones and turned soil into loose mud, quickly reducing the ground into a treacherous mire. Wild and untamed winds threatened to uproot the vegetation, howling as they crashed upon the towering mausoleum's stone walls.

So great was the storm's fury it could be heard even in the room deep inside the structure, a faint tremor at the edge of earshot punctuated by intermittent rolls of thunder. A man sat keeping a lonely vigil in front of the wide fireplace, his head bent over a book. His heavy cloak lay drying nearby, and his simple robes revealed a toned and wiry body that did not explain his formidable presence. His silver-grey hair was lit in a burst of warm yellow which deepened to shadow behind him.

Back curved and shoulders soft as he fussed over the old tome in his hands, the man cast a studious figure. The pages utterly consumed his attention, the words tumbling from his lips in a subdued mutter. Fingers

never normally so hurried traced frantic lines under the ink and flicked through aged parchment pages.

A figure soundlessly stepped into the room behind him, gliding on flickering shadows. His back to the door, the seated man remained unaware.

Three long strides across the threadbare carpet and the assassin was upon him, steel flashing silver before the blade was shrouded deadly crimson. A red line drawn across his throat, the man flailed desperately, sending the book that had so engrossed him crashing to the floor. Bloody bubbles exploded from his mouth as he tried to speak, his nails ineffectually scratching at his killer's bared arms.

The assassin released the man and stepped back before delivering a kick to his back, pitching him forward. Still gurgling, the man fell headfirst into the fireplace, eyes blank from blood loss even before the flames began to lick at his skin.

The bloody deed had taken but seconds, undoing a lifetime of schemes, machinations, and plots in an instant. Strings cut, each would fray from this point, leading to ramifications both unfathomable and far-reaching.

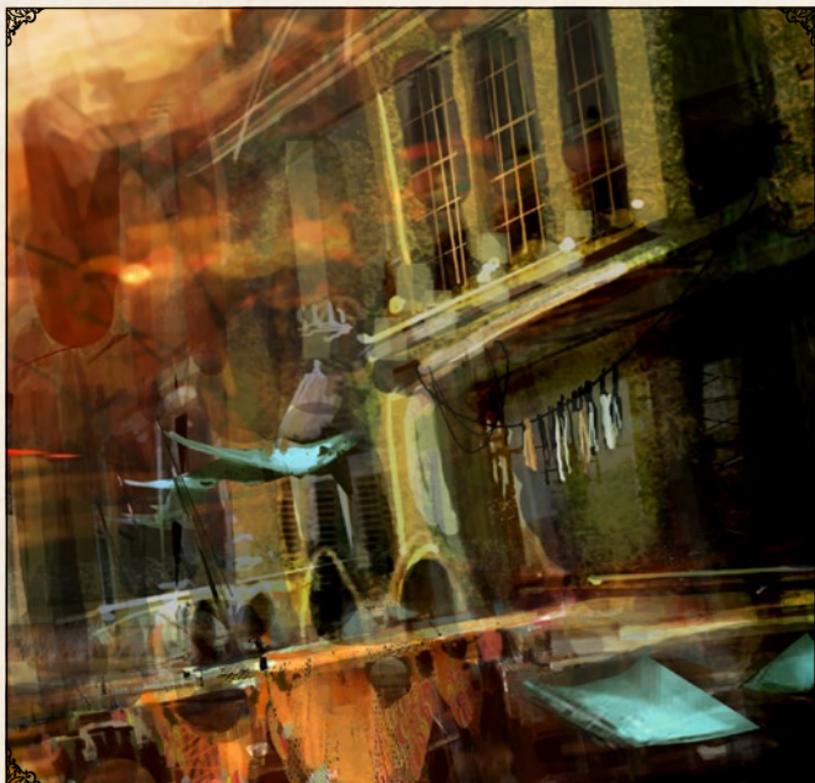
Only time would tell for better or worse.

Silence settled back upon the room, the only sound the distant storm still hurling itself at the walls outside. Ignoring the raging gale, the assassin stooped to wipe the blade clean on the sodden cloak laid out next to the fire. Then, with a reverence entirely contrary

to the brutal fate which had just been delivered, the murderer picked up the long garment and laid it over the body. As if welcoming the dark cloth, the flames licked higher, a faint smouldering smell bleeding into the room.

The solitary figure remained only a moment longer, offering the corpse one last look before fading back into the shadows.

Behind, the strings began to unravel, just as the barbs on each feather began to slowly blacken and curl in the flames.



FIRST BLOOD

Light was born into the day at last as the sun crested the horizon. It flooded between the gaps in the uneven buildings, slim fingers of brilliance lancing through the darkened streets to reveal the handful of traders already hurrying to and fro. The markets seldom waited for daybreak. Head down, each figure scuttled like an ant disturbed from under a rock, soon to be joined in greater numbers, voices echoing from the walls to fill the space as much as the press of bodies did.

Outside of the Merchants Quarter the city woke at a more leisurely pace, silence reigning but for the wind's mischief. It swept through alleys and sent abandoned bottles tumbling into the street, then rose to tease the old hinges of doors and signs, slamming the wooden panels or leaving them swinging wildly on their chains.

One such sign was that of the Drunken Seamstress, proudly suspended high above the ground for all to see. With its aged paint chipped and peeling and its colours bleached by the sun, the image emblazoned onto the wood had long been an object of speculation amongst those who cared to look. In truth it didn't much matter. The sign's importance was not the heraldry it depicted but simply its presence. Like a flag hoisted onto a mainmast, it was a proud declaration of allegiance—and a challenge to those who did not embrace it.

The sun continued its climb, and colour slowly crept into the world once more to offer a welcome respite from the icy night cold. It was not long in banishing the shadows cast upon the threshold of the Drunken Seamstress by the opposite buildings, bathing the heavy door in soft light. With its dark oak turned dull black and its metalwork rusted by exposure to the elements, it was usually just another nondescript doorway among many.

Not today.

Today the door held more significance than ever before: a message left for the Brewers, clear as the dawning day. Even afraid as they were to let their gaze linger, those few early souls unable to resist stared incredulously at the grisly sight of the animal's corpse nailed to the door before rushing onwards.

Inevitably a small crowd gathered. Voicing equal parts outrage and shock in hushed tones, they were content that in numbers they might be forgiven for stopping, a conceit entirely forgotten as the building's inhabitants roused from their alcoholic stupor. The gawkers scattered like startled deer before the sounds within, not even the Brewers' closest allies possessing the bravery to face them.

Only a single child remained behind, both transfixed by the bloody sight and too young to understand its full import. In one hand she clutched a thin, ragged toy rabbit with a lopsided grin over its threadbare face. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes and her teeth

worked her lip nervously, an unconscious reaction to the terrible sight of Scum's corpse.

A jagged piece of metal, crudely sharpened to a vicious point, had been driven through the cat's neck and into the wood of the door. Blood caked the wound, matting the surrounding hair into a crust that had turned cold during the night. The ginger fur covering Scum's belly was painted crimson, and a bloody trail ran downwards to puddle in a foreboding stain on the threshold.

The little girl startled back to herself and fled the moment she heard the heavy bolts draw back on the other side of the door. Nothing good waited in the darkness beyond, her parents had told her.

The mascot's body would only make that worse.

Hidden from sight in a dark alley across the street, Piper had watched the spectacle play out with grim satisfaction. He'd sent the others away before the break of day, knowing his kin did not possess discretion enough to remain topside, even during these early hours. Neither Skulk nor Scourge could ever be mistaken for cityfolk, their appearance far too extreme. Besides, now the deed was done, their usefulness had passed. Only he needed to remain to see that the Brewer's Guild understood the message clearly enough.

The door creaked and swung inwards, taking Scum out of sight and into the shadowy interior. Almost immediately a great cry was taken up, followed by a string of addled cursing.

The Devil of the Undercity allowed himself a dark grin before hurrying away.

The Ratcatcher's Guild had drawn first blood.

'Damn you!' Esters' fist smashed into the table hard enough to make the whole surface shake. The action matched the untamed fury in her voice, loud enough to wake the dead. 'Damn your weakness!'

Tapper didn't rise to the bait, not this time. He leaned further back in his chair with his eyes shut, one calloused hand rubbing at his temples. His damned hangover was a vicious dent in his skull, pounding like a hammer mill. Opening his eyes and letting light flood in would only make it worse.

He almost let his lips twist into a morbid grin at the lie he'd just told himself.

The Grand Brewer didn't want to open his eyes because doing so meant confronting Scum's tragic corpse lying in a pathetic heap in the centre of the table. More than anything, he wanted to keep his eyes closed for one last moment of relative peace, enjoy a fleeting calm before the storm clouds broke. After this, there would be plenty of time for anger and violent retribution, for days and weeks to come. Maybe even months.

He wanted to hold onto his composure as long as possible, especially in the face of Esters' rage.

'Damn you, answer me!' Esters bellow shattered any

pretence of inner peace, grinding into the sore spot the whisky had left behind. Tapper wearily forced his eyes open, steeling himself for an explosion of light.

It wasn't as bad as he'd feared, quickly fading to reveal the outline of their dead mascot, nail still embedded in it. The Grand Brewer stared long and hard at the shape.

They'd all assembled, down to the last. Something like this was too big for any of their number to ignore. Most had risen to their feet during the exchange, outrage written across their features. Others remained seated, framing the sad scene with sorrowful expressions. Tapper took in each face in turn, counting allies as he looked around the table.

The action had become a painfully familiar one.

Of all of them, he felt most sorry for Friday. Sunken into her seat as though trying to push herself as far away from Scum as possible, she sobbed quietly, hands barely resisting the urge to cradle her face. Spigot stood behind her protectively, his fingers reassuringly squeezing her shoulders. He wore a troubled expression as his eyes endlessly flicked between her and the cat.

Stave had also kept his seat, his face a hard read behind his whiskers. His eyes, at least, had turned to steel, although the Grand Brewer couldn't tell who that was for. Decimate sat next to the big lad, her Erskirii colours starkly different to the kutte worn by the others. A seasoned veteran of more difficult times than most of the others, she seemed far more relaxed, leaning back

with one foot over the opposite knee. The one-time exile had kept her mask, but her body language told Tapper all he needed to know. When the time came she would gladly fight—and for Tapper, given how her hips faced away from Esters and her crew.

Tapper's final man was the soldier. Hooper hadn't even sat down in the first place but had hurled his chair to one side the moment he entered the room and saw Scum. He'd been incessantly pacing ever since, muttering behind his moustache, angry cursing under his breath.

The Grand Brewer knew he could likely still trust all of them. Stave's demeanour concerned him most, but over the last few months his old friend had grown to hate Esters almost as much as Tapper did.

Against them, Esters and her cadre.

The woman herself seemed to have grown in stature since entering the room, the surrounding air taking on her fiery intensity. She leaned over the table across from Tapper with a murderous look in her eyes. Her passion had spread through the ranks like wildfire, and only one of her people remained seated. Strangely unfazed by the turn of events, Stoker sat smirking at Scum's mutilated body. As though sensing the Grand Brewer's scrutiny, the Eisnoran thug looked up and offered Tapper an ugly sneer, apparently feeling secure enough for brazen aggression.

Tapper pushed his anger to one side, dragging the desire to beat the lad senseless along with it. Time would come for such things.

PintPot leant against the wall, somehow looking hostile and bored at the same time. The Grand Brewer knew the little bastard well enough by now to realise the lad didn't bother to guard his expression much. Mash, in comparison, looked all too conflicted. Tapper detected more than a shot of sadness at the edge of his eyes. He hadn't stepped in yet, experience teaching him to wait until Esters' fury was spent.

'This is a message, Grand Brewer.' She did not say the name kindly, lip curled mockingly. 'Are you going to ignore this one too?'

Tapper stared incredulously. Did the woman think anyone here didn't know this was a threat? Calling it a 'message' was putting things mildly.

This was a declaration of war.

'The time has passed for your worthless leadership. Indecision will see us dead to this challenge, you mark my words. We answer this act with one of our own!' The Matriarch spat the words into the air with as much bile as Tapper had ever seen. Were she not challenging his seat, he would have been proud to see such a ferocious figure wear the kutte.

PintPot chimed in before he could answer. 'Now you're talking. Time to go out and kick in some heads.'

'No.' Tapper acted swiftly, cutting off the call to arms before any of the others could take it up.

'No?!' Esters slammed her hand into the table once again. 'You want to cower like a scared dog, tail between your legs?'

‘Listen to yourself. You sound more spiteful than a weakling Raedlander noble, demanding we run blindly into the undercity and raze it to the wretched ground it sits on. If our response isn’t measured retaliation, it will only turn yet more of them against us. Are you looking to build a throne for these vermin, as well as steal mine?’

Too late, he realised he’d spoken words out loud which none had yet dared voice, suddenly escalating their internal strife to a new level. Each of the others had turned their head to stare at him, a mixture of emotions cast over their features. Some wore concern. Others, anticipation. Stave’s eyes remained unreadable.

‘You dare accuse me?!’ Esters snatched Scum’s corpse and held it aloft, the animal’s body flopping about pathetically in her tight grip. ‘This is what you’ve lead us to. One of our own cut down and left out in plain sight. And you think I’m building them support? The undercity only understands one thing! Blood! And I will give it to them by the gallon for this.’

She threw Scum into the corner of the room and pounded a meaty fist into the table. ‘Who of you are with me?’ Her voice had dropped to a sinister tone. Nostrils flared and cheeks flushed red, she was a terrifying sight. Her eyes roamed over each of the Brewers, daring them to speak out.

PintPot was the first to raise his hand, quickly followed by Stoker, who twisted the gesture into giving Tapper the finger. Mash gave the Grand Brewer

a searching look, wavering for one last moment before siding with his wife. Among his own supporters, Spigot shook his head sadly and turned his gaze away from Esters. Tapper noticed a look of relief pass over the football legend's face when Friday followed suit.

Hooper was the first to defect. He crossed the floor to stand with Esters, his anger clearly having taken hold. 'Aye. I'm no coward. I'll break fingers until we find out who did this, and then cave in his fucking skull.'

Decimate tilted her head and smiled sardonically at Esters before turning her head back towards Tapper. She clearly wasn't intimidated. 'I'm with you, chief. We cut off the head, not a finger at a time.'

Hooper snorted at the insult, eyes narrowing. PintPot even stepped forward with his fists clenched at his sides. The Exile stopped both dead in their tracks, tutting as her fingers caressed the hilt of her claymore. A tense moment passed, the air heavy with bad intention and open hostility. There was only Stave to go, and by Tapper's count it would end five apiece. The Brewers were back to the same indecision which had plagued them ever since Esters' arrival.

'Sorry, Tapp.'

Stave slowly shook his head, not meeting his captain's eyes. 'She's right. We've sat idle for too long.' The huge man stood and walked away from the table, enormous arms shoving a stunned PintPot out of his way.

He stopped in the doorway to the bar. 'Remember when we were lads, and we thought we'd live forever?

We both know that isn't true now, old friend. Those days are long behind us. But back then we didn't take shit like this lying down, either. And I'm not ready to give up on that just yet.'

Stave left the room, a shocked silence hanging in the air behind him.

Tapper hung his head, defeated.

Esters wore a triumphant grin as she led her troops out.

Mash was the last to leave. The big man looked like he wanted to speak but couldn't find the words. When eventually he did, he tripped over himself. 'I don't where this leaves us, Tapp. I— I'll talk to her. No good will come of this split, not for any of us.'

Tapper managed a half-hearted nod, which seemed to subdue the larger man's worry. Mind spoken, Mash followed the rest.

The Grand Brewer collapsed back into his chair, the air rushing out of his frame.

Mash's words would fall on deaf ears. They didn't matter.

It was over.

Piper waited in the empty square under the shadows of a tree, hood brazenly left at his shoulders. Even in the shade he could feel the sun's warmth sinking into his skin, the sensation quite unfamiliar. He wasn't yet sure if he enjoyed it or not. The heat topside was

distracting for a man who had spent nearly his entire life underground, only coming out at night.

Yet there was something curiously addictive in remaining utterly still under the sun's glare, basking like a fattened rat after a feed. And to the superstitious people of the depths the tan on his skin was talismanic. The deeper the golden shade grew, the bolder he could be amongst them, and the greater his legend grew. No undercity chief before him had dared to lead his people into the daylight.

Piper would change that.

His destiny was to become godlike.

It amused him how easily it had been to pass among the cityfolk. Most didn't care to look at the dregs of society. Beggars, orphans, and whores all wore the same mask of anonymity as they slipped through the cracks on their way to the bottom. Even the street entertainers ignored the Devil as he passed through. He might have considered it an affront had it not served his purpose so well. Most of them were too poor or talentless to find allegiance with the Entertainer's Guild, existing only a single step up from the scum they pretended to ignore. In his experience, the only difference between a street performer and an old man begging for coin was the instrument they carried.

Somewhere in the distance a bell began to ring, doling out the hour. Piper followed the chimes absentmindedly, losing count after five. He didn't particularly care. Time as these people understood

it was only important topside, the concept of little importance in the depths. He was content the traitor would arrive sooner or later.

Sure enough, the figure appeared before the final echoes had faded, lurching ridiculously from shadow to shadow as their head constantly searched for a pursuer. Piper almost laughed. Such theatrics were entirely unnecessary. The Devil had known this place would be utterly deserted today, the same as it was every day. Cityfolk seldom came here. Had it been otherwise, he'd have demanded a meeting in the sewers.

He stifled his mirth for the time being. He needed the traitor in the short term. After that? There would be plenty of time to find humour in the clumsy approach. Especially when his own knife was waiting in one of those dark alleys.

Eventually the traitor arrived, just as Piper's patience threatened to run dry.

'Is it done?' Used to asking direct questions and being answered immediately, the Ratcatcher held with few of the forced pleasantries the cityfolk typically insisted on.

The traitor nodded. If the Brewer took offence at Piper's brusque tone it did not show. 'She took the bait just as expected. You should have seen the look on Tapper's face when the Guild sided with her. It was a real picture.'

'Fine.' In truth, Piper didn't care. If a wedge had been driven between the wretched Brewers all the better, but he was confident in winning the war whether they

stood divided or not. It was enough he'd forced them into rash retaliation. Nothing good would come for them if they ventured into the depths blindly, clumsily searching for vengeance.

'Pelage will find you again if I need your services. Until then, my kin know not to stick you with a blade.'

'Some boon, Vermin. Your woman had best bring the purse you owe me soon.' The masked figure's eyes sparkled at the thought.

Piper chuckled darkly. Petty lust and greed were universal, no matter if an individual were undercity scum or cityfolk. 'Don't worry, traitor. I'll not forget your due. Consider this the first token of my goodwill.'

