Guild Ball

Season 1

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

Ox looked to either side, quick but measured glances, taking in the state of play around him. The Butcher’s Guild treated by two but had possession, the ball rolling out in front of Brisket as she sprinted several paces safely behind him. To his left, Boar lumbered along, barely breathing heavily despite his exertions so far. To the right Boiler and Shank ran alongside, knives glinting in the bright light. Out in front, Ox could see the huge form of Kraken towering over the other Fishermen as they stood in a semi-circular defensive formation. He risked a sidelong glance at Boar, subtly gesturing at the Fisherman blocker. The beast grinned at the Fisherman captain neatly dodging away. He made a careful side step right to maintain their distance. Ox glared, but knew that the longer that this held, the more chance that one of his crew around him would waste their mark and be able to force a mistake from Corsair. Then he could finish this.

Half of the crowd screamed its raucous approval, the other let loose their own volley of curses and cries in answer as the Butchers slammed into the Fishermen. Ox ducked low and further again to the right as he closed, slipping beneath a swing from Corsair’s spear. Droplets of blood from the scratch on his face splattered onto the Fisherman’s clothes, painting a macabre pattern onto the pale cloth. As he moved, his cleaver arced up in a fluid motion and into his opponent’s unguarded stomach. Corsair snarled as the blunted edge struck his plated armour, slid several inches to the side and leapt into the air, the impact driving him back towards the two Butchers. He reacted with a swiftdownwards knife strike towards Ox which the Butcher desperately turned aside with a hard block, blocking the shoulder of the arm holding the knife. Corsair once again stumbled back several paces and Ox pressed his advantage by stepping into the space. The Butchers all knew that close quarters where their adversaries would be unable to reload their spearguns would offer the more powerful, brutal team a significant advantage.

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

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Although Boar started any drive slowly, he bound to much physical momentum that by the time he picked up speed he became an overwhelming force. At the time of Ox’s battle cry and the point of impact, Boar had already become an unstoppable juggernaut. The bulky Butcher crashed into Kraken, heavy pummelling forearms smashing into the huge Fisherman’s thick set frame, who lost ground trying to hold the attack at bay. Boar’s charge and Kraken’s resistance pitched the Butcher forward and off balance but he was able to turn the movement into a head-butt. With no free hands, Kraken did all he could to absorb the damage, tiling his head forward into the blow to take the impact on his forehead, with a sickening crunch, both players recoiled.

Boar was the first to recover and with a bestial roar lunged forward again, a huge hand reaching out to slap his opponent’s guard away whilst his foot simultaneously rose up and kicked out at Kraken’s knee. As the blow made contact there was a loud crack and the Fisherman staggered. Furious, murderous intent giving rise to a madman’s cackle, the red mist descended over Boar’s eyes as he leapt upon Kraken, striking over and over at the giant’s smashing knee and throwing heavy, punishing hits into his ribs. Boar could tell that Kraken had managed to hit back several times in retaliation whilst he had tried to hold off the enraged Butcher, but he was so numbed by bloodlust that he ignored any sensation other than the coppery taste that filled his mouth. As the two players collapsed in a heap of writhing, swinging limbs, Boar briefly entertained the thought that he might have bitten his own tongue. He didn’t care.

Fingers, pink at the tips from pressure, wrapped around Kraken’s throat and he grinned at the Fisherman. His muscles strained against Kraken’s white knuckled attempts to prise his hands away, viciously exerting his strength to smash the back of his opponent’s head into the ground, once, twice. The Butcher knew he was the stronger man and let loose a victorious snort. Again, he smacked Kraken’s head backwards, feeling the hands around his own lessen their grip and then fall away as Kraken lost consciousness. Boar spat in the man’s face. Satisfied, he took deep, hard breaths into burning lungs, and climbed to his feet, looking around for another mark to waste.
Ball carefully controlled before her, Brisket slowed her pace, looking for a break to run past the rival guild’s lines. She could see Boar and Kraken tangled together, Ox and Corsair squaring off and Shark facing down Shark. Boiler lay in a crumpled heap a few feet away, impaled by a heavy harpoon flue and groaning pitifully as he tried to pull it out of his side. A growing puddle of blood soaked into the ground beneath him. Brisket wouldn’t normally feel much remorse for a player on either team in her way. A growing puddle of blood soaked into the ground beneath him. Brisket dashed past Boar, kicking the ball out further in front of her. Boar got out of her way, watched her pass, then ran in the opposite direction, his eyes focused on Shark’s back. Brisket increased her pace to sprinting, easily keeping control of the ball, kicking it out further and further as the distance between her and the open Fisherman goal shortened. Time to start a comeback.