He palmed a large gold coin from a hidden pocket and, much to the traitor's surprise, shook their hand in the style of the cityfolk. When Piper pulled his hand back, the coin was absent. 'Will that be enough to earn your respect?'

A crass expression crept over the traitor's lower face. 'Plenty.'

'Good.' Piper turned to leave, pulling up his hood and stalking his way back to the undercity. He felt hungry eyes watching his departure and allowed himself a satisfied grin. The value of the coin had been far greater than what had been promised.

His act would be interpreted as either stupidity or generosity, and both suited his plans. The traitor would remain keen to betray the Brewers regardless, greed leading them like a child chasing sticky sweets.

Such craven scum didn't have the intelligence or initiative to act otherwise.

Now Piper had only to wait and see what Esters would do next about the dilemma he'd posed her. And regardless of what she chose, hostility in kind would swiftly follow.



FAILURE

Raised voices echoed through the empty hallways, papered walls and soft furnishings doing little to muffle the ire. It was impossible to make out the exact words, putting Venin in mind of simple animal bellowing as he prowled through the darkness. Had the carpeting underfoot not masked the Alchemist's footsteps already, the argument might have aided his infiltration of this sprawling estate, but as it was, the sound was merely annoying.

At least it kept the servants away. Even at the best of times few of them would risk crossing paths with their masters unless summoned; now they'd doubtless all be cowering in whatever holes they'd crawled into. Venin chuckled to himself. He could at least appreciate that much.

The corridor ended in a stout oak door blocking the Alchemist's progress. Cursing under his breath, he pressed an ear against the wood for a moment, hoping to detect any activity on the other side. Nothing alerted him, but he couldn't be sure whether the chamber beyond was empty or the solid door simply muffled sound too well.

A moment of indecision passed, spent awkwardly pressed against the wood. Venin felt his pulse quicken, cold panic taking root somewhere near his belly. He couldn't very well stay here like this. To turn back was to admit failure, something looked upon dimly by his masters. Already, rash and youthful excitement had

begun to twist into concern that he'd bitten off more he could chew by accepting this task.

If he was entirely honest, he knew he was no assassin.

The Alchemist loathed the tremble he saw beneath his dark leather glove. He remembered the shame of being called a coward in his adolescence, made worse by knowing it to be true. The thought was quickly banished. His hand found the doorknob and twisted it sharply downwards, ego overcompensating and unheeding of any danger.

The room beyond was blessedly empty, although certainly not quiet, the voices considerably louder and far less distorted here. Venin stepped inside and quietly closed the door behind him before taking in his surroundings.

Light from a candelabra cast the windowless chamber in a warm glow. Tall bookcases filled with neat rows of ledgers and accounts lined the walls, carefully organised by a fastidious mind. Atop a shrouded fireplace the light danced over the surface of delicate porcelain and gleaming metal shields that reflected his image as he moved around the huge desk in the centre of the room. Such opulence sickened Venin, and bile rose to the back of his throat. He fought the urge to spit it over them and moved quickly on.

Adjoining the study was another chamber, just as large but dominated instead by an immense bed, large enough to sleep a family. Venin doubted more than one person ever slept here, if it was even used much. With

the low light from the study, he could see the covers were drawn tightly over the mattress, and a simple touch of his wrist confirmed the material was cold. A large window loomed on one wall, drapes pulled fast so not even a hint of light was able to penetrate into the room. There was nothing of interest here.

Venin returned to the study, eyes searching for hidden doors or missed alcoves. He quickly found the entrance to the adjacent rooms set into a wall, a rectangular frame not quite airtight and revealing the source of the raised voices.

The Alchemist smiled. He had reached a suitable destination. There wasn't anything to indicate to which Guild the owner of these chambers belonged, but that was inconsequential. All of the Shadow Council were but frail figures without their guards, their sharp minds no protection against wicked steel. Precisely which Guild bore the brunt of this deed mattered equally as little.

Atop the desk a ceramic kettle sat next to an ornate cup, likely left by a servant and still lukewarm from the liquid inside. Venin ran careful fingers over the pale-blue vial in his pocket. He seethed that his masters insisted he use their poison over one of his own creation, but he would follow their orders nonetheless. It was the work of but a moment to lace both vessels with just enough poison to bring down his victim without tainting the flavour of the tea and alerting his victim to the danger.

Deed done, Venin carefully returned the subtle mixture to his pocket, fully intending to dispose of it as soon as possible. He vastly preferred the virulent acids and venoms of his trade and the powerful statement they made. Leaving a victim with their lower jaw and throat melted into pulp would have sent a far more undeniable message.

Never mind. His benefactors did not tolerate disobedience with any great sense of forgiveness or humour. Now was not the time to push his luck.

The Alchemist crept back into the bedroom and cracked upon the curtain enough to see the horizon. The sun had already set, and night was slowly claiming the skies. It wouldn't be long before the agents outside would orchestrate a catastrophe fit to distract the guards. He settled down behind the door to wait, disinterestedly listening to the bickering voices emanating from the secret rooms. No doubt the Shadow Council had been airing out their frustrations for hours, meaning Venin's tired victim would more than likely spend the night here. That suited him just fine.

Venin nervously watched from the shadows as the portly Lord Chamberlain sipped his tea. From the size of the ledger the man studied and the gold rings adorning his chubby fingers, he was easily identified as a Moneylender. Venin attempted to calm his nerves

by reminding himself once more of the intended anonymity of this act. The victim's identity wasn't important. The assassination was a political statement designed to destabilise the whole of the Shadow Council, irrespective of their allegiance.

He would have better succeeded had the bastard shown even the slightest sign of discomfort. Blithely drinking from the poisoned cup, the Lord Chamberlain hadn't shown a hint of illness. There wasn't the merest tremble in his hands, and his breathing remained normal, free and unencumbered. Venin's mind ran through the possibilities. Perhaps he had been too cautious and underdosed the tea. Or, it could have been the man's unexpected size, his bulk requiring a larger amount of the poison to affect him. Maybe he simply held a natural immunity.

Whatever the reason, it was causing the young Alchemist's blood to boil.

A commotion outside disturbed the figure from his ledger and he looked towards the bedchamber before lurching to his feet. As the man padded across the thick carpet and crossed into the room and towards the grand window, Venin inwardly cursed. The Lord Chamberlain's footsteps were heavy but showed no sign of uncertain gait.

'August Lord!' The moment the Moneylender pulled aside the curtains a blazing inferno beyond lit the room ruddy orange. The warm colour lent a sickly hue to the short man's visage, and his jowls quivered

sickeningly as he took in the sight before him.

There could be only moments before he summoned his guards, or at least a servant. The time for subtlety was past.

As smoothly as he could manage, the Alchemist pulled the wire garotte from the pouch at his belt, took a deep breath, and stepped out from his hiding place. He crossed the floor quickly, his deft hands twisting through the air as he snapped the wire around the Lord Chamberlain from behind. It didn't take properly, cutting into the man's chin rather than his throat, and suddenly Venin found himself weathering a storm of weak blows as his victim flailed his arms. He wrenched the garotte with a snarl but only succeeded in drawing a thin line of red and a frightened yelp.

A fist hit him in the side of the head, making his ear ring. Stunned, Venin planted a boot in small of the Moneylender's back, sending him hurtling forward into the window. It cracked from the impact, one pane exploding outwards in a shower of jagged glass.

Sound suddenly rushed into the room, frantic footsteps and shouting warring with bells sounding the alarm. Wind howled through the window, dragging ashes and cinder with it. Above all, a fire raged through the building opposite, flames licking at an ancient spire as it collapsed in on itself.

The Lord Chamberlain staggered backwards uncertainly, nose raw and bleeding. 'Guards!' His voice came out in a drowned squeak, barely audible over the

din. 'Help m—' He never finished the word, gasping instead as Venin resumed his attack.

He leaned over his victim's shoulder, spitting malicious words into his ear. 'They're not coming. My masters have seen to that.' Eyes bulging, the man tried to reply, gargling like his own tongue was choking him, not the garrotte.

'I don't care who you are, so don't waste your last moments on that. All I was bade do was kill one of you pigs, and you just happened to get unlucky.' Venin drew the wire tighter and felt the man's struggling growing weaker as his life ebbed away.

The Alchemist smiled. He had found the idea of murder distasteful in the past, but not for a swine like this one. He would have gladly killed men and women of this station for free, even. The coin was nothing more than a welcome bonus.

His victim shuddered and went limp, tongue lolling disgustingly from his mouth. Venin let him topple in an ungainly heap.

Tasting blood on his lips, Venin realised he must have bitten his tongue at some point. He spat it away, noting how the rich carpet smouldered from the dark embers drifting in from the maelstrom outside. Swiping a loose dreadlock from his face, he made his way across to the window in wonderment.

The inferno opposite showed little sign of abating. The remains of the spire were now a blackened skeleton of charred supports and shattered brickwork. Below,

immense chunks of fallen roofing lay strewn over the ground, flames spreading from them to the dried grass. Dark silhouettes ran back and forth, braving a mire of floating embers and an ashen rain as they carried pails of water to dump on the burning debris.

His masters' agents had indeed been good to their word. The building looked ancient, likely a survivor of each and every miserable day of the Century Wars—occupation and liberation both—and another hundred years before that. Proudly it had stood, a symbol of tradition and endurance against the ravages of time.

It had been brought low in mere moments.

Venin appreciated the sentiment. Everything was changing now, and nothing was safe. Not aged landmarks, even one nestled into the Guild district, and certainly not the rotting institutions surrounding it. It was time to finish his part in this bloody evening, and to send the message. The days of the Shadow Council's invulnerability were past. He returned his attention to the Lord Chamberlain, ready to check his handiwork before departing.

The body wasn't there.

A trail of blood led behind the extravagant bed and Venin chased it in growing alarm. He rounded the edge in time to see his victim's pale hands tug on a long, knotted cord which disappeared into the shadowy ceiling.

He was running even before the Moneylender released the rope, knowing a gong would be sounding within the bowels of the mansion. At this late hour

any servant would likely be accompanied by guards, and neither could be allowed to find him here.

Hearing the man pull himself up to lean upon the bed, Venin looked over his shoulder to offer the bastard a final contemptuous glare before he left the room. The face which waited was a ghastly apparition in the firelight. Blood streamed from the shattered nose and ran over a sickly grin, the lips pulled back into fleshy cheeks to bare yellow teeth. A pair of piggy eyes set into the bloated visage shone with malicious triumph.

Venin's blood ran cold, his earlier hubris draining away. That smile would haunt him until he died.

It meant failure.

He swept into the study without looking, ears pricked at the sound of nearby footsteps echoing nearby. Left with only moments to escape detection, the Alchemist hurriedly slipped through the opposite door. He found himself in a corridor wide enough for a small army to march through, the walls adorned with immense frescos painted onto each wall. Self-preservation won the uneven struggle against his loathing and he hastened through, fighting the urge to take one of the torches from the wall and set them ablaze as he did.

The hallway ended in a carpeted wooden staircase leading down into the main hall. Heavy footsteps blundered somewhere behind, accompanied by raised voices and the metallic chink of heavy mail. Panicked, Venin took the steps three at a time. Close to the base he slipped and crashed the rest of the way in a

heap of tangled limbs, cold stone tiles at the bottom sending jarring impact through his body. Groaning, he didn't miss a beat but forced his protesting body to rise, ignoring the lance of pain that shot through a twisted ankle as he did. He had no choice: remaining a crumpled bundle of limbs on the floor meant death.

Large candelabra set onto tables around the room illuminated the way as he stumbled onwards. He didn't bother with the grand entrance, as a heavy iron grille barred his exit that way. Moving as fast as he could on his injured foot, he pressed on, trying to ignore the figures which had appeared at the top of the stairs and were descending almost as quickly as he had.

The first door was mercifully unlocked, and he fell through before breaking into a lopsided, haphazard run. His headlong charge took him through another door, and then another, leaving a trail of open doors and furniture he'd shoved aside.

One last frame, this one a sheet of ornate metal, and suddenly the scent of smoke hanging in the air made Venin aware he had finally stumbled outside. He collapsed against the door in relief, attempting for just a moment to calm his ragged breathing.

As the blood rushing through his ears finally abated enough to hear the surrounding commotion, he opened his eyes to see he stood in a small garden with a walkway leading around the corner of the building. A short iron fence ringed the area, its blackened metal glowing orange on one side in the light.

Venin wasted no time climbing awkwardly over it, as uncaring of the bloody scrapes the metal carved into his flesh as of the rents it made in his tunic. The guards could find him at any time. He winced as he landed on the opposite side, his ankle unable to take any weight and close to giving way. Through sheer willpower he remained standing and lurched into a dark alley, away from the raging firelight.

Ensconced within the darkness he was safe at last, free from pursuit. A quick pat down confirmed he'd left nothing inside that could identify him. He was more concerned about the Lord Chamberlain recognising him. He'd kept his mask on the entire time; he could only hope it had been enough.

The man's smile returned unbidden to his mind as he worried, the inky blackness suddenly turned as sinister as the expression, the tight walls around him a prison Venin had the urge to escape.

He had failed.

As he hastened away on his injured limb, Venin could only wonder at what the repercussions might be.

POISON

The atmosphere in the Drunken Seamstress had turned since the day they'd found Scum murdered. In better times Friday had always known it a blessed refuge from the bitter world outside, the easygoing camaraderie of her brothers and sisters a welcome comfort. Without doubt her happiest memories belonged within these four walls, the place more her home than any other den or bolthole she'd known. Now a morose sense of foreboding threatened to eclipse them all. It hung in the air as heavy as cigar smoke, twisting every smile into sardonic glee and tainting every expression.

Despite the swing towards Esters a clear divide still existed between the Brewers. Stave kept to himself, barely acknowledging the others as though great shame had grown into an impenetrable barrier. Hooper's ire had yet to be quenched, despite how he tried to drown it with beer. Decimate, exile turned favourite daughter, wore a dangerous glare for any who had dared to vote against the Grand Brewer. The rest kept their alliance with Esters close, a new crew and hierarchy beginning to emerge.

And at the top, finally within grasp of the seat she so coveted, the Matriarch.

Spigot was the only one who provided Friday with any sense of reassurance, her only remaining anchor to the happiness of past times. Yet his burden was most terrifying of all, filling her with nothing but dread. She

was far from afraid of the man. The secret they shared however, was something else.

No matter the views of the Brewer's Guild, Friday could never understand Spigot's sobriety as a curse. It had steadily drawn them both closer over the last year, the reversal of his fate an inspiration which returned feelings she'd long thought forgotten.

Their awkward courtship had begun quite innocently, mutual friendship evolving into lingering glances and blushed cheeks. She smiled to remember how initially neither had been willing to cross the line and admit their true feelings for each other. Months on, and Friday now believed she saw not only affection harboured within her partner's eyes, but the same love she was scared to name out loud.

It lent even more fear of the repercussions of his sobriety being discovered.

Presently Spigot quietly watched the other Brewers from the bar, one hand gripping a tankard Friday knew would be half empty. He'd become remarkably adept at the pretence of drinking around his teammates. Friday didn't share his abstinence, but she had grown to despise the Guild's code. Thanks to it, Spigot could never let his guard down amongst his comrades, those who should have welcomed him regardless of whether he was half-cut or not.

Friday's heart broke to know how alienated and distant he felt. Brewer culture had grown so disdainful of those who did not indulge it was nigh on impossible

for her not to feel some animosity herself. Her blood ran cold every time one of the heavier drinkers mouthed off, just as she knew Spigot's eyes would narrow in irritation. He never expressed his frustrations, but sooner or later she feared he would simply walk out on them, never to return.

His eyes found hers and Friday brushed such concerns aside, a wide smile taking root in spite of her worries. Deciding she could do with being cheered up, she set to picking her way to Spigot across the dirty floorboards, avoiding Esters' clique as best she could. After refusing to side with them, she too was left feeling isolated and vulnerable.

Stoker blocked her way before she reached the counter, leaning backwards in his chair.

'Huh, lass. Didn't see you there.' Slurring tainted the burly Eisnoran's words even more than his thick accent, rendering them almost incomprehensible. Friday wondered how long he'd been drinking.

She also didn't miss the distinct lack of apology.

Stoker had very few friends as far as Friday could tell. An abrupt and discourteous oaf, he'd made no effort to ingratiate himself with Tapper's followers and only allied himself to Esters on account of their shared heritage. She'd never seen Mash or Quaff take to him, only PintPot usually willing to share a beer with the man.

He loudly boasted about his past to whoever might listen, but in truth it was a mess of rumour and hearsay, most of which Friday doubted to be true in

the slightest. Some horseshit about hiding inside of a furnace, flames licking at his skin without burning him. Having seen his skin peeling and blistered after the silly bastard doused himself with whisky and hurled himself at the opposition, she knew that as a lie to start with.

Such stunts did, at least, explain how the man had become so repulsive. His ruddy skin was crossed with hideous scars, and he rarely lacked a sickly scent about him like spoiled meat. He was ugly as sin to boot, which didn't help. Friday would have happily told anyone that asked it was a shame he ever took the helmet off.

A swift kick resolved the problem at hand, the thug's chair swinging out of the way enough for her to slide past and make her way to Spigot. Behind her back, she heard the Eisbnoran grumbling under his breath.

Spigot's face lit up handsomely when she drew close. 'What happened to the Guv?' she asked.

'Tapp's in the other room.' Spigot nodded towards the inner chambers, where the Brewers assembled around the long table to vote. 'Thrashing something out with Esters and Mash.' His expression had dropped with the answer, the same as the tone in his voice. Like Friday, Spigot cared little for the Matriarch.

Friday listened, detecting the barest hint of raised voices escaping through the crack between the doors. Whatever it was, Esters hadn't launched into a full-blooded assault on the Grand Brewer just yet. She

supposed Mash was playing peacemaker between the pair again.

She wouldn't have wished that task on her worst enemy.

Her voice lowered to a whisper. 'What are we doing here, Spigs? What happens next?'

'I don't know, lass. We're in uncharted seas now. All we can do is ride out the storm, and hope our heads are above water when its finally over.'

Friday nodded nervously, not comforted in the slightest.

The heat gradually rose as the day wore on, the number of faces inside the pub steadily rising as the mood deteriorated further. Every patron to the Drunken Seamstress was a Brewer through and through and had taken a side in this struggle, just the same as the players themselves. Backers of both sides contemptuously stared at each other across the barroom, an occasional curse directed at the opposite group. Tempers flared even at the tables, sharp words passing between the individuals playing dice or stones alongside coins and favours.

'Hey, Legend. Yeah, you.' Stoker's drunken voice was obnoxiously loud, heard in every corner of the muted pub. The muttered discussion stopped, curious heads turning in his direction. 'Aye, the football legend himself!' The thug's stubby finger stabbed aggressively through the air towards Spigot, as if his target wasn't immediately obvious.

Friday saw Spigot roll his eyes and discreetly squeezed his hand. He smiled in return, carefully composing his face before replying.

‘You’re too kind, Master Boiler.’ He raised his tankard in mock salute.

‘Sit and have a drink with me, Legend.’ It wasn’t an invitation. Stoker’s voice was as ugly as his expression, an unmistakably mocking sneer. Friday felt the hairs on the back of her neck rising.

Spigot waved it away. ‘Thanks, but I’m comfortable here. Perhaps a quiet drink another time, eh?’

‘Quiet drink? Pah! I haven’t toasted our new captain yet. We fucking sing when we’re winning!’ The insult was much clearer this time, half the figures in the bar stiffening at his crude words. Spigot’s hand tightened around his tankard as he choked down a retort.

Stoker didn’t wait for a reply. He unsteadily clambered to his feet, his inebriated movement jolting the table several inches across the floor. Drink spilled over a surface already wet from spilt beer, and two empty tankards rolled to the floor.

‘What, think you’re too good for our new captain, eh? Don’t want to raise a glass to her?’ His eyes narrowed. ‘Can’t rightly say I’ve seen you raise a glass to anything much of late, now I’ve come to think of it.’

Friday’s heart was caught in her throat, her chest tight. Stoker was advancing on the bar, lurching inexorably forward.

‘You never used to be that way, Legend. Any old

excuse to have a drink with the lads, or on your own.' The finger lashed out again. 'You were a bloody drunk, worse than anyone!'

'And you're not far off that now, Stoker. Sit yourself down and stop making such a scene.' Spigot's voice had turned colder than Friday had ever heard it.

'How does a man like you turn it all around, I wonder?' Stoker's eyes suddenly flicked away from Spigot, landing on Friday. She recoiled like he'd slapped her, his drunken leer enough to make her nauseated.

'Easy there... time for you to walk that mouth back, lad. Take it outside into the fresh air, where you can use it to puke in the gutter.' Bitterness still laced Spigot's tone, despite his attempt at less hostile language. His arm dropped protectively across Friday, a tremble betraying his slipped composure.

'It's okay, Spigs. Bite your tongue.' She couldn't keep her voice below a high squeak. Everything was coming unravelling, just as she'd feared. Even if Stoker did leave them be now, he'd already raised enough eyebrows to ruin everything.

Stoker had no intention of letting it go.

'Love of a good woman, perhaps.' His grin had become lecherous, his eyes boring into hers. 'Maybe we could all do with some love from you, girl. Turn us all into legends, and win the bloody championship without trying.'

'Apologise. Now.' Spigot snorted the reply like a bull, his cheeks flushed and a grimace taken root under his bushy moustache.

Stoker lunged forward, taking Spigot by surprise as the pair of them crashed into the sturdy bar. Winded, Spigot couldn't do much more than flail ineffectually, the tankard in his hand bouncing off of his assailant's thick shoulders. Stoker roared incoherently and swatted the arm away, the metal mug bouncing forgotten into a corner.

Friday tried to pull at Stoker's sleeve as one hand rose, ready to hammer downwards into Spigot, and was belted across the nose for her trouble. Already possessed of formidable strength, Stoker's berserker fury and inebriation lent him might enough for the blow to send her reeling. Seeing stars, she dropped to her knees, only vaguely aware of a hand which came to rest on her shoulder, preventing her from rising again.

Cheering and jeers surrounded her. Fights were not uncommon in the Drunken Seamstress, and this one had been building for some time, a proxy for Tapper and Esters' own struggle. It was a catharsis no one wished to pull apart just yet.

Through blurry eyes she saw Spigot push Stoker away at last, hurriedly grabbing a bottle from the countertop. When Stoker charged in again he was ready, bouncing it off of the larger man's head with a hollow thunk. The Eisnoran staggered but kept his feet, rewarded by a second and then a third blow from the bottle, which finally shattered in a shower of green.

Letting out a deep breath, Spigot dropped the bottle as his teammate fell to one knee. 'Why are we fighting,

you damned fool?' Frustration ruled her partner's voice, mixed with anger Friday hadn't seen since his recovery.

'No... reason.' Stoker spoke through erratic breathing. 'Just don't... like... people thinking they're... better'n me.' He turned his face upwards to reveal a mess of blood and broken glass, beard wet with spit and beer.

His uppercut was the wild swing of a desperate man, but for a second time he caught Spigot unawares, lifting him off his feet and onto his arse. As though empowered by a stunned opponent, the Eisnoran leapt up with a snarl and grabbed a bottle of whisky from a nearby table. Friday shrieked and tried to stand through the dizziness engulfing her head. She expected Stoker to return the favour Spigot had paid him just moments earlier.

What happened next was far worse, a nightmare made real.

Stoker grabbed the downed man by his kutte and upended the bottle, jamming it in Spigot's mouth. 'Come on, you bastard! You'll drink with me now, won't you?' Friday could only watch in horror as she saw the spirits leak from Spigot's lips and over his shirt, the man forced to drink a mouthful of the venom he'd tried so desperately to forget.

He caught Stoker's arm with his fist and the bottle slipped away for a moment, allowing a choking Spigot to spit out what he could of the liquid. He didn't get much respite, as Stoker leapt back on him, bottle in hand.

'Nah, nah, Legend, drink up!'

Stoker's fevered cries and actions were finally excessive enough to force a reaction from Stave, who stepped into the fray to wrap one immense arm around the Eismoran and drag him away. Mash hauled Spigot up to his feet opposite and moved to stand between the pair of them.

'It's over.' His tone brooked no argument.

Spigot's eyes blazed with fury, rage having overtaken his good senses. He stared at his assailant over Mash's shoulder. 'You dare make me drink this vile poison like some drunk in the gutter? I should have taken that bottle to your throat while you were floored!'

Fridays heart sank as silence descended. Spigot's words had been heard by all, including Tapper and Esters, standing by the doors to the inner chambers.

'Poison?' Mash raised an eyebrow and stepped away from Spigot like a man afraid of infectious disease. He looked down at the whisky bottle with unbelieving eyes. 'Really?'

Spigot's choler had faded completely, his face ashen. He breathlessly spat away the last remnants of the liquor in his mouth. 'Aye, you heard me. Poison.' His voice had shrunk to a defeated whisper.

Tapper pushed his way through the crowd, making way until he stood face to face with his teammate, a stern cast to his face. The Grand Brewer measured his man with steely eyes, the weight of the world behind them. He looked every year of his age suddenly, Friday realised. Spigot, to his credit, met the gaze with unflinching steadiness.

She felt a bittersweet pang of pride as her partner faced the end with his head held high.

Eventually, Tapper spoke. 'Really, Spigs? You've forsaken the code?'

Spigot nodded.

The Grand Brewer looked around at each of his teammates. As they passed over her, Friday sensed his helplessness. He was a man undone by defeat after defeat. This was yet another. With inevitability, Tapper's eyes came to rest on Esters. She wore the same victorious expression Friday had seen when the others had crossed the floor to her side.

The Grand Brewer's shoulders dipped the tiniest bit. Few would have noticed, unless they knew him well enough to see it. His stern demeanour had successfully hidden sadness every time before. This time, Friday could tell.

Tears wet the edges of her eyes. A crushing wave of grief reared up inside her, overwhelming her as the inevitable words were spoken.

'Spigot. You have betrayed us. You are no longer worthy of wearing the kutte.'

'Aye. I... I understand. I just couldn't go back to that, Tapp.'

If Tapper felt any sympathy he chose not to voice it.

In absolute silence Spigot pulled the kutte over his head, hands lingering for just a moment longer than they had to as he gave the sash to Tapper. Still unspeaking, he bent down to retrieve his beret, which he dusted off carefully. The crowd parted as he made his way over to

Friday. Before she could stop him, he pushed his cap into her hands, a sad smile behind his moustache.

The tears broke then, flooding her vision as he wrapped his arms around her.

One final hug.

'I love you.' It was barely a whisper in her ear, but she heard it louder than the most bestial roar. Friday closed her eyes for a moment and savoured his warmth. If he was so proud, then she could be also.

She pulled away and her eyes met his. He sensed her intent before she could give word to it. 'No. This is my punishment alone. You cannot join me, little one.' Her reply went unsaid as he kissed her, full on the lips.

Friday savoured the moment of intimacy between them until she felt him move away. Her mind knew it was their last.

The heavy door opened, and for a moment Spigot stood in place, bathed in brilliant sunlight. A soft smile graced his lips, just for her. For their memories together, through times good and bad. For the Guild he loved so much, which now had exiled him. Then it slammed shut, and he was gone.

FANGTOOTH UNLEASHED

Mist gracefully skipped around Midas with the ease which Brisket had come to expect by now, dispossessing the Alchemist of the ball and shoving him away with the tip of the long quarterstaff. By the time Midas had righted himself it was too late, Mist's long legs whipping rainwater from the turf and making precious ground into the opposition half.

'To me, to me!' Brisket's voice floated down the pitch towards her teammate as she propelled herself in the direction of the Alchemist goal.

One arm still raised for the pass, she tilted her head back over her shoulder in time to see Mist's foot slide back and then forward like a pendulum. Taking a deep breath, she forced her head down and pushed harder, ignoring the protests of legs grown dull from exhaustion. Mercury's wheezing breath grew more distant as she opened the gap between her and her marker, his body as tired as hers but lacking the conditioning she'd done day after day.

It had been a long afternoon spent under broken grey skies.

Both teams played a fast-paced and fluid game, but with the earth beneath turned to mud frustration coloured every face. Near enough every time Brisket had punted the ball on she'd spat fire as she'd watched

it roll to a dead stop over the ground instead of continuing on to her teammates. Clumps of soil stuck to her studs made her boots impossibly heavy and cumbersome, adding to her misery.

At least the same was also true for her opponents, although the realisation was of scant satisfaction.

This time it seemed Mist had employed sense enough to aim beyond her position and into the open field in front of the Alchemist goal. It hadn't been a pass as much as kicking into the open, but the play still belonged to the Order alone. Mercury was the only player this far back, Crucible committed to Midas' blunted goal run and doubtless sprinting back with utter futility.

The ball landed with a wet slapping sound just ahead of Brisket, as lifelessly as she had come to expect. Her boot resolved that, a stiff toe punt moving it forward over the ground, still sticking and forcing her to slow pace.

She knew Mercury wouldn't soon catch up, but he might still meet range to hit her with a gout of fire. She had little desire to drop and roll through the mud to douse the flames. Three more paces and she'd take the shot—and hope her sodden feet didn't slice the ball away like last time. Brisket's fears were realised a second later when she felt fiery fingertips reaching for her, an explosion blasting great clods of brown dirt overhead and leaving her ears ringing.

There wasn't time to look back and see if her cape was burning. Her feet took her the final pace and

without thinking she leant back and struck the ball on her right foot, the same practiced kick she had made a hundred times before. It sailed up and away, a fine spray spiralling into the air from the soaked skin.

Brisket found herself without even the energy to punch the air as her shot struck the goal and spun crazily off the edge of the pitch, a dejected Alchemist official scattering away to retrieve it. Her shoulders sagged, and for agonising moments the world shrank to her laboured breathing, with the kiss of the rain on her skin and the roar of the crowd both lost to the echo of her hammering heart. Her hands unconsciously pressed into her flanks and she smiled in spite of herself.

Old habits never truly died.

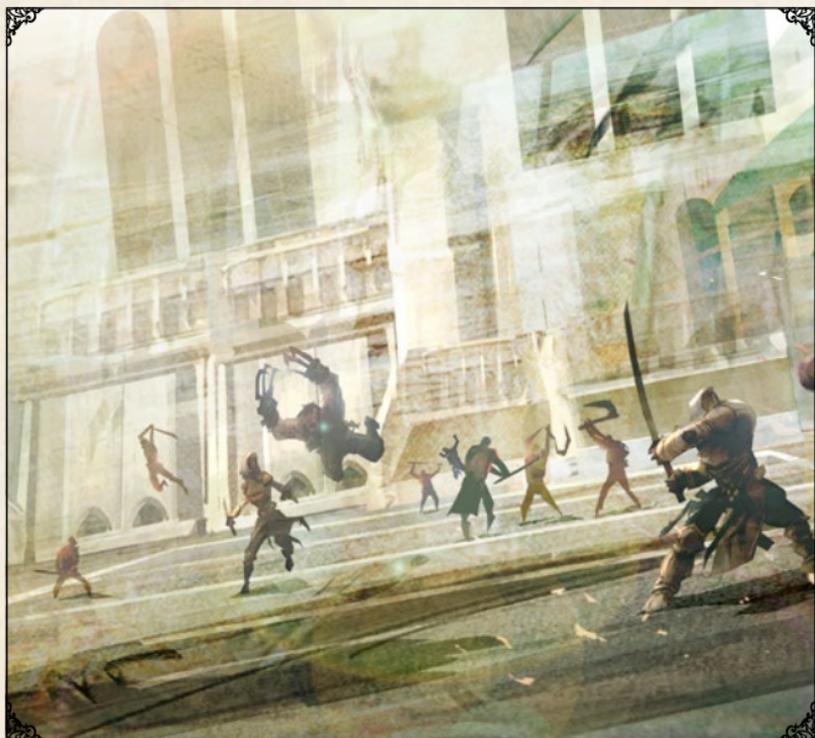
He would never have permitted such weakness in the yard, she knew. With a shaking hand fast becoming steadier she brushed back the wet hair plastered to her forehead and then spat her exhaustion onto the ground where it belonged.

Brisket raised her head just in time to watch the goal kick soar past. It landed in front of Mercury, who turned his back to her and moved away at a steady jog, taking the ball with him. With no chance of catching him Brisket drifted downfield at a more leisurely pace, still not possessing the energy for a sprint back into position. Her goal had stretched out the Order's lead over their opponents, and she could afford to wait her moment.

Mercury stopped just shy of the faint halfway line and fired a surprisingly neat pass across to Venin. The

lad's inexperience showed all too glaringly, his eyes looking only at the incoming pass rather than around him. He'd get away with his lack of awareness this time, Brisket could see. The other Order players were as out of position as she was. Her pace increased as she made for him, trying to close the gap before the Alchemist started moving.

The first touch was a good one, Venin receiving the ball high on his chest and deftly dropping it to his feet as he turned his body downfield.



Venin ignored Midas' shouts for the ball. His captain's run had been clever, but there was no way Venin intended to pass the ball to the egotistical fool. His sense of self-importance had been enabled enough already by the others.

The same went for Midas' lacky, Crucible. Once, there had been a spark of rebellion in her, stoking a sense of longing in him he'd never expected. It slipped away the moment the young woman aligned herself with Midas and the High Council, her outlook dramatically changing. As Crucible pranced down the pitch he no longer saw the headstrong idealist he'd fallen for, just another drone corrupted by the canker. Venin remained destined to be without companion, not that he minded. His whole life had been self-imposed isolation, Naja his only confidant.

He didn't intend to pass the ball out to Crucible any more than he did Midas.

Cursing at the uncertain footing, Venin tried to keep the ball moving along with some difficulty. His studs had thick sods of sludge stuck to them, lending his footsteps an absurdly ponderous gait. A blur at the edge of his vision was accompanied by heavy thuds thundering over the ground, making his head snap in their direction.

Even with his ornate armour dulled by the rain and splattered brown, the Order's towering paladin exuded an imposing air. The subdued light lent a dark cast to his expressionless mark, enough to leave an unconscious

shudder travelling through Venin's body. The Alchemist barely had time to react as the immense figure barrelled forward at full pace, one shoulder down. He managed to mostly dodge the charge before he was roughly shoved away, heels kicking backwards. No longer controlled by his feet, the ball slid away on the slick mud.

Venin kept one eye on it as he watched for his opponent's next move. One hand trailed to his belt, fingers reaching for an acid vial. He tore it from the clip as Benediction barrelled forward once more, the long blade of his sword raised high in the air. Venin ducked to his right, feeling the sharp metal pass close to his scalp as it swept downwards, slicing through his thick bun of hair. With the same movement he pounced away in the direction of the ball, tossing the glass tube behind him with almost casual indifference.

As his boot found the ball once more and tapped it onto firmer ground he heard a low grunt, accompanied by a familiar hiss. His mouth twisted into a vindictive smile. So much for that challenge.

He was invincible.

The goal waited, just out of reach. The lion sat on its haunches nearby, fur flattened by the rain and the cloak draped over its muscular back soaked through. The creature watched him intently, eyes betraying unrestrained malice, doubtless heightened from being forced to endure the miserable weather.

A flash of uncertainty shot through Venin. Earlier in the match he had watched in horrified fascination

as Pride yawned, its open mouth revealing a maw full of impossibly sharp teeth. Up close all hint of wonderment was entirely replaced by fear, his prior ebullience quickly dissipating. The Alchemist could all too easily imagine the agony should they find occasion to tear into his flesh.

‘To me, you damn fool!’ Midas was still shouting in high Valentian, as though he didn’t think the opposition would understand his words. He had an unobstructed view of the goal—the perfect position for a snap shot.

Venin ignored the man and resumed his pace, more cautiously as he approached the beast chained to the goalpost. He knew he had only precious seconds and space to find his shot. He fired a sneer in his captain’s direction and enjoyed a howl of frustration as he threw his right leg back, clearly about to take a shot at distance.

His boot struck the ball as he’d intended, clipping it just under the centre of the stained brown leather, where the stitching was most prominent. The momentum spun him on the spot, Venin offering Midas the finger as he rotated in his direction. The other man’s face was ashen, a priceless moment stolen from the king of fools.

The ball veered to the right at the last moment, curled by some fateful quirk and missing the goalpost by mere inches.

Venin felt the colour drain from his face to match the drab world around him, the constant drum of feet in the stands louder than ever and accompanied by

loud jeers. Flags in the white and gold of the Order waved as though caught in the most torrid storm.

'...damn you!' He could barely hear Midas' shouting over the raucous noise. His expression turned sheepish, Venin looked across to his captain, wondering whether to try selling a sense of contrition he didn't feel or simply shrug off the inevitable criticism.

He wasn't surprised to see Midas running towards him, admonition doubtless on his mind, but couldn't work out why the older man's face remained so pale. The Chosen One opened his mouth once more and this time Venin heard the words all too clearly, his blood turning cold.

'Run, you bloody fool, run!'

The sound of Fangtooth's mace smashing into Venin's legs was sufficiently sickening to make Brisket blanch, her discomfort deepened by the agonised screaming which followed. Loud enough to be heard over the stands the sound was visceral and raw, torn from the youth's throat. The impact swept the Alchemist's limbs out from underneath and landed him in a crumpled heap he wouldn't be rising from, not from the twisted angle of his legs.