She got a handful of steps closer before Siren came skidding out of nowhere between her and the ball, the bitch looking to steal it. Brisket tried a headlong tackle rather than arresting her motion, not expected by the other woman, who deftly dodged out of the way of the more physical player but had to concede control of the ball. It bounced crazily to the side, away from both of them. Why could Brisket not just learn to play the game? How precise the vicious cutthroat could be, but his own attack had struck his jaw, Corsair’s eyes rolled backwards, the man knocked out. Ox was careful to keep Corsair away from his speargun as they circled each other. No use at short range and needing to be reloaded before it could be used again, it couldn’t be used as a ranged weapon but it barely needed a worthwhile reload tool. Ox risked a kick at it, sending it skidding off backwards. He timed it well but didn’t anticipate the rope unbidden from his lips. Raising the weapon high over his head, he swung it down. The blade bit, skidded past the ankle and tore out a huge chunk of the Fisherman’s boot, skin and the meat beneath. Blood shot everywhere. His shaking hands slipped now, Ox grasped the cleaver firmly, positioned it in the same place and repeated the terrible action, again and again, driving the blade into the gristle of the joint. Bright red blood covered everything. He could see the bone, even that was stained red. Red, grey violent red, the world became one hue. Ox’s own spit, much darker now and closer to crimson, ran down his shirt. Corsair stirred. Urgently, as fast as his wounded body allowed, Ox moved over and struck a boot into his face. With the last vestiges of his strength he raised his cleaver two-handed above his head and drove it down, once, twice. The Fisherman’s Guild Captain might have screamed, he didn’t know any more.

Ox’s world had shrunk to numb already, his senses shutting down. He collapsed sideway, next to the maimed player. Burning, bright sun overhead. To the morbid eye the darkness of the deep, void seemed to have claimed them after all.

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

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

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The History of Guild Ball  
and the Empire of the Free Cities

Guild Ball. It is a game like none other. The beautiful game you say? Maybe. I've not heard that one before. You wanted to know about it? Oh, I can tell you all about Guild Ball lad. Very few better placed than ol' Greyscales to point you in the right direction on that one. I've been a part of the game for more years than I care to remember.

It has risen to be ingrained in all of our lives, the ship further out to sea than they ever thought it might get. What was once an idea and then a solution now has a life of its own. It crosses the mountains, deserts, plains and the darkest, most primordial forests of our kingdoms, where no man in his right mind would choose to tread. It transcends the differences between the peoples of the Sovereign States and their nobles, politicians, kings, queens and princes and speaks in a common language where none exists. It binds our people together with ties stronger than any alliance that has come before or likely ever will. Even the gods of the greatest religions and pantheons look upon Guild Ball and are humbled, so fervent are the people in its worship, so widespread are they, from the poorest peasant wallowing in serfdom to the lord that he serves.

Whatever they might tell you, Guild Ball is now indispensable to the Empire of the Free Cities. Ruthless, bloodthirsty and vicious are all good words for it, but the clever mind that looks upon man knows that this has always been human nature, no matter how much he's learned or what gods he might have found. That's a dark truth boy, one that you might want to think on in years to come. Without the release, the raw euphoria, the cheering of the bloody violence, the wisest amongst us know that rivalries once forgotten would emerge from the darkest recesses of humanity as conflict, as war. We have seen it before, terrible atrocities, a darkness that threatened to overwhelm us. Instead, the players in the game are revered, heroes of a proud tradition rather than violent thugs. No matter who they are or what they might do, no matter that they represent corrupt organisations, only interested in furthering their own profit and power.