Fangtooth prowled around his fallen adversary, brutal mace cutting a crimson line in the dirt. The hulking figure stopped pacing and looked up as Midas

neared. The mask hid his expression but his body language conveyed threat nonetheless, daring the other man to draw closer.

The message was clear, even to Brisket some way away.

One more step, and you join him.

Midas raised his hands to chest level and backed off, pretending to find more interest in chasing the ball. The crowds on both sides of the pitch let him know their disapproval at his act of cowardice, clearly anticipating a bloody confrontation.

Brisket didn't blame the Alchemist. Another goal was worth more to the Alchemist's Guild than conceding a takeout and would keep up the pressure on the Order. Besides, for all his mangled legs would keep him out of the remainder of the game, Venin would be fine once the apothecaries got to him.

What followed next proved her very wrong.

The Monster retuned his attention to the fallen Alchemist, one mitt lifting the heavy steel head of his mace into the air before driving it downwards into Venin's hand. The youth's screaming reached an even higher pitch still, becoming a hideous shriek as Fangtooth ground the weapon further into the ground, crushing the ruined fingers beneath.

No stranger to violence, Brisket wondered at the sense of such an act. Venin wasn't going anywhere. He was out of the game, and a simple knock to the head would put him out cold. Fangtooth was wasting time better spent marking the downed Alchemist's

teammates.

She changed her run to intercept.

The mace pounded downwards again, this time at the end of a brutal doublehanded swing. It put Brisket in mind of a Farmer hammering a post into the ground for a fence, as relentless as a boulder tumbling downhill. The blow struck Venin across his shins with another violent cracking sound, and the scream suddenly feel silent as his voice blew out.

The Monster repeated the violent action again, and then another time, each strike met by a red explosion. As she neared, Brisket heard the boy's pained sobbing, the sound disturbingly pitiful. Still too far away to try and stop the attack, she looked over to the sidelines, expecting to the see the apothecaries rushing over.

Sure enough, two figures in Physician's Guild whites stood ready, although neither looked prepared to step onto the pitch and aid the stricken player. Fear didn't seem to be the cause of their inactivity. As she looked on a third figure had joined the Sawbones, the newcomer's cowled cream vestment putting her in mind of a priest. Brisket's eyes narrowed as she detected a flash of silver changing hands, then the third man smoothly shaking hands with the apothecaries before fading away into the anonymous shadows.

As if to underscore the arrangement, both Sawbones turned their backs, ignoring Fangtooth's bloody mace as it continued to punish Venin and turn his exposed limbs into a messy pulp.

Brisket's feet slowed to a stop, the game quite forgotten.

This was retaliation, she realised at last. A statement, or retribution of some kind. But what institution had power or influence enough to make this play? Convincing a brute like Fangtooth to indulge his violent tendencies was one thing, but bribing the Physician's Guild was quite another. To her knowledge, none of the politicians dared cross the Physician's Guild. Masters of life and death, they had occupied an insurmountable throne at the top of the tree since their very inception.

Who now dared to sit higher?

Venin's vision had turned to dark mist in the corners, charcoal shadows shot with angry veins of crimson fast rushing in to claim the rest. He could feel his throat was a ragged mass of tortured flesh, as if a terrible fire taken hold until it had burned away his voice and blackened the rest to ash. His ears had stopped hearing anything but a muffled hiss, deafened by the rising intensity of his screaming until they'd yielded in the unequal struggle.

From some distant place he felt some sort of impact. From how the world swung left to right and back he guessed his head must be rolling around. For the briefest moment he felt a lance of pain before it dimmed and floated away, gone to wherever the rest of the agony had fled from before.

He realised, quite suddenly and with a strange sense of disjointed confusion, that he might be dying. Too fatigued to be truly afraid, Venin tried to move and force some semblance of life back into his body but failed, pushed past the point of return. Even reaching into the well of seething resentment which had taken root in his heart yielded no result. It had been dried up by blistering sunbursts, and now that same sun was fast falling and leaving him to darkness.

Unbidden, the memory of the Lord Chamberlain drifted into his thoughts. Once more Venin saw yellow teeth peering out from behind fatty jowls, distorted to even greater proportions than they had been in the flesh. The smile playing over their surface was twisted and warped: impossibly broad, brazen, and taunting.

The sinking feeling which had accompanied the Moneylender's grin returned.

Failure. He would die a failure.

Somehow the thought wasn't as vivid or terrifying as it should have been or even as it had been previously. His whole body was numb, his mind fast succumbing to a similar affliction.

Another impact rocked him and sent the world tumbling away, his sight growing blurry and covered in scarlet. In the little light remaining an angel vested in Solthecian robes appeared, stepping out of the gloom.

He thought he recognised the figure for a fleeting moment, but it passed.

Venin blinked, and his eyes never reopened. The

lids felt impossibly heavy, sticky blood binding them together. Something cold and sharp rested hard against his throat, pressing into his skin in a blossom of warm liquid.

The world shrank to that one sensation, a thin line around which the whole world revolved. It was mercifully clean and pure.

His breath came in shallow whispers, pushing against the blade.

Just a thin line against his skin.

Just a thin line against his skin.

Just a thin line—

— THE DEVIL'S WORK —

Tapper had always kept a safe room at the Drunken Seamstress, a place where any of his family could lay their head in times of hardship or distress. Situated at the highest point of the tavern, atop a narrow flight of steps leading ever upwards from the next-highest floor, it had seldom seen cause to be used. Few knew of its existence, and most of those had long forgotten.

Friday did not count herself amongst them. In her earlier years she'd lived here for months at a time, preferring the soft bed to one of hard stone or wet soil, especially one shared by an outlaw she'd grown tired of. It had become as much a home as any other to the orphaned girl—more, even. The isolation added to the sense that this place was somehow hers and hers alone. Whenever Friday wanted to be alone with her thoughts, her feet never failed to bring her here.

Pale moonlight shone through the windowpane to bathe the lonely room in a cold hue, Friday painted in ethereal silver. Sitting on the edge of the wide cot with both legs pulled close to her body, she'd wrapped her slender arms tightly around them and tucked her head into her knees. Other than a light tremor from shallow breathing, she hadn't moved for hours, her mind mired in thick emotive fog.

Distress seemed to colour everything. Each time she tried to clear her head, the image of Spigot standing in the light swam into focus, unbidden and quite

unwelcome. It brought a hundred other emotions and memories with it each time. Tapper's gravelly voice, reluctantly handing down judgement. The lines around the Grand Brewer's eyes softening, his stern gaze just as tragic and remorseful as they had been for poor Amber weeks before.

Esters' triumphant grin above all, tainting everything.

Friday hated being so useless. She'd hidden herself up here every night since Spigot's exile, weeping like an old maid at a funeral until sleep eventually claimed her. No-one seemed surprised. She guessed they all had their own grief to overcome in their own ways. Spigot had been a Brewer for years. He'd been a pillar of the Grand Brewer's command, as much Tapper's right-hand man and confidant as Stave or Hooper.

On the pitch, he'd defined any team he'd played in, even during the dark times. She'd heard plenty of talk amongst pundits about certain players being talismanic for their team's hopes, proud veterans the others looked to in times of hardship.

Spigot had been that icon for the Brewer's Guild.

The Grand Brewer had been the only one to climb the winding steps to the room, come to try and comfort her each time. For time unknown he'd simply sat with her, one comforting arm draped around her shoulders. They hadn't spoken. He'd likely known how close Friday and Spigot had become long before that fateful day, she realised. Very little ever passed his attention. Somehow, his presence was a mark of

approval, recognition of something another might have called foolish or taboo.

Too late she realised they had never needed to hide their relationship, at least.

Too late. So much time wasted.

In one hand she clenched Spigot's beret in a white-knuckled fist, the grip channelled from a great reservoir of hatred building within. The only time her mind was free to race was when she indulged it, embracing dark thoughts that typically ended with her knives embedded in Stoker's throat, carving her wrath into his skin.

It was likely for the best the brutish thug had kept away from the Drunken Seamstress these last weeks. Friday wasn't sure she'd have stopped herself from giving in to such violent impulses. She doubted many would have stopped her, either, not even on Esters' side of the line. The Eisnoran thug's actions hadn't been met with any more forgiveness than Spigot's supposed betrayal. Never a popular figure, he had now earned himself the ire of an entire Guild.

He'd inflicted a diseased wound which would take years to heal—if it could heal at all.

A shredded piece of blood-stained kutte lay on the long table, ends torn and frayed. In the low light it was a sinister inversion of Brewer pride and an unmistakably bad omen. Wrapped about a heavy disc,

it had been launched through one of the ancient pub windows earlier this evening, crashing to the floor in a shower of glass and bad intentions.

The identity of the thug who'd thrown it had been swallowed by the night. By the time the first patrons made it outside, hurried footsteps had already faded into echo, and no amount of cursing would return them once more. Some speculated that it had been the same scum who'd nailed the cat to the door, a gang Esters still knew little about despite her best efforts.

That in itself wasn't surprising. Since first blood had been drawn it seemed the entire undercity threatened to climb out of the rancid depths and confront them.

It was far from the first occasion one tyrant or another had managed to unite the disparate tribes lurking in the darkness. Esters was able to recall at least three such individuals from memory alone, along with the miserable gangs they formed. Each had been put down mercilessly by the Brewer's Guild. The undercity wretches were desperate and hungry but had no taste for seeing their own blood spilled. Backstabbing and infighting usually broke their alliances even before the leaders were captured and strung up.

This time around was of far more concern. She had never known boldness like this. It spoke of a newfound confidence and organisation never before encountered from the Vermin below.

Esters carefully unfolded the bloody strip of cloth, grimacing as her fingertips were slowly stained dull

red. The object within was heavy and metallic, hard to the touch with ridges pronounced enough to be felt through the thick weave. She knew what it would be, even before the final fold of the grisly fabric was lifted. Even so, her brow creased and her eyes narrowed at the sight of the Brewer medallion. It was an older piece, brass rather than the bright steel or dull iron worn by a younger member.

Only a handful of individuals still within the Guild wore such heirlooms. Tapper had one, and Stave. Decimate carried the surprisingly pristine emblem she had produced upon her return, long thought lost in the violent coup which had ousted her. Esters herself wore a hard iron disc, having given her old family medal to Mash on the eve of their wedding as a token of their union.

Mash.

Cheeks flushed, Esters tore the aged metal from the cloth and strode to the closest candle. The metal glowed amber in the soft light, the colour rich and warm. Trembling fingers carefully revolved the disc around in her hands, noting every scratch and burr. Each seemed painfully familiar.

The Matriarch took a deep breath and turned it over.

There, stamped into the back where she'd known it would be, was her house's crest. For a moment all she could do was fight a rising bile which had taken root in her belly and was forcing itself up into her throat. In her chest her heart hammered away, a great pressure building

up as she became light-headed. Through it all she stared at the disc, a metalwork kraken glaring back accusingly.

The anger took hold as suddenly as a bright flare of lightning from the skies above. Ferocious and inarticulate, Esters' voice tore into a scream as she smashed the candle aside and hurled the badge away from her. Unthinkingly, she wiped eyes which had become wet at the edges, leaving ruddy streaks from fingers stained with blood from Mash's kutte.

Before, she had known these wretches would pay with their blood for the affronts they visited upon the Brewers. Now she vowed to put every ramshackle slum and hovel to the torch until her beloved was returned.

Hooper knew each of the streets leading to the Drunken Seamstress like the back of his hand, and the same was true for most of the alleys leading from them. He bloody well ought to. He'd walked them every day of his life, ever since he was a kid like PintPot. The lad strolled alongside him now, the pair of them on their way back from chasing down a cutpurse who had been causing grief for the wrong people.

The younger man was boasting loudly, as usual, his voice carelessly echoing over the hard pavement. PintPot's brash nature and crass sense of humour irritated most people, but Hooper didn't usually count himself amongst their number. He was fond of the lad.

PintPot reminded Hooper of how he'd been in younger years, before his stones had dropped: all mouth and stories, ready to fight anyone or anything.

This evening, however, Hooper found PintPot's excited drawl irritating. He was tired and nursing a headache, and sweat tickled his back from the thrice-damned humidity hanging in the air. The younger man was like a little dog, yipping and snarling at anything it saw.

Hooper resisted the urge to kick him.

Other thoughts troubled his mind also, an all-too-rare occurrence for a man who didn't care for much beyond the moment. To start with, he still didn't know how to feel about crossing the floor. The Grand Brewer was a good, honest man. Hooper had sat on his right as vice captain for years, always trusting Tapper's judgement at every turn. In one moment of heated anger, he'd turned his back on all of that.

He'd asked himself why many times since then.

It wasn't just the dead cat, he knew. Scum had just been the final thing to push him over the edge; the rest had been building up for months. Young Amber being cast out and the Grand Brewer not stepping up to stop it. His indecision during the Butcher strife the previous summer, when Brisket had all but handed the Brewers the reigns, only for Tapper to sit on the sidelines watching. The Butchers were powerful and established. It didn't take a Scholar to see how that bond could have benefitted them, especially now.

There were plenty of other examples. For nigh

on a year now, the Guv had allowed himself to be outmanoeuvred by Esters time and time again. To cap it all off, he'd diluted the Guild by not only letting the Exile back in but embracing her as though blood had never passed between their houses.

Despite all of that, though, it still didn't sit right to have abandoned the Grand Brewer.

Hooper didn't care one way or the other about Esters. She was playing the game, trying to edge out her rival. That was nothing new. The Guild was built around such challenges, built around leaders strong enough to fight them off or wise enough to step down when their time was past. Perhaps, Hooper conceded, some part of him thought Tapper still had legs. He caught himself sighing in frustration. For weeks, he'd led himself around in circles like this, and it had gotten him nowhere.

Thinking about the Vermin made it even worse.

During the leadership struggle, the underworld had risen a head far uglier than Hooper had ever before seen. Beady eyes with malicious intent seemed to stare from every shadow and wait at the end of each street corner. Even the pickpocket they'd just put in his place had dared a filthy look as the Brewers left. Vermin had never before dared to strike against the Brewers before, always preferring to skulk in the shadows like cowards.

Now it seemed inevitable.

Every day the streets emptied the moment night fell, stripped of people concerned for their own welfare.

Faith in the Brewers had fled with Scum's lifeblood, wasted like spilt beer. The shift in power sat poorly with him. On nights like this he paced, one hand firmly clenched around the handpiece of his maul, body as tense as the air around him. Every movement, real and imagined, caught his attention.

'...and then I bottled the bastard. Should have seen it—the claret went off like a broken tap!'

Hooper looked sideways at his companion. PintPot was still mouthing off about some conquest or another, completely oblivious to the apparent hostility of their surroundings. 'Shut it, lad. Just try keeping your jaw closed for a change, eh?'

For a second, Hooper thought PintPot might slug him, but then the smaller man apparently thought better of it and looked away. He at least had the decency to offer a halfway sheepish look.

They rounded a corner, and up ahead the faint silhouette of the Drunken Seamstress appeared, a bright light behind the windows.

Friday raised her head from the pillow, the cloth damp from yet another night where she'd cried herself to sleep. She cursed herself for being so damned stupid. Snivelling achieved nothing, and it certainly wouldn't be what Spigot would want. The moon was still overhead, light spilling into the room and painting her

like a ghost. Had her mind not been so preoccupied, she might have laughed at that idea. Some haunt she'd offer, too busy wailing about her lost love.

Her thoughts were distracted by the faint scent of charcoal, gritty and dry. Undoubtedly what had stirred her, it wafted into the room from a gap under the door, a slight breeze breaking the stillness and causing her to sneeze.

Friday sat up properly and reached for her discarded boots, drowsy fingers pulling the laces taut with a little difficulty. Sliding off the cot, she padded over to the door and opened it a fraction further. The smell was much stronger in the corridor, rising upwards over the stairs. Darkness ruled at the top of the staircase, but she fancied the air on the landing below had a hint of smoke to it, muddying the candlelight.

Suddenly alert and with her heart racing in growing apprehension, Friday crept downwards. With each step the temperature increased. By the time she reached the landing she felt a layer of sweat across her head and shoulder blades. Smoke eddied near the ceiling, the thicker scent to blame for a cough which wormed its way into her lungs before spluttering outwards again. Not waiting for the air to grow worse Friday leapt around the next corner and towards the next staircase. A heavy door blocked her path, a faint crackling sound audible behind it.

She nearly wrenched the aged door from its hinges.

Hot, dark grey clouds immediately billowed into

the corridor, enveloping Friday and forcing her to grasp the doorframe as dizziness threatened to send her falling. Below, a dull amber glow crept upwards through the gloom. Fighting the urge to retreat, Friday pulled part of her tunic over her mouth and hurriedly descended, knowing she didn't have much time.

The Drunken Seamstress was ablaze.

The last few steps nearly proved to be too much of a challenge for her uncertain feet, but raw panic kept her moving. Oppressive flames surrounded her, licking at the plentiful aged and dry wood. It was heaviest over by the bar, where the counter had become a blackened inferno which reached for the ceiling and blistered the paint covering wattle-and-daub walls. Elsewhere the fire had yet to burn as high, instead expanding outwards over the floorboards and carpet.

Friday looked around frantically, trying to make out if anyone else was trapped with her. Her heart sank as she immediately saw a large shape lying slumped over a table in the closest corner, beyond a sheet of dancing flame which denied her a way past.

'Hey! You there! Can you hear me?!' She shouted as loud as she could, but her voice was lost amid the conflagration. She opened her mouth to shout again but phlegm plugged her lungs, forcing her to hack it onto the floor in a fit of abrasive coughing.

By the time she recovered, the figure was out of sight, consumed by the fire.

Something heavy barged into her flank and Friday

recoiled until she saw it was Quaff, fur darkened by soot and his eyes rolling in terror. She knew the feeling. The massive dog whimpered and shook.

‘Let’s get out of here, boy!’ She grasped his collar and yanked him as hard as she could, fear lending her strength she’d never known. She could barely make out the doorway on the other side of the room. Surrounded by fire dripping from the walls and slowly climbing over the oak frame, it wasn’t much of a choice—but it was also the only one they had.

Hurriedly picking out a route through the burning building, Friday was about to lead Quaff towards the threshold when a voice turned her head in the direction of the inner chambers. Decimate staggered towards her through the smoke, dragging an unconscious Esters with her, one of the Matriarch’s heavy arms thrown over the Exile’s narrow shoulders. Quaff tore away from Friday, leaping towards the two women.

‘Help me, blast you!’ Decimate was wiry and strong, but not even her prodigious stamina could last in air fast becoming unbreathable. Her knees were on the cusp of buckling.