All that and more, these are the things that make the game known as Guild Ball. P'haps I like the name you called it – the beautiful game, was it? There's a certain irony there that rings true to this old seadog. But you want the real story of how it came to be this way, don't you? I thought that you might. To explain that, I'll have to take a little more time to tell you about the origins of the Empire of the Free Cities; the guilds that built the game to what she is now and how by doing it, they saved all of our lives.

You'd have to ask the bookworms over at the Scholar's Guild about when the Sovereign States first came into being as they are now, because the hell I know. If there ever was a name for this world before the Empire of the Free Cities or the Sovereign States, then it's long been forgotten and passed into the mists of time.

Long before there was anything like you see now, the tribes of men spread across the land and formed communities, villages and homesteads. After a time, they grew into towns, larger, with more people, banded together to look out for one another. Safety in numbers against a hard world outside of the walls. Probably didn't take long before most of them started feeling proud of where they called home and it started being part of who they were. Before too much water passed under the bridge, they fought against other people, other townships. Don't rightly know how they sold that one, what imagined reasons might have been come up with. Doesn't ever take man much excuse to spill blood in my experience. Whatever they might have said, the real motives were land and power. Carved out their own little dominions. I guess that was the start of it. Soon, there were kingdoms, with borders and armies, kings and nobles, and all of the things that come with them.

The guilds have always existed within our civilisation, for as long as any history you might read can recall. It's all the same story. In the early days of the first cities, groups of merchants got together and formed houses named after their trade to govern their business, which they called guilds. History books always leave out the part unsaid, about how much easier it was to better exploit their customers and inflate their prices that way. Couldn't think why, eh? No one knows which one was first and anyone that tells you different is talking out of his arse, but it hasn't stopped most of them claiming it over the years. It doesn't really matter in any case. In no time, all sorts of walks of life were setting themselves up that way. The guilds have never had any issue with numbers or supporters. Back then as much as now, probably even more so, upwards mobility was limited by station of birth and the guilds offered a nice way to get respect and earn a pretty penny on the side to its members. Don't know many that would turn that down.
As the isolated cities began to trade and establish ties to each other, so did the guilds do the same. Soon, all trades would be represented by one guild or another, in every city across the land. Once they were, the game changed. They never stopped competing with each other, but there was something new that the old guard who started the guilds out never dreamed of; internal conflict to gain power for one house or another, the rise of corruption and political infighting. That’s a grand tradition now and no one alive has ever dreamed of it being any different. Once you sail out on that ship, there never is any looking back.

When the Sovereign States were born into the world, politically uniting cities and lands under one ruler, national guilds became a reality, neatly fitting in alongside. That was the real shift in their fortunes; when guilds not only controlled all practice of their particular craft, but started rubbing shoulders with the men and women that held the power that they didn’t have. Every one of them greedily fished for a catch that was right in front of them but yet just out of reach at that point. It all became a quest for political influence with the state; pursuing their own agendas over that of their rivals, making coalitions where they needed them and casting them aside like a rough haul once they had outlived their usefulness. Always been the truth that the houses of the guilds can be fractious and prone to infighting, but just as true is that they are unified by how much they don’t get along with any of the other guilds. One big battle for respect and pride, kept grounded as long as the rulers didn’t pay them too much mind.

The Sovereign States that would eventually be united into the Empire of the Free Cities existed this way for generations, the people living out their lives, paying fealty to the nobility and their gods and toiling under the watchful eye of the guilds. In the cities and towns traditions and culture started to develop; religions took root and each drifted further apart from those that sailed different seas. In all things they became less alike and stared at their neighbours; increasingly wary and untrusting, always vigilant for hostility. Then came the Century Wars.

No-one can remember the cause for the Century Wars or who fired the first shot across the bows; for all that they devastated the land, murdered our peoples and brought civilization to its knees. I won’t even try to explain it, but I’ve seen war in my lifetime and I can tell you, when people have been fighting for a long enough stretch of years, the meaning gets forgotten and the violence itself becomes the cause. The horrible memories end up shared communally in a place, even if no one was there to see them. One group hates another because that group hates them, that’s about all that might ever be needed. No one thinks beyond that.