Dodging around clumps of flames, Friday hastened over to take up Esters on the other side. With her head next to the Matriarch’s, she could just make out the other woman muttering to herself under her breath in delirium. Esters was alive, but for the time being she was very much dead weight.

A massive crash sounded behind them as the ceiling

in the inner chambers collapsed, bringing half of the doorframe with it. A huge wall of burning debris and ash followed, spilling towards them. Quaff yelped and almost tripped Decimate, who kicked him out of the way with a curse in her native Erskirii.

'We're going to die in here!' The tunic fabric covering her mouth had slipped down, and her words were clear. In some part of her panicked mind, Friday knew she'd only spoken in hopes that Decimate would argue with her. When she saw the grim agreement in her teammate's eyes, sadness flooded in to mix with the animal fright searing its way through her body.

'Aye.' The Exile's voice was flat and without emotion, as though she'd already come to terms with the truth.

Glass shattered somewhere, and the roaring flames intensified still further. Friday felt her skin slowly being cooked, burned by the impossible heat. A terrified Quaff was barking and knocking into her legs. Somewhere in the distance another crashing sound broke through the conflagration, like wood collapsing inwards.

Lightheaded, Friday felt her limbs become heavy and dull, useless lumps of meat which didn't feel like they belonged to anyone anymore. She stumbled and fell to one knee, dimly aware of Esters slamming into the floor beside her.

Her eyes closed.

Spigot's face swam into view, as it always did.

I love you.

She tried to return the words, but others were shouting nearby, drowning out the raspy whisper that was all she could manage. Out of nowhere a strong pair of arms hoisted her up and threw her over a thick shoulder, and then the fiery air was whistling around her as she flew towards the door, limp as a child's ragdoll.

Suddenly she felt fresh air once again, and the heat was mercifully absent. Head spinning, Friday fought to stay conscious. She had the vague sensation of being unceremoniously dumped on the ground and watching the dim shape of her saviour's boots leading away. Almost by instinct she rolled on her side to puke her guts up.

For several urgent minutes, the world was the dirty piece of stone in front of her eyes, and even that was identified more from its coolness against her cheek than by seeing it. A blurry ball of orange light swam somewhere beyond her focus, but she forced herself up onto one elbow. As her vision cleared and sound slowly drifted back to her senses, the surrounding voices steadily became louder, their swearing more distinct.

Someone dropped down next to her, landing heavily. Friday recognised the Exile, her dark kutte a stark contrast to her light tan.

'D-Decimate?'

The other woman had lost her mask. She wiped eyes turned wet and swollen, her lips pursed in anger. Somehow, Friday didn't think the tears were from sorrow.

'What happened?'

Decimate paused before answering. 'They pulled out Esters. Don't know if she'll make it. Svantelit, the woman is strong, but she must have swallowed a bellyful of ash even before I got to her.'

Friday didn't know how to reply. Her mouth moved, trying to form words and failing. Just as she found something, howling interrupted her, turning her head in a new direction. The sound was awful, a single keening, mournful note, repeated over and over.

She found her feet unsteadily.

Five paces away, Quaff sat on his haunches by a bulky, unmoving figure, their identity held fast in the darkness. Trying not to trip and fall, Friday stumbled towards the body, panic rising.

Hooper appeared in her path, torso bared, arms and chest covered in soot, scrapes, and angry welts. His face was mournful, eyes full of hurt and sorrow she'd never before seen him wear.

'Best not look, eh, lass?' He sounded defeated. Friday ignored him and pushed past, feet catching on each other. A moment later she was next to Quaff, the mascot now whining miserably.

Her eyes grew wide and she fell to her knees, suddenly overcome.

Mash stared back, dead eyes unblinking and blood staining every inch of him. His body was covered in layers of vicious cuts and dark bruises, his clothes torn and ruined. It looked like he'd been thrashed to within an inch of his life before he expired. Yet an even more

horrific indignity had been visited upon his body after his death. His mouth had been mutilated, cut at the edges and forced into a yawning chasm.

A dead rat was stuffed inside, its brown and grey fur stained crimson.

There was no mistaking the message. It was a gloating statement of dominance, arrogant and callous.

At last the Brewers knew their foe—just as they were on the cusp of losing the war.



— SHADOWS FALL —

The chanting in the crowd was a deafening, rolling sermon which never seemed to cease, the end of one chant bleeding into another. Priests in bright white prowled the stands and stalls, robes glowing brightly in the brilliant sun, arms aloft in supplication and voices raised over the noise to spill bitter condemnation. They chose only the darkest sections of Soltheician scripture for their audience, their hateful words bursting violently into being. Around each iconoclast the people swayed like grass in the wind, blank-eyed puppets with their strings pulled taut.

Brisket shook her head. Not all Order spectators were cut from this bolt of cloth, but as the team had progressed through the Sovereign States Championship she had seen the less fanatical supporters pushed out, until the friendly stands seldom held a friendly face, only those baying for blood.

The Betrayer was under no illusions as to the nature of the company she kept.

She wouldn't soon forget the sight of Venin's broken body in the centre of the pitch, puddles of rainwater stained crimson by his blood. Along with it was the grisly sight of Grace's knife slicing through the lad's neck, a bright streak of arterial red arcing up into the air.

The Saint.

Never had Brisket felt more animosity towards another individual, not even the Flashing Blade. Fillet at

least had believed her actions were for the betterment of her teammates and her Guild, a respectable goal unfortunately directly opposed to Brisket's allegiance to the Master Butcher. Grace only wanted to see the world purged. Dispassionate eyes betrayed a heart devoid of goodness when Brisket confronted her about Venin's death. The Alchemist's life was almost incidental, blinked away in an instant and with the same thought as a horse swatting a fly with its tail.

Grace's attitude wasn't the only thing which rankled.

The air surrounding the game had become far more violent over the last months, matching the raised sense of hostility and suspicion amongst the Guilds themselves. Some greater agenda was still being played out, and Brisket couldn't shake the feeling she and her teammates were at the centre of it.

She wished the others in her side weren't so indifferent or quick to embrace the darkness. She alone in the Order side seemed to want to hold back the tide. As she stole a glance at Honour marshalling her team from the sidelines, Brisket found herself wishing her path had taken a different turn, one mirroring that of the First Lady. Honour was loved by all. Her name and deed were set to echo throughout history long after her days were past.

Brisket was a footnote. Nothing more. A survivor too stubborn to relent, left fighting for every day since she should have fallen.

On the opposite side of the pitch, the Farmer

supporters roared their defiance at the fanatics. There was no end of bad blood between the two groups, most Farmer's Guild spectators also being devout Solthecians. The Order had poached hundreds of their number since debuting Brisket's team, pundits deserting their team to stand with the opposition. Champions they might be, but the Farmers stands were patchy with gaps.

Today the rivals at last met. The animosity felt on both sides was enough to stand up the hair on the back of the neck.

Brisket noted the empty spaces in the opposition stands had been filled for this game, although not by figures in the orange and yellow of the Farmer's Guild. Spectators in Alchemist green instead stood in a great group at one end of the pitch, several more interspersed into the sea of Farmer colours. Seeing such secular and progressive people standing shoulder-to-shoulder with staunch traditionalists was a strange sight, one which left Brisket nervous. Venin's death had been a brutal and callous act. Sooner or later, retribution was no doubt due.

She only hoped it was not today.

The radiant sun had finally reached its zenith, an open field of blue still absent of clouds. The world below was bleached dry, the restless air shimmering

in the heat and as unlike the drab mire of Brisket's previous game as could be.

Grange's clumsy pass spun away from Bushel's run and Brisket intercepted, jumping to catch it on her chest. A chorus of angry shouting echoed over the pitch from the opposition stands, and various projectiles launched like a broadside from a fighting ship. They fell short of where she landed but pelted Mist, who staggered and fell to the pitch in a tangle of robes.

Brisket kept the ball close as she darted across the ground, quickly snapping a pass to Fangtooth and dodging away as Windle aped clumsily towards her, long arms windmilling. The Monster didn't react in the slightest to her play; instead the ball struck him in the leg and ricocheted away crazily into open ground, rolling back towards Windle as it came to a stop.

She swore and reversed direction, feet moving faster as she broke into a sprint. Fangtooth shuffled along with her in an awkward run, headed towards the incensed Farmer in the centre of the pitch.

He was a frightening individual. Since he had been reborn by his newfound faith, memory of the ambling and oftentimes confused figure had been entirely driven away and replaced by the image of a fanatical zealot. The chains binding him had been cut away and the impurities burned from his body, and now only the flames of repressed rage remained, since fanned into violent bloodlust. A bloodcurdling scream sounded from under his mask as he charged into the fray, and

Brisket felt an uneasy shudder grasp at her spine. She had known berserkers before in Boar and knew to be wary. When their blood was up, violent men lashed out at anything within range, friend or foe.

A quick glance read the game enough to see none of the other Farmers were close enough to steal the ball, and she slowed, taking deep breaths into aching lungs.

Let the pair of them fight. She could wait for the opportune moment.

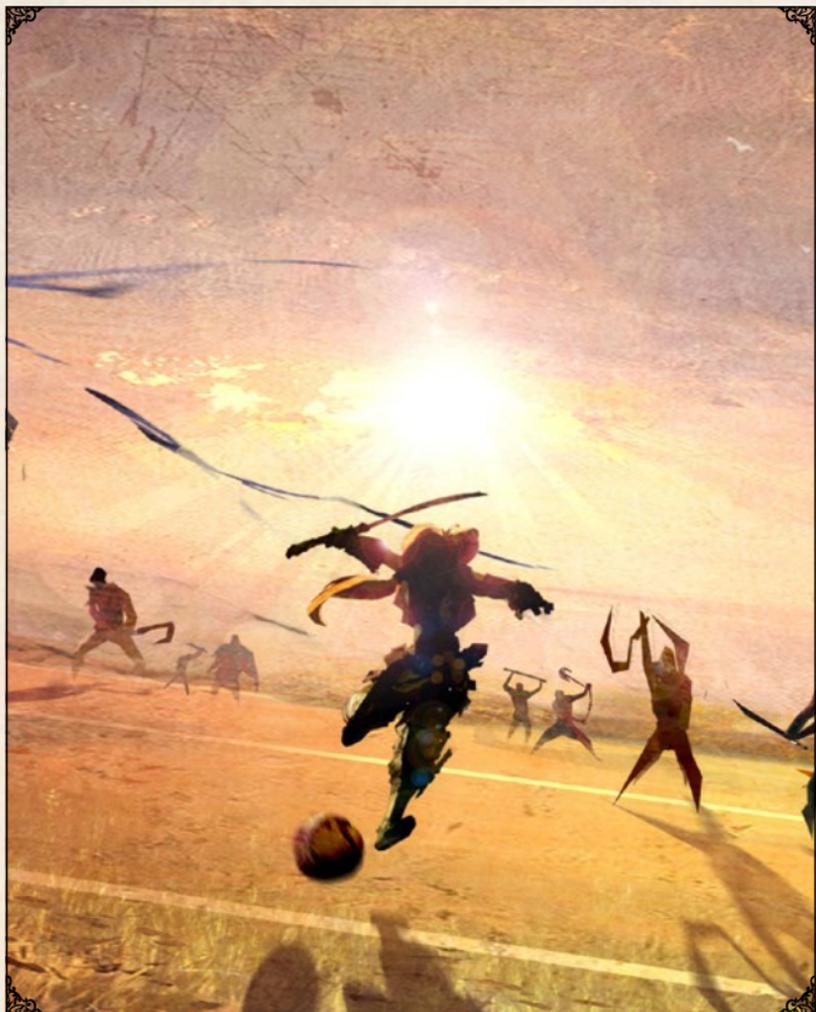
Heavy footsteps threw up great goutts of dust and left the earth shaking as the titans neared each other. Even the Order stands seemed to hold their breath for the seconds leading up to the impact, the last words of their droning hymn finally waning away on the wind. A strange sense of foreboding flashed across Brisket's mind in the eerie quiet, little more than a nagging doubt at the edge of her mind quickly dispelled a moment later.

Fangtooth and Windle crashed together, and the crowd on both sides of the pitch broke into a deafening howl of approval.

The Monster led with a massive swipe of his heavy mace, a wide crescent of murderous intent headed straight for his opponent's skull. Windle knew better than to try and block, ducking instead and wrapping a huge arm around Fangtooth to drag the Order thug off balance.

He was thwarted by the momentum of his opponent, whose body pivoted and accidentally shook Windle

free. The Farmer tumbled head over heels onto the cracked mud but regained his footing quickly and launched himself forward with an unexpected burst of speed. Fangtooth had little chance to block the attack before Windle's hay hooks raked the rough scar tissue covering his exposed arm, leaving bright streaks of red.



If the bigger man cared he didn't show it, grunting as the mace swung around once more. Windle stopped the attack dead by rearing back a fist and punching Fangtooth's mask as hard as he could, denting the metal. His opponent staggered backwards as the spectators surged, cheering louder and frantically waving their pennants.

The fight still had yet to take them too far from the ball, leaving Brisket circling in frustration, waiting for her window.

Sharp metal points glinted in the sun as the claws swept down once more, this time digging much deeper into Fangtooth's skin before being torn out once more, dulled by crimson. Windle let loose a throaty bellow and kicked the Monster's knee out from under him before closing in as his opponent dropped his mace and fell to one knee. A meaty fist lashed out, hooks scratching through Fangtooth's scalp as the mask dented again.

All around her Brisket could feel eyes staring, the air thick with suspense. The crowd was louder than ever, the din punctuated by the relentless drum of stamping feet. Something had changed. It was more akin to being in the Trial than a match of Guild Ball.

Fingers clasped together, Windle hoisted both fists up in the air before bringing them down together. The blow dashed the mask from Fangtooth's head, revealing a horrific and bloody visage, enough to unsettle the stomach. There was a handful of gasps from the stands, but most revelled in the violence,

their voices coming together in a bestial roar.

Their fury was matched by the Farmer, who repeated the action. A second before he struck a huge forearm caught the blow and batted it away.

Lurking under a stream of blood, partially hidden by horrific welts and scar tissue, a mouthful of cracked and missing teeth formed into a sadistic grin as the Monster rose back to his feet. His sudden revival further empowered the Order crowd, priests whipping the spectators into a frenzy. Reeling from the heavy-handed parry, Windle staggered a few steps to the side, only able to watch as bloody fingers closed once more about the grip of the immense mace.

Brisket saw her chance as Fangtooth resumed his advance on the Farmer, darting out wide to gather the ball. She reached it just as the mace smashed the Farmer from his feet and pounded him into the dirt. He tried to regain his feet, only to be knocked flat on his back again, yelping as the punishing blow clearly dislodged a tooth and left the side of his face bloody. A kick came a moment later, sending one hook tumbling across the dry grass.

The Farmer crowd had stopped cheering. It was happening again.

They weren't alone in the realisation. Blood draining from her face, Brisket looked helplessly to the sidelines, hoping to see the apothecaries already making their way across the pitch. She was relieved to see them running until she realised they were moving in the opposite direction of the confrontation.

For a moment confused reigned until she saw frantic figures climbing the pens separating the crowds from the pitch, uncaring of the spiteful barbs awaiting them at the top. Her eyes widened as she took in the adjacent row, where an immense tide of bodies rammed repeatedly into the aged iron grille, making it rattle with each impact.

Men and women from the Watch busied themselves along the sidelines, shouting ineffective warnings to the spectators, some going so far as to strike the metal bars with truncheons. As Brisket watched, horrified, one stick was grabbed by a set of hands in the crowd, and the Lawkeeper was pulled into the bars, his own weapon lashing back out at him. The man fell to the ground with a bloody face just as canisters and vials thrown by figures in Alchemist green began to explode, great clouds of billowing smoke rolling across the pitch and obscuring Brisket's field of vision.

Knots of brawling spectators surrounded them on all sides, the men and women in the Order stands having proved themselves just as willing to invade the pitch as those from the Farmer stalls. With so little wind the smoke refused to dissipate, adding to the chaos. Screaming voices echoed through the gloom, disconnected and directionless. Over it all a crashing sound announced the collapse of another section of fencing in the distance.

Brisket remained close to Fangtooth, the hulking brute revelling in the chaos. The Monster strode across the pitch with impunity, a trail of broken bodies left in his wake where the mob had attempted to drag their nemesis down. Even now, a wall of angry men formed in front of the two Order players, each clutching either a rusty shank or a truncheon stolen from a fallen Lawkeeper.

Fangtooth laughed at them, the sound nothing more than an ugly rasp.

With an angry scream they came at him. As her teammate's face slipped into a sneer and he began to swing his mace around in wide sweeps, Brisket ducked away and sprinted off to her right. Glancing over her shoulder she was glad to see just one pair of thugs following her, the only two sensible enough not to join their fellows in the suicidal charge. She spun on her heel and addressed the lead figure, long knife in her hand held out and pointed at the shaven-headed youth like a duellist.

'Are you so stupid to test me? I have gutted men and women for less offense!' Her words were snarled, her blood running hot from raw adrenalin and fear. She was confident one opponent would present no challenge.

Two was another matter entirely, which was why she knew to end this in a hurry.

She leapt forward without waiting for a response, her voice raised in an old Butcher war cry she hoped might break their nerve. The lead figure nervously stood his

ground, but behind him the other man turned craven and bolted into the mist.

Her first slash cut directly across his body, forcing him to try a clumsy dive out of her way. His reaction was too late for him to completely escape the wicked steel, and the blade drew a deep stripe across his arm. Mewling like a child, the man staggered away from her and into the fog, joining his comrade. Brisket allowed herself a satisfied smirk and kept going. Soon enough Watch reinforcements must arrive, but until then, her best chance for survival was to reach the dugouts.

Assuming, of course, they hadn't been overrun.

Another three paces and her luck ran dry: the second man waited for her with three others alongside. He grinned stupidly, his resolve apparently bolstered by numbers. In his stubby fingers he wielded the neck of a broken bottle, the jagged glass vicious enough to match his expression. Wearing spiteful leers, the thugs began to step out in a wide circle, keeping Brisket in the middle.

She decided not to let the thugs take any more advantage than they already had. Knife slicing through the air threateningly, she tried the same trick as before, charging the man directly in front of her. Built strong with wide shoulders, he obviously felt far more confident than her previous assailants, even coming at Brisket in response. She didn't slow her pace; his action merely meant she would feint away and kick his knee out. With her next step she oversold the build-up

to a lunge, noting his eyes flicker towards her blade.

Something hard hit her in the back of the head before she could continue the movement, flooring her. Through her daze she kicked at the arms which tried to grab her, her fingers scrabbling to find the hilt of her weapon. She heard a grunt as one boot connected with something solid, but then a rough hand belted stars back across her vision.