What is known that rather than try to end the conflict, the nobles and the rulers of the Sovereign States seemed happy to bleed their cities’ coffers and populations dry in self destructive battles and engagements that seemed like they would never end. Didn’t take long before it was always a wash. As many dead or dying on the winning side as the losing one, if there even was a clear winner. One day you’d take some land, a couple of miles worth shit to anyone, set up your flag and tents and then the next day you lose it again. The only thing that changed was that both armies were a couple hundred men lighter afterwards. Even worse for those of us out at sea, we didn’t have anything to show, just marks on a map that got scratched out. Sometimes not even that.

With no decisive end in the spyglass that anyone believed might happen and every State using ever more destructive and inventive weaponry each day to make up for the lack of men in their quest for victory, it was to guilds that unexpectedly fell the mantle of mediators of peace.

As I said before, the guilds had long since held ambitions which reached far beyond the limits placed on them and their business interests by fickle and self serving politicians or the nobility. By the time of the of the outbreak of the Century Wars, the oldest and most powerful guilds had begun to at last exert some influence over the ruling class, but it had been to their considerable chagrin that they had still been unable to have any lasting hold on any real power.

War, and the inevitable upheaval that it brought to the world, gave them much greater freedom to pursue their dealings with a variety of more direct threats and without being undermined by the state. At first some of them, always the foolish ones, celebrated as the older, wiser birds sat on the rocks and watched on. But when the years rolled by and the conflict had devastated their industries and trading, it started hitting the guilds hard, reducing their wealthy coffers and what influence they had amassed. I can tell you that a whole bunch of them in the Fisherman’s Guild at least got to thinking that the Century Wars would likely destroy the guilds and all that they had worked for. I reckon me that near all of them must have thought it, obvious really. How are you going to do any business with all the people poor, homeless, dead? It took nearly the death of the world as we know it, but in this one instance, nearly all of the guilds could all agree. The Century Wars had to end.
Fortunately for all of us, with independent ties between their houses within the Sovereign States, the guilds found themselves almost ideally placed to act and put an end to the hostilities. I don't rightly know how they all got together or decided who would approach the nobles, monarchies, dictators and the holy men, or how they managed to bring them all over to the new way of thinking. P'haps some of them saw the light and a way out, although I'd wager a month's purse that at least a handful of them needed some sort of special handling, if you get my drift. I can think of one particular King that was found floating face down in the Monde, can't say whether there were more I didn't hear of.

Finally, after considerable negotiation, the Century Wars were over. They'd agreed that the land and all of the Sovereign States were to be unified as the Empire of the Free Cities. You might think that people were dancing in the street to hear it, that there were parades or cheering crowds, armies returning home to greet their loved ones. There was none of that. Every man, woman and child were just exhausted. I remember when we found out most of us just collapsed to the ground. Didn't seem real. You'd probably think that strange young blood, can't imagine it, eh? Well, that's what it was.

Officially, everyone remembers it in the history books as the crowning achievement of a grand alliance lead by the Skaldic King, Gustav VI of the Holstmann dynasty. I think that as time passes, they probably will forget the truth. The guilds designed it that way. The Old Skaldic Empire became Skald, the first principle domain of the Empire of the Free Cities and the monarchy revelled in the platitudes heaped upon them. But you remember a moment ago when I said that everyone just sighed, exhausted at the end? There was one group that gleefully rubbed their hands together and smiled, hidden in the shadows out of sight. Quietly, the guilds looked on satisfied, for at last, they had achieved the position of power that had eluded them for so long.

But within the new unified land, a sudden vacuum existed, a tenuous peace after years of conflict between a disparate and varied populace with few common ties. Whilst the Sovereign States started the long road to rebuilding their shattered lands and people, it became obvious that something would need to be done, some institution would need to be established to bind us all together, or see everything break down all over again. That lad, was when the idea of nationalising the mob football games from the early days was reborn, as Guild Ball.

It wasn't anything new really. Way back when, it had been a ritual, a cerimonial thing that happened in settlements to celebrate the last autumnal harvests. Sounds like an idea from a madman now, but originally they played in the middle of towns and villages. Didn't have the stands, or the carefully set out pitches and dugouts for the teams. Just six or seven holy men on either side, a ball, made out of an inflated pig's bladder wrapped in leather and the local people watching, all standing around. Object was to take the ball and kick it into the other teams post, set in the ground out on the other side of wherever it was they were playing their game.

Now, I couldn't rightly say why anything in this world happens the way it does, but it seems obvious to me that it would grow into something bigger than an event that happened once a year at a harvest ritual. And it did, became a sport, the origins long since forgotten. You ever hear of a holy day of worship on the last day of the harvest lad? Thought not.

Of course, as the years had passed and the game grew in popularity, they had to move it out to the countryside. It's a world of difference having a bunch of doddering old goats walking around a place, speaking in sermons and praying to their gods for a some deliverance or another than it is to have young men and women trying to win a game there, all aggression. You get a lot of collateral damage, if you get my drift. That's when the game started being played on the specially made pitches, in fields set aside for the purpose. Now, the old boys weren't too happy to have their ceremony stolen from them, as you'd expect. That's where the name mob football came from. It was meant as a slight, to describe the cattle mentality of the people that went to go see the games. Spiteful name, but I can't say that anyone took offence.

It spread everywhere quickly and soon everyone was playing it. Nothing too serious as we know it now, just locals kicking the ball around one afternoon a week, but in every place you can name and more. It all stopped when the Century Wars came. The young men and women that played the games got dragged off to fight and the pitches were neglected, either overgrown or dried out, markings all faded. I hear that the Bookworms send out Magisters to find these old forgotten playing grounds, so they can mark them out as cultural heritage sites or some crap like that. Waste of time if you ask me. But that was how the game was then, abandoned. Until the guilds got a hold on it.

When the guilds saw mob football, they saw the opportunity to do something grand with the idea. It was unique in that it was popular in every village, town and city throughout the Empire, the only knot that tied all of the ropes together. With the backing of the guilds to formerly establish
teams, leagues and tournaments, and the vast sums of money invested to achieve this, Guild Ball become the new national sport of the Empire of the Free Cities overnight.

Originally they had in mind that it would give the people something to unite them and stop another war. Some other visionary with too much time on his hands came up with the idea that Guild Ball would let them settle disputes between guilds, offer a decision making process outside of the official channels or politics. But really, if it was either of those things, then they were overshadowed quickly by the struggle amongst the guilds. Having brokered the peace and shown the ruling classes that they were to be feared for what they represented, the guilds were now swollen with power. Guild Ball couldn't shake off the fact that ultimately, the guilds ran it. And as they stepped into their new boots after the Century Wars were over, it became just another tool in their arsenal of intimidation against each other.

For the guilds, the game means something very different to the rest of us, a way that they maintain their grasp over the Sovereign States by reminding their rulers of the threat that the guilds represent, all the time dancing to the tune of a much more deadly game against each other. But without the spectacle of Guild Ball and the guilds themselves binding everyone together, I fear that the Empire of the Free Cities would have long since fallen apart.

In a new era of peace and a period of endless possibility, the guilds now see a whole new business and revenue stream, and with it huge opportunities for amassing further wealth and power. With the potential being so vast and with their fierce rivals involved in the conflict of Guild Ball, the guilds now each have a vested interest in providing their chosen teams with training, equipment and facilities to try and tip the edge in their favour. Each match ups the stakes and makes the game bigger than ever before.

All of that makes for better watching for you or I, or even better still, a very good way of life if you can make it in the game.

And that lad is Guild Ball, our national sport. Wildly popular, played in front of thousands of roaring spectators hungry for blood, victory and glory, whilst behind the scenes the results can mean fortunes are won or lost on the kick of a ball.

Oh, so you want to be a player in the game eh? You should have said so sooner. Come with me and I'll show you the ropes...

- Greyscales, Fisherman's Guild Vice Captain
SOVEREIGN STATES OF THE
Empire of the Free Cities

SKALD

Skald is one of the most populous Sovereign States within the Empire of the Free Cities. It is located in a relatively central position on the northern part of the continent and is bisected by the major land trade routes to the eastern and southern states from the north-west.