‘Union bitch!’

‘Order, my arse. This one’s a Butcher brat.’

The voices floated close by, tones barbed and cruel. If her wits could have fought their way to the surface, she might have been afraid of what might come next. Rough hands held her arms and legs fast, and dizziness robbed her strength.

‘Well, I don’t care what you are. You’ll bleed like a stuck pig all the same!’ Brisket could feel breath on her skin, reeking of sour mash and rotten vegetables.

Rattling armour and a heavy crunch stole the thug’s next words. Suddenly the pressure from her arms and legs was released and she fell roughly to the dirt. Her head cleared in time to see her attackers retreating, leaving one of their number in a crumpled heap. A mounted Watchman sat astride his steed nearby, wheeling back around to her.

The end of his polearm was covered in blood.

Her saviour apparently recognised her as a player, and he reached down to haul her back onto unsteady feet. ‘Damned scum.’ He spat in the direction of the

downed man before turning to her. 'Are you injured?'

Brisket shook her head, still collecting her senses.

'You still don't look so good. Step up here, and I'll get you out to safety.'

Brisket nodded wearily, shaking the rest of the cobwebs away. One foot gingerly found an empty stirrup and she vaulted behind the rider.

From her elevated position she could see the dense clouds were at last beginning to thin out, revealing a scene which more closely resembled a battleground than a Guild Ball pitch. Pockets of fighting remained, with white-robed Order supporters pitched against Farmers in yellow and orange, the colours of both sides now stained with blood.

Judging from the trail of dented armour and bloodstains leading back towards the sidelines, the Lawkeepers appeared to have been beaten back once, but reinforcements were now arriving. As Brisket watched, a unit of mounted Watchmen charged into the pitch from one flank, chasing down a group of Order supporters. The crowds dispersed almost immediately before the disciplined cavalry, though flailing hooves caught one or two unable to escape the press of bodies quickly enough. The downed figures remained prone on the grass, even when a line of Watch on foot caught up, iron shackles in hand.

The rider kicked his own mount in their direction. Most had the good sense to flee before an animal easily twice their size, and those foolish enough to deny their

progress were soon bludgeoned by the Watchman's polearm or kicked by vicious, iron-clad hoof.

Before long they reached a thin line of advancing Lawkeepers in dark blue. As the horse slowed to a trot, Brisket offered her thanks and dropped to her feet, saluting the Watchman as he wheeled his mount and sped back into the fray. A couple of the Lawkeepers gave her dirty looks, but they parted to allow her through nonetheless, closing their ranks seamlessly behind her.

Suddenly Brisket was safe again, and she almost dropped to her knees, relief and tension all draining from her body at once. Now the feeling was upon her, she realised she'd been threatened the moment she stepped out of the dugout at the start of the game. It was a terrible sign of how severely the violence had escalated.

The Order had earned this day of lawlessness by themselves. The death of Venin in their previous game had crossed a forbidden line, one never trespassed upon without great consequence. She almost didn't recognise the game she'd grown up playing when they took to the pitch, despite her best efforts to keep them honest.

This was something quite different.

The sun had begun to fall from the sky by the time control was finally reclaimed, the remaining rioters cast in an umber shade as the Lawkeepers led them away. Unruly crowds absent, quietude descended and

left Brisket feeling utterly disconnected to the world around her, the scene so surreal compared to anything she'd seen before.

The Betrayer took a deep breath and looked around in silence.

The stretch of ground where she stood had been the Farmer sidelines during the game, where she'd seen the first fence fall. The iron grille rested as a mangled ruin a few feet away, rusted metal bent and split. Nearby several prone figures lay on the ground, unmoving. Most wore the dark blue of the Watch, a handful yellow or orange. Brisket knew with certainty they were corpses. The match apothecaries had already passed through administering aid where they could. All that remained now was to take the bodies away for the Spooks to perform their grim duties.

Her eyes found one victim wearing the cream and blue of the Order, and Brisket found herself instinctively padding toward them. Whoever it was had clearly been the target of the Alchemist supporters, judging from torn scraps of green discarded nearby.

A sinking feeling took hold as she approached close enough to spot a familiar hood. She slowed, her steps suddenly weary. The final paces seemed to take an age, the strife of the whole day coming to rest in her limbs. When eventually she arrived, it was all she could do to kneel by the body sadly.

Mist lay in a curled foetal ball, his lifeless body kicked and crushed by a horde of trampling boots after being

brought down. Rich scarlet blossomed over Order white around the Shadow's abdomen, pooling on the soil beneath. Given how much of it there was, Brisket wasn't surprised to find a hilt protruding from within the robes, the weapon piercing through the binding around the chest and belly. Reaching delicately around a metal cross hanging from a thin chain around her teammate's neck, she gave the hilt a sharp tug and pulled it free, revealing a crude metal shiv.

Brisket sighed. Weapons like this were as popular with outlaws and mercenaries for their anonymity as much as for their lethality. She tossed the blade away. It wouldn't tell her any secrets.

A sense of emptiness threatened to take hold, sorrow creeping around the edges of her thoughts. She didn't particularly care for any of her teammates, and she certainly held little allegiance to the Order. Her servitude here was only to buy the life of the Master Butcher, one of the few people she still cared anything for.

Mist had been a mercenary caught up in the machinations of the Solthecian church, just like her. But for all they hadn't shared many words, their partnership on the pitch had begun to breed a confidence and familiarity she now realised.

The loss cut far deeper than she could possibly have suspected it would.

Mist's eyes had closed to agony in the end, Brisket saw. Her gaze landed upon the cross she'd navigated around a moment ago, spotted with blood. She didn't

know whether Mist truly believed in Solthecius but felt it her duty to open the striker's eyes regardless. Mist's spirit deserved to greet the August Lord as any of the faithful might. And if her suspicion was unfounded, she doubted the corpse would much care. A soft smile her farewell, Brisket reached towards her fallen teammate.

'Stop.' Grace's voice was as clipped and taut as it ever had been. If the Saint had been affected by Mist's death, she hid it well.

Brisket's hand stilled, although she didn't withdraw it. She looked back over her shoulder, surprised to see only Grace. The Saint was nearly always accompanied by Benediction, her constant shadow.

'Give me a reason beyond your spite, Saint.' Brisket was too tired to keep up any pretence of politeness, drained both physically and mentally by the day's events.

'Your ignorance offers the unbeliever blasphemy, a holy passage I will not permit be sullied by his filth.'

Brisket rose to standing, hands dusting her trousers. 'And you make that distinction based on what, exactly?'

'I am the agent of the August Lord. His voice when dealing with scum like you...' Grace's head tilted sideways, to indicate the body behind Brisket. '...or that.'

Brisket wanted nothing more than to slap the smug grin from the Saint's face. She could all too easily imagine the gloating expression hidden behind the mask. She felt her hands clench into fists at her sides and forced a deep, calming breath.

‘Fuck you, Grace. I’m captain. I choose to honour the fallen. You will acquiesce and fall in line.’

‘Or what?’ The other woman framed her reply with plenty of aggression. ‘I see you playing with a paper crown for the first time, Betrayer. It doesn’t suit you. Better you remember you are only another mercenary, just like that pathetic pile of rags beyond.’

Brisket could almost taste the venom lacing her words. ‘Or I will carve the arrogance from your hide. Betrayer I may be, but I am still a Butcher, and you would do well to remember your faithful dog does not stand at your back now. Are you so brave without him?’

The words seemed to have some effect upon the other woman, who stepped back a pace. ‘I have no further time to waste with insignificant wretches such as you or the miserable corpse you seem to care so much for.’

Brisket offered a predatory smile, quite deliberate and entirely honest, as the Saint backed away another step before turning on her heel. Much to Brisket’s satisfaction, her movement revealed more than a hint of hurry.

Alone once more, she returned her gaze to Mist, returning her hand to its duty.

A least the Shadow might find peace this day, even if Brisket’s struggle would continue.

—FORGED FROM STEEL—

The old courtyard had served as a meeting ground for opposing gangs for generations, since even before the wars. Although it was technically part of the undercity, the people of the depths normally avoided it, not because it was out under the open air but from an intense and enduring fear of being haunted by those who had fallen here. Their superstitious culture only exaggerated the myth, and the ominous stains long seeped into the cracked tiles did little to dispel their fear.

For so many Vermin to assemble in this cursed place now spoke greatly of the power Piper held over them.

To the Brewers, this land was merely a battleground. A place where disputes had always been settled out of sight of the Watch and where the law of reprisal was blood alone. There could be no mistaking why they'd assembled here, the purpose always the same.

Only seven of them remained now. Although not a true Brewer, Lucky had almost come with them, but Stave had gruffly forbidden it in no uncertain terms. The lad had seemed genuinely upset, enough to leave Friday feeling sentimental herself. She'd waved to him as he stood in the street in front of their temporary lodgings, his hand stroking Quaff's fur.

She couldn't tell if he was saddened because he couldn't join them or because he knew he might never see them again.

It didn't matter either way. There were some places

a person should never step if they could avoid it, and this was one of them. Better he stayed away. Gods only knew he'd already seen enough misery in his lifetime.

The Vermin filled the space all around, easily two of them for every Brewer, likely more waiting in the shadows. Some raised their voices in discordant song, a terrible reverie of missed notes which mocked their foes as much as united their own kin. Lurking behind a hulking great bodyguard in the centre stood the Tyrant of the Undercity. His gaze swept over the line of Brewers, a dangerous smirk plastered over his jaw.

Friday had never been prouder of the men and women who stood either side of her, defiantly displaying the kutte. In the past, they'd all held their grudges or even come to blows with one another, but in the face of a common threat they'd united without a second thought.

Above all, they were family.

Her mind strayed from the scene for a moment, wishing the Grand Brewer stood with them. She knew she wasn't alone in the thought. Hooper, Decimate, and Stave had all remained loyal in their hearts. She could tell each missed their leader's presence. Even PintPot, surprising them all, had voiced his displeasure at marching without Tapper.

Friday stole a glance at Esters. The older woman was a hard read, her unrelenting hatred for their enemy turned into a bitter mask. She betrayed no sign of whether she desired the Grand Brewer's leadership

now they were faced with a real fight, though Friday suspected she might have done. The Guv wasn't just a fearsome brawler. He held an aura of command which was unmatched throughout the Empire of the Free Cities, inspiring his side with confidence. Tapper was the rock which had never broken, no matter the hardships they'd endured.

The same couldn't be said of Esters, still clearly affected in the aftermath of her escape from the fire at the Drunken Seamstress. It was a miracle she'd lived through that night at all. Friday remembered seeing the woman's unconscious body wreathed in smoke, breathing reduced to a shallow rasp and bloody spit dirtying her lips. For days after, Esters had lain unmoving on her cot, attended by the best sawbones the Guild's coffers could buy. Rumour had it that when eventually she did rise and discover the fate of her husband, she fell back to her bed all over again, refusing to speak for another two days.

She'd emerged another woman entirely. Seething fury had settled over the Matriarch, silent intensity replacing strident and boisterous words. It matched a drawn face with skin turned ashen pale since so much life had been smothered by smoke. The rest of her had seen no less change. A long cloak of dark fur hung over a body which had turned leaner, making her broad shoulders as intimidating as her ferocious expression and the long axe she kept by her side. Sinister markings painted the skin around her face, sharp black lines

contrasting with her pale flesh and the frozen hatred in her eyes.

Esters looked ready to sell her own life at the cost of vengeance.

Friday smiled darkly. If she were honest with herself, none of them would likely walk away from this. At least Esters had embraced that.

Her attention was drawn back to the moment as the Vermin began to spread out in response to some unseen signal, their eyes alight with violent anticipation. Most wielded heavy cudgels or lashes, the metalwork too precious and rare in the undercity for scum like this to lay their hands on without blood. Opposite Friday stood one notable exception, at least, a young girl no older than she whirling an aged and rusted chain around herself with lethal intent.

The Brewers kept their line, every one of the final seven holding their heads high.

This was their last stand.

Still a coward hiding behind his massive protector, Piper raised his flute to his lips and let free a long, piercing note. Friday had time to be minded of the horn blown at the start of Guild Ball game before the denizens of the undercity came at them in a snarling tide, voices raised and long strides eating up the ground.

The chain barely missed, whistling through the air where Friday had been standing a moment before. Before she could toss one of her knives in retaliation the wiry woman dragged the metal violently backwards once more and the Brewer took a frantic step back, breaking her aim. Friday launched the blade as she moved anyhow, hoping for respite to press an attack. Bold as brass, the Vermin only laughed as the spinning knife sailed well wide.

Friday swore. She couldn't escape without turning her back, which most likely would earn her the brutal lash of hard iron against her skin—and worse if she were tripped. Going to ground now would be fatal. Unlike the pitch, this ground had no rules and no apothecaries with their icy sponges.

At least the length of rusted metal seeking her was keeping Friday from being dragged down by other assailants. With the chain swinging around so wildly no other dared approach them lest they be hit. Even so, her limbs had started to burn from dancing around, and her breath was fast and short from the constant movement. Sooner or later Friday knew her stamina would run dry. Hoping the other woman would falter first wasn't an option. She had to either find an escape or finish the bitch first.

Another wide swing arced through the air and Friday ducked under it in desperation, trying to dodge closer. Panting as she found herself inside what had to be the useful range of the chain, she drew another blade and advanced on her opponent as quickly as she could.

A moment later, Friday felt the repercussion of her gamble, a crack across the back of her head staggering her and driving a lance of pain through her skull. As she blinked away the daze the chain struck her arm, forcing her hand to spasm and drop the knife to the ground with a clatter. The pain was incredible, her bare skin already raised in an angry welt. Instinctively she cradled the bloody limb as the woman opposite her snarled victoriously, whirling the long chain around her head in a wide loop before launching it forward.

Terror rooting her in place, Friday could only watch.

A tall shape barrelled into Friday from behind, toppling them both. She landed heavily, gasping from the shock, but it at least broke the spell. Next to her the other figure lay unmoving, facedown in a rapidly expanding pool of blood. One of the undercity scum, he was rake-thin with diseased skin stained by dirt. Horrified, Friday forced her eyes from the body to look at the woman who now stepped into the fray beside her.

Steel axe bloodied by untold Vermin, Esters was a vision of vengeful fury. The Matriarch's eyes were lit with bloodlust, the charcoal paint adorning her face smudged and running like great blackened tears. Heaving with her heavy breathing, the immense fur draped across her shoulders moved like a wild beast with its hackles raised.

Esters launched herself at Friday's assailant in a headlong charge. The chain snapped out, striking the Matriarch in the face and leaving one cheek a

bloody mess, but it couldn't stop her momentum. Esters' axe brutally cleaved into the other woman's neck, breaking it in a tide of gore as the Vermin's head flopped backwards and fell with the rest of her body.

Still holding her arm to her chest, Friday struggled to rise until a strong hand hauled her up again, bringing her face-to-face with Esters. She almost didn't recognise the woman. The side of her face was bloody and swollen, lending the savage cast of her features an increasingly primal feel. The Matriarch still didn't speak but only fixed Friday with an intense glare and spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground before pushing past her to join the fray elsewhere.

Glancing around, Friday realised the fight had moved away from her and she stood mercifully alone for the moment. As she caught her breath, she tried to make out where the other Brewers stood in the brawling mass of bodies, only to feel her hopes fade and her shoulders slump in defeat. In spite of their determination and Esters' berserker rage, they were losing the uneven struggle.

Decimate was surrounded by fallen Vermin, those not crawling away lying unmoving, life likely extinguished. The rest attacked en masse. Even as Decimate's long claymore bloodied one foe and sent them to the ground, another would step in to press the attack.

PintPot fought a similar horde, his chest heaving from exertion as he struck anyone close with a broken

bottle. Even in his element, the strain showed on his face as exhaustion took hold. Elsewhere, Stave slumped against a wall, kutte torn and one flank bleeding heavily. Hooper fought to protect the older man, but even his powerful arms looked tired.

She couldn't see Stoker at all.

Movement drew her eyes to the ground over by Piper, where sewer grilles had been thrown aside and yet more thugs climbed out from the depths, fresh bodies for the assault. Friday counted twenty before losing track, their numbers still swelling.

She felt hopelessness sink in. Pinned down as they were, backs almost to the wall, the Brewers couldn't flee. They would be cut down here in the darkness, their corpses left out by their killers as a grisly message.

Esters had apparently caught sight of the new arrivals too, for she stepped forward into their path with arms outstretched and axe blade held aloft.

The Valkyrie was ready to embrace death.

As the swarm came at her she finally broke her silence and began to sing in a voice low and mournful, a keening note for the dead. Her voice raised in pitch as the enemy thundered over the ground, a screaming tide of murder sweeping into the lone woman and overwhelming her.

Esters disappeared from sight.

Another group headed for Friday, three men and a woman, brown and yellow teeth bared as they snarled like rabid dogs. Before she could react a drum

of footsteps sounded behind her, faster and heavier than those of the mob. She turned her head just as a warhorse clad in full plate thundered past, rider already sweeping a long mallet back through the air and ready to strike.

The stallion crashed into the group a moment later, momentum dashing two of the men to the ground. The rider's hammer found the knees of the final man, the blow shattering his kneecap and bending his leg in a horrific direction. One of the others tried to rise to his feet, only for the mighty horse to rear back and crush his chest beneath its hooves. Blood streaming from his mouth, he fell, joining the other downed Vermin. Friday wasn't surprised to see the woman turn on her heel and flee. The rider wheeled her steed around to Friday. She recognised the familiar face at once. 'Lady Justice.' Faris had patrolled more than her share of Brewer's Guild Matches over the years. 'Esters—'

'Will be fine, child.'

With a composed nod Faris indicated Friday return her eyes to the swarm, where the Matriarch had been joined by a cohort of Blacksmiths. Anvil led from the front, his immense tower shield warding off the Vermin as they stabbed at him with crude shivs or bounced cudgels off the unyielding steel. His hammer struck out at any within range, easily driving them to the ground. She recognised Sledge alongside, the apprentice's face excited as he laid into the undercity

scum with massive blows that hurled his victims through the air like old rags.

Turning around in astonishment, Friday saw the rest of them.

Bright flames lit the scene as Burnish's Dragonthrower belched fire into a heaving mass of Vermin, his apprentice a whirling dervish dancing through the burning ranks. Iron was more direct, bulldozing through the tight scrum, punching through the air with mailed fists as muffled laughter sounded behind his mask. Not far behind Ferrite knelt on the back of one downed thug, tongs cruelly hobbling his ankles.

She'd have likely seen the others if she'd looked, but another figure stole her attention. Long strides propelled him confidently towards Esters, followed by those Brewers still able to fight, mouths moving in the same aria as their Matriarch.

Tapper smashed into the Vermin with a bellow, no longer a man conflicted but instead the Grand Brewer she remembered. Every strike lashed out with brutal efficiency, first tripping the opponent and then beating them bloody. When two wretches inside the reach of his polearm tried to drag him down, he grinned and headbutted one away, then punched the other hard in the face.

At his flank Hooper laid into the thugs surrounding them with renewed fury, following his leader's example and finally unleashing his pent-up angst. On the other side Decimate danced around, her long blade cutting

a bloody swathe through their enemies. Friday felt her legs moving her closer, a knife drawn and in her hand. The Grand Brewer's aura was magnetic, drawing his family around him.

Eventually the Brewers reached Esters. The reverse of Tapper's hooked pole hit her final assailant in the jaw, knocking the scum backwards and towards Decimate, who ran him through without a second thought. The rest of the Vermin's nerve had broken, their backs plain as they scuttled towards the safety of the shadows.

At last the two leaders of the Brewer's Guild stood together.

Bleeding from more cuts than Friday could count, the Matriarch was unsteady on her feet, fury temporarily beaten from her. The side of her face was an angry purple, one eye swollen closed, and a mass of red smeared around her mouth signified she had either vomited blood or bitten one of her adversaries.

Tapper placed one heavy hand on Esters' shoulder, steadying the woman. They remained that way for a long moment until eventually he leaned to her ear, lips moving, passing some message Friday couldn't hear. When the Grand Brewer withdrew, his hand remained, joined by Esters' own. The younger woman was stunned to see the Matriarch's eyes turned wet.

After a pause, Esters nodded.

Tapper was apparently satisfied. He turned to the rest of his family, barking orders. 'Decimate, Hooper,

run down this piss-poor scum. Make sure stories reach the sewers of what happened here today.'

Friday looked to where the Piper had stood, signalling the onslaught. She wasn't surprised to see the Tyrant had long since fled. The fight was over. Maybe even the war too. She doubted Piper would raise such support again anytime soon.

Tapper turned to address the assembled Blacksmiths, their heavy steel a stark contrast to the bright kutte of the Brewers. 'You have done a good thing this day, my friends, and we are in your debt. I know your price. It will be done.'

Anvil nodded. 'See that it is, Grand Brewer. The outlaw has been on the run for far too long, and his crime is unforgivable.' All the Blacksmiths but Iron grunted their agreement. Anvil and Tapper shook hands and clasped shoulders like old comrades.

Friday wondered at the meaning. Looking around at the other Brewers, she saw only equally blank faces. Stoker was still conspicuous by his absence, not that it mattered much to her. She didn't care if he'd been killed or not.

The Grand Brewer turned his attention back to his people. 'Time to go home and rebuild, lads. It will take more than undercity scum to bring us down.'

The cheering that met his words was tempered by exhaustion but no less genuine for it. Their questions about the day's events could wait. The Grand Brewer was back.

SNAKES

The wind rattled eerily through the old graveyard, cold and lonely fingers reaching for the warmth of the living. Moonlight lent the stones a silver gleam, their edges sharp and jagged with shadows, what little lettering remained outlined by foreboding darkness. Brisket sat atop one such stone and observed the scene in quiet contemplation. Her feet kicked back and forth, idly punting small stones and watching them tumble over the hard ground. She had thought she'd never to return to this place, where she'd bid a final farewell to Ox and accepted the inescapable truth that she'd never be called a Butcher again.

Why she had climbed this lonely path remained a complete mystery to her. Indulging depression and wallowing in misery wasn't in her nature, nor was wasting time working over past mistakes. Perhaps, she grudgingly conceded, she was simply more comfortable here than anywhere else. It wasn't the first occasion her feet had led her along the aged dirt track that ended here; her perch wore several fresh scrapes from previous visits.

Brisket frowned. If a person no longer felt they had a place among the living, why should they not find refuge among the anonymous dead?

Gods, she sounded no better than the most morbid Spook. She hurriedly cast the thought away and turned her head to the lantern, hoping to find refuge from the

darkness threatening her thoughts. Moths fluttered around the warm glow, with only the dirty glass preventing them from finishing their lives by reaching the naked flame beyond. It was a tiny oasis against the ruined surroundings, a small pool of amber straining against the moon above.

The air was chill this far past summer, any residual heat now fading each day alongside the shortening light. This year the warm days seemed to have been all too brief, marred by storms turbulent enough to match the violence insidiously creeping throughout the Empire of the Free Cities.

Brisket saw hint of it in every game, doubtless filtering down from the Magisters and Chamberlains of each Guild. Players tackled harder, swung their weapons with far less reserve, and stuck the boot in more gleefully than she'd ever known before. She'd seen smashed fingers from downed players being trodden on, felt the dull ache of bruises which persisted long after their colouring abated, and watched the opposition kill the ball on more than one occasion.

Off the pitch the stands reacted with increasing intensity, bloodthirsty cheers becoming more commonplace alongside stories of open brawling in taverns and pubs before games. The tension had reached heights previously unknown, leaving her feeling fatalistic. She had become utterly convinced she was somehow at the heart of a storm which had been brewing for some time, spearheaded by the renewed spirit of the Soltheician faith.

The worst part was feeling so helpless. Her entire life she had been able to fight her corner, backed by her teammates or not. Now she was merely another pawn in a larger game beyond her understanding. Grace had accused her of delusions of grandeur, and despite Brisket's best efforts to dismiss them, the words remained.

Her captain's mantle was a joke, some cruel farce from a mummer's play.

She sighed. A great weariness had built up within and broken the barrier, and now she found herself unable to ignore the truth or fight the sadness which came with it.

Desperately searching for some salvation in this forgotten and silent place, she kept her perch, numbly staring at a world she felt entirely absent from.

Light gave away the Ferryman's approach below long before she heard his footfall crunching over the grit path. Brisket watched his winding progress, steps unhurried as the lantern at the end of his tall staff swung from side to side, and the feathers in his cloak ruffling like a flock of birds about to take flight. Another time, she might have felt apprehension or leapt to her feet to challenge him. Now, in this moment, she was only tired. Obulus knew she was here, clearly, and had made the effort to come to her. She would at least meet with him.

When eventually he completed the climb to her eyrie, she'd abandoned her seat and waited with her arms folded across her chest. He offered her a polite nod and raised one hand in greeting. 'Brisket.'

For a man of his age, the silver-haired Ferryman showed surprisingly little fatigue after his ascent, his composed aura undiminished. She'd never spoken to him previously but found his voice to be exactly as she'd expected, venerable and deep.

Guarded.

She offered a curt nod back, not feeling the need to use his name.

Obulus turned to survey the vista, eyes trailing upwards to the skies. 'Another storm lurks on the horizon, ready to rain into the streets of every city across the land. I trust you are not so ignorant as to have missed the signs.'

'I'm too tired for clever words and games, Ferryman. Why did you come here? If you think to toy with me like one of your puppets, you can cut the shit and go elsewhere.'

His eyes swung towards her, dark pools of shadow the light had no hope of reaching. They pierced her soul and rooted her in place. When he spoke again, it was with a tone of admonishment. 'Do not dare to test me, Betrayer. I would think nothing of casting you from this ledge, nor otherwise ruining what little remains of your career.'

Brisket shrugged off his words, holding her ground

in the face of his unrelenting stare. 'Yet you won't. Because now there is a bigger player in this game than even you.'

When next he spoke, his voice was uncharacteristically quiet and subdued. 'Yes.'

She hadn't realised she was holding her breath until he replied. Giddy, she tried to keep her expression hard as she exhaled and released the pent-up tension. For a moment she'd dared to speak as the Ferryman's equal, the same way the Master Butcher might have. Brisket didn't know where her courage to confront him had come from.

Was she refuting Obulus, or Grace's bitter words?

The Ferryman watched impassively, apparently unaware of her relief.

'I won't pretend to offer you salvation. We both know I cannot grant such a boon.'

'Then why are you here?' More than anything, Brisket was tired of being used by others. Becoming an agent for the Ferryman held little appeal.

'Your new masters are unlike any other adversary. They will see the world burn if it furthers their agenda. They care little for those caught up in their machinations, even less than those who dare oppose them.' Obulus' free hand emerged from his robes clutching a pair of simple metal crosses, flecks of dried blood staining one of them.

Brisket immediately recognised the sullied piece of metal, having last seen it suspended around Mist's neck. The Ferryman noted her eyes widen.

‘I see you are familiar with the token. It was indeed taken from your ally. The other was found on the corpse of one of my agents... a man who dared betray my trust.’

Brisket returned his stare evenly, wondering where Obulus was leading.

‘Do not mistake the simple appearance of this icon. This is no simple badge of the Solthecian faith. This is the cross of the Crimson Order, a secretive conclave which operates within the highest echelons of that corrupt institution. Mist was a knight of this order, leading an elaborate masquerade within the Union for years.’

‘So, you had Mist killed, as well as your own man?’ Brisket refused to believe this was a confession. Obulus didn’t give such information for free.

His eyes narrowed. ‘Are you so blind, Betrayer? Mist’s true identity was known all too well to me, as was that of the fool attempting the same infiltration among my agents. My mistake was allowing their masters to discover this knowledge. In their fear they executed both, before either might become a liability.’

He continued, voice calming to a more even pitch.

‘Three days before Venin’s murder, the Alchemist brat broke into the Shadow Council’s chambers and attempted to murder one of the twelve, on orders of the Solthecian cult. He failed. His death was retribution from his masters, absolution purchased in pain and lifeblood. But when the Alchemist’s Guild spoke of their own retaliation, the Solthecian faith saw another

opportunity. There is no place in the light for a Shadow, especially not one which has outlived its usefulness.'

After a pause he continued. 'They led the violence in your last game, Betrayer. They let Mist's life expire, and in a way which would accelerate the violence between the other Guilds.'

Brisket raised one eyebrow. She quietly considered his words, remembering the venom Grace had directed to Mist's broken body. There was some truth in the Ferryman's accusations, although she had no doubt that more yet remained hidden. 'And now you seek to use the violence to turn me?'

'You are on the inside already, Brisket, the same as Mist. Untrusted, worth as little as vermin scuttling through the sewers. Do not earn the same fate as your teammate through inactivity, languishing in self-indulgent misery.'

She offered him a smile. Her answer was easy.

'No. I will never be another one of your puppets. You cannot use me to further your own agenda.' Just speaking the words made her realise she was replying not only to Obulus but to Grace and the Order too, claiming her rightful mantle and turning at last from the brink of despair.

Obulus' lips slipped into a gentle smile. It was an unfamiliar sight on his countenance, surprisingly void of malice. He paused and looked about, eyes lingering over the ancient stones surrounding them. When his gaze returned it wore the same stern fatherliness she had

seen all too often in the Master Butcher. His expression softened, disarming against the lantern's glow.

'Once, this meeting might have been to further such an arrangement, for all that you could well be the most stubborn soul I ever have known. Now we cannot afford to waste time with such games, however. If you do not act soon, it will be too late.'

An earnest sympathy had crept into his voice, to match his features. It sat strangely with the legend preceding him.

'We have never been enemies in the past, but now we must become allies, united against a common foe. Neither you nor I can stand against this new danger alone. Given time, the isolated violence facing the select few shall grow to threaten us all, and the world beyond. Stand with me now. Together we shall cast back the encroaching darkness before it overcomes everything we hold dear.'

She searched his eyes, looking for any trace of duplicity, and found none. Still, she did not trust him.

'No.'

Brisket's cold tone forbade further entreaty.

A moment of silence passed, marked only by the wind rustling through the dried grass. Eventually, Obulus nodded. When at last he spoke, an impossible sadness had sunken deep into his voice.

'Then look now to whatever gods you hold dear to save us all.'

Footsteps echoed over the hard stone, each one clipped and precise. Scalpel waited patiently, betraying little of her displeasure at the invasion of her crypt. She knew it would be an outsider, even had the spirits not whispered such secrets to her. None claiming allegiance to the Mortician's Guild would be nearly so brave as to enter here without permission. Only the Ferryman was permitted to cross the threshold unannounced, and he was not so foolish to announce his presence with heavy boots.

She rose from her cross-legged position and padded across the floor on bare feet, fingers casually brushing over the hilt of a skinning knife as she palmed it into her hand. Aethyric energy surged in the air around the Spirit Weaver, ghosts of the interned dead enthralled by the potential to gorge and lessen their endless hunger.

Ghast's shade watched impassively from the opposite corner of the room, eyes blazing like balefire in the gloom. Unlike the others, Ghast was content to stalk like a predator, prowling the dark places with animal cunning. His spirit was remarkable and terrifying. Not only had it proven to have retained an increasingly sinister sentience without a host, but it actually appeared to be growing ever stronger. Even now it drew in the ambient light from the torches, tiny embers trailing towards its hideous form.

Shades were not visible to those unattuned to their plane, yet Ghast had by now accumulated enough energy to make the unenlightened quietly uneasy

while nearby, even if they did remain unaware. In crowded places Scalpel continued to watch with curiosity as others inexplicably changed paths to avoid the Silent Terror. She'd never encountered a soul with such vehemence to so affect the living.

It seemed Ghast's story was yet to be finished.

The Spirit Weaver ignored the mocking stare at her back. She was no such mortal, easily cowed or intimidated. The footsteps were louder now, accompanied by the slither of material dragging over the smooth tiles, and reflected light appeared along the walls beyond the alcove. Curious. Her visitor clearly didn't intend to hide their presence.

Scalpel lost the knife in the folds of her sleeve. It would be there if she needed it once more.

A young woman vested in Solthecian robes swept boldly into the vault. Scalpel was not unused to such figures from her duties and immediately recognised the eggshell white and azure blue of the College of Virgin Sisters. If nothing else, the Solthecian church had an eye for grandiosity which often left an impression. Unlike her chaste brethren, however, who were often quick to shy away from the Spirit Weaver, this woman regarded Scalpel with imperious eyes. The sternness of the stare suited the upward turn to her nose and high cheekbones, all entirely at home with an austere tight bun of hair.

Surely this could be none other than the Saint. Scalpel wondered if the woman would still be so

adored if the faithful could see the cruel stare behind the mask.

Grace didn't wait for pleasantries. 'Your kind have brought chaos to the world, Witch.' For all that the Saint was well spoken, the words seethed with vicious intensity. 'By transgressing against the Inquisition's new rule, you have unleashed a tide of Vermin to choke the streets with blood. Even now, they still rise up like a torrid and desolate blight, a disease which will never rest.'

Scalpel felt the hairs rising on the back of her neck, the spirits gleefully gibbering at the edge of her conscious. She forced herself to remain silent. In truth, the Saint was undeniably right. Drawing the Ratcatcher's Guild into the affairs of the Mortician's Guild had been a severe and unforgivable mistake.

'Yet even a heathen like you cannot be held in contempt for this sin. Our agents are all too aware that the misguided introduction of the minor Guilds is to be blamed on the Ferryman. In this, at least, you are blameless.'

Grace's head tilted to the side, the action condescending, the same way a mother would talk to an errant child. 'I put this to you, Witch. How long will you be content for Obulus to ruin your destiny? Your Guild has already failed under his leadership. How many whispers have you heard of people infuriated that the Morticians seem never to claim their due? How often have words reached you speaking ill of the Ferryman and his motivations?'

She raised one hand to drum her fingers along the edge of a stone slab, revealing soft milky skin under her tabard's sleeve, the faint blue trails of the blood in her veins running invitingly for the spirits clustered around them. 'And how often have you caught yourself entertaining those same thoughts?'

Scalpel glared at the Saint's smirk, wishing nothing more than to cut it from her face and feed the rest to the spirits until only a husk remained. Once again, she couldn't argue with the spiteful diatribe. Obulus had seen all too many failures in recent times. Whatever bond of fealty the Hunter's Guild owed appeared to have been forgotten, the Mortician's Guild even humiliated by their former vassals when the feral had been stolen from under their noses. Arrangements orchestrated with the Butcher's Guild had come to nothing. The Ratcatchers ran free of any leash, rabid and demented, and provided little strength or influence to their masters. Hemlocke had been one gain, but Scalpel cared little for the Soul Seer. An unwanted refugee was no boon.

And then, there was Ghast.

His eyes bored into her aura, the malevolent shade unwilling to forgive his death. Scalpel had spent too many hours ruminating upon Ghast's demise, vividly reliving the violence and the moment the Ferryman's machinations had begun to unravel.

To hear her frustrations given voice was the collapse of some final barrier within, the dam holding back a tide

of accumulated vitriol and discontent broken at last. For the first time since the meeting began, she spoke.

‘And your interest here is what, Saint?’ The words were as alien as the intended parley. Scalpel only dealt in absolutes. Questions and uncertainty were both for others.

The smile grew wider, even if the frost in Grace’s eyes remained.

‘Let us suppose that the Order has tested our incumbent captain and found her... lacking. Now consider that if this miserable state of affairs were to continue, how likely it might be our faith would be searching for a suitable replacement, should some misfortune strike the Betrayer from the roster.’

‘I see.’ Scalpel was careful to remain neutral. She cared little whether the Order might murder Brisket or not, but the suggestion that the Order sought concert with her was a strange turn of events. ‘I will not adopt your god, Saint.’

Grace appeared to find the concept amusing, mirth suddenly exploding across her features. ‘And I wouldn’t seek to steer you into the path of the divine light, Witch. I am not possessed with folly enough to think you could ever return your heart from the abyss. But lacking as your creed might be, you do offer a particularly merciless quality which my masters and I can appreciate.’

Scalpel waited, her mind racing with new possibilities unlocked by the Saint’s words.

‘Your Guild has become impossibly weak, driven near

ruin by the Ferryman's poor decisions and misguided ambition. The hand you hold is a rotten one, absent of any sort of future, and Obulus' failed attempts to regain influence and power have proven the futility of fighting against the tide. The Order would see you free.'

The other woman wasn't laughing anymore, her expression deadly serious. The flickering light lent additional gravitas to her stern and commanding features.

'Our patience is not infinite. Brisket's fate is sealed. Yours is yet to be written, and is in your hands.'

'And what is your price for my freedom, Saint?' There was always a price, Scalpel knew.

Grace smiled at the question, her expression no less cold for it. 'How astute you are, Witch. Our price is simple.'

She leaned forward and the spirits around them recoiled from her aura, which blazed into a brilliant corona of white flames fed by righteous passion. Her voice dropped to a low hiss.

'Bring us the Ferryman's head.'

FAMILY

The storm lurking on the horizon had yet to break in full, its ominous grey clouds visible even after night had fallen, blotting out the stars and moon above. As the two Brewers leisurely made a path over the cobbled streets and through close alleyways a light rain began to fall, a precursor to the inevitable. Not yet heavy enough to form puddles in the shallows and potholes, the drizzle was nonetheless enough to wet Friday's head as she followed the Grand Brewer. She didn't know why Tapper had insisted she come with him this evening. When she'd asked he'd dismissed the question, only indicating their destination.