Such a position historically proved to be both extremely lucrative for the old Skaldic Empire and tragic in equal measure. For all that in times of peace, Skald was able to levy tithes upon any commerce that travelled through its borders, during the Century Wars those same passageways became the roads which armies marched upon. Devastated by the conflict, it is a testament to the resolve of the Skaldic peoples and their sense of purpose that Skald has rebuilt with remarkable alacrity and once again risen to great prominence.

The Sovereign State of the Old Skaldic Empire was long regarded by its people as the seat of civilization on the continent and there remains the same long-standing attitude of superiority towards their peers. Cities within this state easily represent the heaviest civic sector funding on the continent. Skald boasts the most governmental buildings within the entirety of the Empire of the Free Cities and the largest bureaucratic body.

Skaldic people have their own style in all things; from fashion to eating habits, they are extremely resistant to outside influences from the other Sovereign States. The only element that appears to have been able to permeate this cultural ideal is religion. Skald is almost exclusively given to the worship of the Solthecian faith, robust churches standing proud in most villages and towns. In the cities, the walls and roads are lined with spectacular stonework and artistry of saints and blessed angels, spectacular cathedrals dominate the skyline.

Skald is a monarchy with a royal family which has held their seat since the first formation of the Old Empire. The King is the head of state, but Skald is ruled by a Parliament. The government conducts the affairs of state, from domestic affairs to foreign policy, as well as regulating taxes and controlling the centralised mint. Ultimately, the monarch is able to dissolve or form government as is his wish, although in reality, the royal family are puppets to the politicians and have very little free rein with which to conduct their own affairs.

The capital city of Skald is Aldebrecht, a huge, swarming city, filled with people of all persuasions and of varied descent. There are several districts throughout, the buildings of each grandiose and extravagantly decorated. Nowhere is this more evident than in the real centre of power of the city, the guild district. Following the rebuilding of the city after the wars, each strove to outdo their rivals in construction, the result being sweeping buildings of dynamic design and with a wildly prominent sense of grand affluence. It is a common sight to see hurried messengers and tradesmen bustling past awestruck visitors in the streets surrounding them.

VALENTIA

Valentia is located along the westernmost coast of the Empire of the Free Cities. It is warm with a pleasant climate, its towns and villages famous for their finely regarded vineyards, picturesque cobbled streets and romantic old world villas. Summers are long, the forests abundant with wildlife, the coasts lavish and calm.

There is a rich Valentian tradition of the Sovereign State being the home of arts and culture throughout the Empire of the Free Cities, from long before the Century Wars. A home to sculptors, artists, actors and musicians, Valentia is a noble ideal to those outside of its borders.

For those that live within the cities of Valentia, nothing could be further removed from the truth. Despite her reputation, the state was never an affluent one and with many of her cities and grand works destroyed during the Century Wars, she is unable to pay the cost of rebuilding. Those same artisans now sleep in doorways or ruined buildings at night. During the day they either beg for the scraps of a passerby or perform in the marketplaces for coppers of an uncaring crowd, all of whom have seen each tired performance one time too many.

Minor crime such as petty theft is rife. The poor rural areas outside of the cities are safer but lack civic investment, contributing to a much lower standard of life than is evident amongst their counterparts from other states. Some amount of private investment from wealthy individuals has enabled a select few of the towns to avoid the same fate and has contributed to creating a unique middle class amongst the Empire of the Free Cities; primarily consisting of guild officials with an eye to become landowners.
For the nobility of Valentia life remains as was, albeit with barely any semblance of any real power. Their grand estates are remote from the cities and the hard life of the peasantry, although the wiser amongst them secretly wonder how long before the lower class revolts at the terrible conditions that they are forced to endure. The gap between the rich and the poor in Valentia is extremely pronounced, with literally no chance of upwards mobility. Even the most humanitarian nobles are forced to look the other way when food riots and murders of government officials occur for risk of being dragged into events far beyond their ability to control. Each of the nobility know that as soon as the first of their guardsman is seen to intervene, it will set a dangerous precedent and establish a commitment none of them are willing to place upon their fragile comfort.