The Smithy's Forge was an old tavern in the Blacksmith's quarter, deep in the heart of the city. Although she'd never before set foot in the unfamiliar district, Friday had heard plenty in passing from older members who'd found reason to visit over the years. She marvelled at the architecture as Tapper led the way, so remarkably different to the rustic homeliness she was used to. Tall metal spires soared upwards from the top of every other building, and intricate latticework graced windows and doors. Bronze statues waited on corners and at the centre of plazas, depicting a host of different heroes and villains as well as monstrous creatures of legend.

At least twice Friday had caught herself gawping like a starry-eyed child at the clever metal shapes

and artistic stonework before forcing her jaw closed. With every lamp lit and the streets wide enough for two carts to pass each other, this was another world she hadn't even known existed, barely a stone's throw from her own.

Eventually, their journey through the exotic ward ended, the Grand Brewer pointing out the pub with a nod.

Its appearance was far less grandiose than Friday had imagined from the tales she'd heard, a narrow frontage sandwiched between traders to either side, as was typical of inner-city buildings. The sign swinging from the chain was dull, unpainted metal only, more akin to an embossed shield than what she knew as a pub sign. Listening, Friday couldn't hear drunken voices raised in song or discussion, sounds she normally associated with people enjoying themselves. With only the steady patter of an increasingly heavy rain surrounding her, it was near quiet as a grave.

For all that, the Smithy's Forge wasn't unwelcoming. Warm light glowed from inside, creeping around the criss-crossing bars covering the windows and colouring the metal umber. The pub was a blazing hearth in the centre of the city, and compared to the cold rain it offered just as much sanctuary as the Drunken Seamstress did in Friday's bittersweet memories.

Tapper loudly knocked on the door, knuckles playing a staccato message, before opening it and stepping over the threshold.

Warmth immediately rushed up to envelop Friday

as she followed him through the portal, far more than she had been expecting. Firelight danced in just about every corner and upon most walls from heavy iron braziers, brighter still in the fireplace around which the tables were set. Metalwork objects of every conceivable purpose and colour glowed richly in the light along the walls around each flame.

She realised the building was far larger inside than she'd thought, the width easily forgotten considering the expansive depth of the room in which they now stood. Friday looked up at the rafters high above and her breath caught at the sight of a large dragon all in polished silver suspended from the high ceiling on long chains. Features graceful and proud, it was as if the beast were absorbing the light and reflecting it from its body.

Friday found herself shaking her head in simple wonderment. Even the scent here was unique, laced with sulphur and charcoal to mask spilt beer and smoky pipes. The stories she'd heard didn't do the place justice.

Blacksmiths truly were a completely different breed to Brewers.

Along the far wall a bar topped with heavy wrought iron stretched back into the shadows. Tapper led confidently along its length, walking past similarly adorned tables. Most of the patrons ignored the Brewers, the one or two who did acknowledge the strangers in the midst raising their tankards in salute.

The Grand Brewer returned the gesture with a smile or a nod each time, an unsure Friday following suit.

A tall young woman blocked their progress at the back of the room, whipcord lean under a loose jerkin which bared muscular arms and broad shoulders. Her scarlet hair was shaved down to her scalp at the sides, the top worn long in a thick mass which trailed behind her head. Her eyes wore an aggressive look to match the severe undercut, combining with the rest of her appearance to cast one of the more intimidating figures than Friday had ever seen.

‘Grand Brewer.’

‘Rivet, you look hale, lass.’ Tapper nodded at her hair. ‘I see you’re still wearing the apprentice cut. Old Auger yet to see the light and make you a Master?’

‘No chance.’ Her face softened slightly. ‘Bless the old boy, I don’t know what he’d do without me, really.’

Tapper clapped her on the shoulder warmly. ‘Aye, you’re a good lass. Don’t you worry. He’ll see sense and step you up soon enough, the day he retires from the shop himself.’

She snorted good-naturedly. ‘You mean the day he draws his last breath, then? They’ve been trying to drag him out for years now—that’ll never change.’

The Grand Brewer laughed heartily, sharing her joke. Friday felt decidedly awkward, an interloper to a discussion between friends. She waited patiently, averting her eyes.

As though sensing her discomfort, Tapper nodded in her direction. ‘Friday, meet Rivet.’

The Blacksmith turned her eyes upon Friday, a mischievous grin lifting her lips. 'Friday, eh? Brewers, you lads have all of the comely lasses, I swear.' She spat on her palm and held it boldly forth. When Friday took it, Rivet near shook her arm out of joint. She was likely the same age as Friday, but a foot taller and far stronger.

The other woman turned her attention back to the Grand Brewer. 'You're here for the traitor?' Friday noticed the friendly camaraderie had slipped from her features.

Tapper nodded. 'Bad business, that. For both our houses.'

'That it is. The Exile dragged the wretch here earlier.' She moved aside. 'Best you go and offer any last words. He won't be long to hear them.' The Grand Brewer nodded and stepped past without further reply, disappearing under the archway behind. Friday followed, feeling Rivet's eyes on her the entire time.

'Make the bastard suffer if Master Anvil lets you put the boot in.'

Cool air waited at the bottom of the long stairwell, the blistering warmth remaining above. Cold hues of granite and limestone replaced vibrant red and brass, the tone entirely different now they'd descended beneath the earth. Friday could hear trickling nearby where rainwater had found a way in. Candles burned low along the walls, their wax spilling towards the ground in streaks as flames near exhaustion flickered.

Tapper apparently knew the way. The clomp of his heavy boots echoed loudly off the plain walls, as did the sound of him splashing noisily through a puddle at the end of the grimy corridor. He ignored a left fork and took the right instead, heading towards a row of doorways set into one wall. As she approached Friday saw they were cells inside, each with a stout wooden door recessed into the entry, relieved only by a small square window covered with iron bars. Dark patches marred the ground where blood had been spilt and left to congeal and dry, and the sickly scent of stale mould rose to assault Friday's nostrils.

Decimate awaited them, leaning against the wall next to the closest door. Her mask hid most of her expression, but her body language suggested boredom as much as anything. When Tapper and Friday appeared, she offered both a curt nod in greeting but didn't otherwise move.

The Grand Brewer turned to Friday. 'Inside the cell, lass. You'll want to see this.' His voice had turned hard.

Friday followed the command and ducked into the first cell. She had to squeeze past Anvil, the formidable Master Blacksmith standing just inside. He was stripped to the waist, and his tattooed skin glistened with sweat in the lousy light, tiny beads running over arms as thick as a bull's neck. His expression stern, he didn't acknowledge her, eyes fixed instead on the figure that cowered in the opposite corner.

The captive's wrists were shackled together by heavy

iron, but he didn't look like he would be mounting an escape anytime soon. He might have tried previously, if the purple hue and swelling of his brutish features were anything to go by, and blood from a split lip stained his beard. Still Friday recognised him, in spite of his injuries and the layer of dirt which covered his skin.

Stoker.

Anvil took a step towards the chained Brewer to make way for the Grand Brewer, and she wasn't surprised to see Stoker shrink away, any hint of defiance long beaten out of him. Friday didn't have to look much further than Anvil to see who had busied himself with the task. The Blacksmith's huge hands were capped by knuckles scraped ruddy red, and Friday paled just imagining how hard the impact from one of his fists might be.

'You're a piss-poor whelp, for a man who calls himself a Master.' Tapper's voice was absent of any warmth, entirely unforgiving of whatever crime had brought him here.

'Master? That's a poor jest.' Anvil took another pace closer to Stoker, grasped the man's ragged hair in one fist, and roughly dragged him to his feet. 'You're no Master, whelp. Killed the man who was and threw his bloodied body into the forge, didn't you?'

Stoker was sent crashing into the wall, landing shoulder first and losing a patch of skin to the abrasive brickwork.

Friday wouldn't be feeling sorrow for the Eisanoran

anytime soon. He was a disease that crept into any room he entered, once dangerously close to the heart of her family. There could be no way he'd be welcomed come back into the fold after how he'd baited Spigot. If someone else didn't do the deed, she would gladly slide a knife between his ribs to prevent it.

'Pl-please. Tap... Tapper. I'm— you can st-stop this.' Stoker was weeping pathetically as he lay face down on the floor. 'I'm... I'm not the tr-traitor...'

Anvil cast an inquisitive eye towards the Brewers. Tapper strode across the cell through the dust and filth, kicking up great gouts of powder. He lowering to his haunches next to the downed man. 'Aye, you're not. At least, not to the kutte.'

He patted Stoker's arm, eyes sympathetic when Stoker flinched. 'I know the traitor, the man led by the gold in his pockets. His due will come in time, when he has outlived his usefulness. But traitor or no, you are scum, barely a step above the Vermin. What you forced me to do to Spigot was unforgivable.'

The Grand Brewer glanced back at Anvil and Friday before returning to Stoker. 'And your blood brought me salvation for my family, probably the only good thing you've ever done with your worthless life.'

He stood again and kicked Stoker in the ribs. The other man groaned in pain and rolled onto his back, helpless as a beached whale.

Tapper fixed Friday with a searching look. 'I'm done with him. Friday, lass. You can choose his fate. I trust

you to make the right choice.' The Grand Brewer broke the stare and left the cell without further ceremony, joining Decimate outside.

Anvil remained, waiting for her word.

She realised she'd been staring at Stoker the entire time, only vaguely hearing Tapper's words through a cold veil of hatred. The venom was ice coursing through her veins once more, tempting her to the same bloodlust she'd seen so possess Esters.

Friday forced herself to look away. The urge to kill this wretch with her own hands didn't sit well with her, threatening to twist her into someone neither she nor Spigot wanted her to be.

Her eyes strayed to her surroundings, taking in the miserable cell. The stench of urine and dried blood was overwhelming, and the rotting straw in one corner likely crawled with lice and mites. Damp crept up the walls, spotting them brown. Once Anvil's torch had been taken, the only light would be a sliver bleeding through the door's tiny window, assuming the Blacksmiths didn't take that also.

It was a wretched hole in the ground, worse than any bolt hole or den she'd known. Nothing came here to live, only to die.

Friday offered Stoker a final look. His eyes pleaded with her.

Her blood still ran cold. There would be no forgiveness from her.

She turned to Anvil. 'He's yours.' The Blacksmith

nodded, respect clearly written in the gesture. ‘And when you’re done with him, burn his kutte. He never deserved it anyways.’

Stoker screamed inarticulately as she turned on her heel and followed the Grand Brewer, a raw croak which became a strangled sob once Anvil’s hand found his throat. Her final memories of the man would be the sound of heavy fists striking his body over and over. The Blacksmith would be in no rush to finish the traitor when his agony could so easily be prolonged.

Tapper and Decimate waited for her outside, as she knew they would. Both of them wore fiercely proud expressions.

This was her family.

And they stood united, strong, and proud.



— PUPPET MASTER —

Hood pulled firmly in place to hide her identity, Scalpel stalked soundlessly through the ancient hallways, her slippered feet gliding lightly over the old stone tiles. Unable to penetrate the darkness of her cloak, the candlelight illuminating her surroundings revealed only explosions of fine dust as she passed under its muted glow.

Although her body moved with surety of purpose, inwardly her mind raced.

The deed upon which she now embarked was a betrayal not only to her Guild, but her mentor, the individual responsible for her rapid ascension through the ranks of the Mortician's Guild. She was one of only a few the Ferryman trusted with his thoughts, privy to secrets rival to those whispered by the very spirits themselves. The act she was about to commit would utterly sever that communion, but compared to the severity of the likely aftermath, her treachery meant nothing.

This eve she would irrevocably alter the destiny of her Guild—and the Empire of the Free Cities.

At this hour none but the guards prowled the corridors, their minds blunted by boredom as they aimlessly patrolled. Even in the wretched depths of the Mortician's Guild, the magisters and chamberlains had to sleep, their business meetings typically held during daylight hours. The spirits remained, of course. In a great swathe they swept along behind her, a vortex of

excited energy and vague skull-like faces half formed in the broken light.

Strangely, it seemed Ghast had abandoned her. His absence was keenly felt, although not unwelcome. For months the violence and hatred in his gaze had plagued the Spirit Weaver. Respite now was refreshing in the extreme.

A sound echoed from around the corner ahead, alerting Scalpel to sidestep neatly into an alcove. She could have simply brushed past the guard—it was not unusual for her to find reason to visit the Ferryman's chambers, even at this hour. But Scalpel wanted neither to risk a witness to her presence nor to be informed Obulus was not entertaining visitors. In the darkness she waited as the guard's heavy footsteps came ever closer.

Soon he appeared, a heavysset man with a long moustache covering his top lip. As she suspected, his eyes were glassy and dull, the monotony of his duties having long won the uneven struggle against his better instincts. Guards walking the interior rarely knew the barest hint of activity. His paunch strained against a chainmail shirt, and his heavy breath stank of soured wine. Scalpel's lips curled at the edges. With such figures employed as guards it would be easy to blame their incompetence in the sober light of day.

Eventually the guard's uneven gait took him away, and the sound of his boots reduced to a dull thud. Scalpel stole out from hiding and set off again, hurrying

to her destination. She was not eager to commit her sin, but the sooner her blade cut into the throat of the Ferryman, the quicker the doubts in her mind might be silenced.

The surrounding furnishings had grown increasingly more elaborate and exotic as Scalpel drew closer to the heavy door marking the entrance to Obulus' den. Her memory recalled an early lesson, when she had dared to question the pointless extravagance. The Ferryman had chuckled at her words. In retrospect she knew he had likely been amused by her bold impudence.

'In truth, these trappings mean nothing to me. But they do to others. I allow them to think they are indulging me, or somehow courting favour.' She remembered his voice, even and humourless despite his smile. 'Let them waste their time. Fear will keep these gifts coming, and I am content to appear arrogant by displaying them instead of fortifying my rooms against assassins.'

She had raised an eyebrow at the sentiment. It had not gone unnoticed.

'Protection can be bought with more than coin, Spirit Weaver.'

This evening would prove the folly of those words. She returned her head to the present, shaking away the memory, and placed one palm on the aged wood leading to his chambers. Old hinges let out a barely perceptible creak as the door swung inwards.

The grand decorations ended immediately. The

Ferryman's rooms resembled a cell similarly sparse to the one Scalpel kept herself. The plain grey walls stood cold and foreboding, their hard surfaces void of fabric, ornamentation, or paint. The floor was no better, with dust and cobwebs choking the corners. Scalpel made quick time through the nearest alcove, familiar with the layout.

She found the Ferryman in his study, as she had known she would. Simple wooden bookshelves lined the walls, the spines of their contents cast ruddy amber by a crackling fire. Obulus sat facing away from her as she entered, his hooded vestments matching hers to similarly stave off the chill. His great feathered cloak lay next to him drying, likely from the storm raging outside. Her moment could not have been better; his attention was entirely given to the tome he was poring over.

She took a single step into the room before halting, her head turning to face the darkness of a corner behind her. There, a tall silhouette stood a deathly vigil. A tremor passed through Scalpel as its head slowly turned to face her.

Ghast's shade no longer wore the mask, just as the man hadn't when he passed. It remained only in shards of broken metal hung around the spirit's neck, rusted from the rot creeping through his form. For the first time since his death, the shade's face appeared animated, mouth opening and closing, as though speaking with the sound stolen away. His skin stretched and warped with the movement, a hellish

nightmare in the bloody light. His eyes burned no less malignantly than the last she had seen him, although in this setting his haunt had shed its mocking aura and taken on one of cruelty. The other spirits recoiled, banished to the farthest corners. Scalpel fought the compulsion to do the same.

Yet Ghast was not staring at her. His gaze was instead reserved for the figure huddled in front of the fire.

Scalpel took courage from the Silent Terror's approval, doubts finally laid to rest.

Three quick steps took her to the Ferryman. One hand snaked around his temple before her presence was known; the other grasped the knife which sliced through his neck. Blood blossomed against the bright metal for an instant and then sprayed freely into the air, and the heavy book dropped to the ground as his limbs began to twitch wildly, fingers splayed outwards. She held on, fingers forcing his eyes closed, deliberately keeping his face away from hers. A single glance might be all that it took to unravel her resolve.

His mouth opened and he gurgled something, trying to speak as blood spilled outwards, staining his vestments. It was drowned out as the spirits found their resolve and swept upon the struggling mortals in a writhing torrent of aethyr. For a moment Scalpel was lost inside of a storm as their hunger drove them forward, endlessly lashing them to steal the vestiges of life which exploded outwards.

As suddenly as they had come, a fright took hold and

they scattered once more, although not at the Spirit Weaver's bidding. Ghast now surged forward, she knew, his hateful vengeance tainting the air like ink spoiling water.

Some rational part of her mind screamed to make the warding, to banish the ghoul lest it consume her along with the Ferryman. She felt the pull of Ghast's soul with horrible certainty, powerful and malevolent. His anger was a raging inferno, consuming her as it burned into her skull like wildfire, smoke obscuring her conscious thoughts. For a moment the rush nearly overwhelmed her, threatening to tear her mind asunder. With supreme effort the Spirit Weaver resisted, hurriedly shielding herself.

Her victim wasn't so lucky.

The Ferryman's aura shrivelled and cracked as it was transformed to a dry husk, all traces of life wrenched away into a cavernous maw which had broken across Ghast's face, a great rent in the world. Scalpel felt dark glee rising within it as it drank of its victim, a glee as terrible to behold as its seething fury. Despairing, she released her hold and kicked the body hard, pitching it headfirst into the flames. Obulus had needed to die, but he didn't deserve the fate Ghast would have visited upon him.

The Silent Terror howled in frustration and dissipated, unable to match the fire's hunger as it quickly began to consume the corpse. Ghast's crimson eyes were the last to ebb away, vengefully turning upon her before they, too, faded.

At last, she was alone.

Scalpel nearly fell to her knees and wept. Wept for Ghast's revenge. For the Ferryman, her mentor.

For her betrayal.

For a moment she remained in a stupor, committing every detail to memory. She knew this would be a memory revisited time and time again in the days and months to come. Then, with slow purposefulness she picked up the Ferryman's cloak and gently lay it upon the body to cover the smouldering and blackened figure.

It was done. She alone had possessed the strength and daring to change the fate of the Mortician's Guild. A canker had set in, had rotted away the institution like worms through a corpse. But now, that would all change. Grace had been right. The Ferryman had done enough damage.

Outside, the storm raged.

The Spirit Weaver didn't care. It would pass. Now was the time to be reborn anew.

With Scalpel wearing the mantle of puppet master.