The unspoken consensus amongst the landed gentry is that they are likely the last generation of traditional Valentian nobility. That once they have passed on or their coffers run dry, the guilds will claim their lands and titles for themselves. Each day, they watch the end of old Valentia grow closer.

**Ethraynne**

Ethraynne is a relatively new Sovereign State that began life as part of Valentia. Prior to the Century Wars, a short and bloody civil uprising in the region resulted in a declaration of independence and the creation of Ethraynne as a Sovereign State in its own right.

Although the State consists of some twenty individual isles, with ships regularly travelling between them, the three largest play home to the most highly populated concentrations of urban settlements and house all of the government buildings. Sharing the same climate, language and cultural history as Valentia, traditionally the islands have been regarded as a considerably poorer and less artistically accomplished orphan to their neighbours on the mainland.

This certainly would have been a fair assessment before the Century Wars. Luckily for Ethraynne their perceived lack of military importance and the Valentian navy's preoccupation with the Raed meant that by boon of natural geographic safety, they escaped the ravages of the Century Wars as an impartial observer.

In the years during and following the Century Wars, the Ethraynnian people were able to nurture a rapidly expanding infrastructure and series of public improvements. The towns and villages of Ethraynne are some of the most beautiful and scenic amongst all of the Empire of the Free Cities, her citizens friendly and courteous. In the western regions of the Empire of the Free Cities, there has developed a significant shift of political and economic power towards Ethraynne, much to the dismay of the Valentian nobility.

Although initially opposed to unification, the Ethraynnian people have since grown to accept the adoption of a national identity with the mainland. This is undoubtedly due to the extremely lucrative trading that occurs between the guilds on the islands and their counterparts in other Sovereign States. The ports of Ethraynnian cities bustle with activity and industry, as the trade ships and fishing trawlers of several surrounding states arrive and depart at all hours of the day.

Ethraynne is known for her great inventions and scientific innovations, the founder houses of many of the contemporary guilds are located upon her shores. The Astronomer's Guild, the Alchemist's Guild and the Engineer's Guild all maintain large and influential guild houses in Ethraynne, with only the latter having its ruling house elsewhere. There is a new scientific movement which is beginning to gather momentum and importance in the Empire of the Free Cities, its roots firmly located in this Sovereign State.

**Raedland**

In the times before the Century Wars, Raedland was a powerful state with several interests across what would now be further flung parts of the Empire of Free Cities, all administered by a centralised government on the Raed mainland. In those days, Raedland maintained a mighty fleet that ruled the surrounding oceans and provided her with much revenue. They taxed the great fishing trawlers of Eisnor and Erskirad, as well as being able to exert considerable militaristic pressure and assistance in establishing outposts and colonies.

During the war, Raedland had to sacrifice each of her assets one after another. Her navy was stretched beyond its ability to sustain supply lines and forced to fight a war on multiple fronts. As continued news of successive defeats and the fall of once impregnable fortresses overseas mounted, it became apparent that the war effort was not going well. The remnants of a now devastated military would be needed in its entirety to protect the mainland from invasion.

During a time when both Valentinian and Erskirii armies threatened to begin landing on the shores of Raedland, and with the Queen and her sycophantic supporters indecisive at the height of the crisis, the Raed military were
forced into a coup d’état to wrest power for themselves and the good of the nation. With power over the army and navy consolidated, the difficult decision to abandon the remaining colonial cities was made.

Life for the Raed became a hard existence; the citizenry that had not already been conscripted were forced to take up arms to support the depleted military in repelling the invading forces. After long months of bloody urban warfare in the streets of coastal towns and cities, and of bitter naval engagements, Raedland could call her shores her own again.

Raedland now continues to exist as a military state, unable to support herself without the army to feed the populace, keep the peace and provide a continued sense of stability. Despite the efforts of reformers within the State, the people of Raedland have long memories of the ills of the royal family and the nobility. They have welcomed the application of martial law to put down the protests of the royalists that the monarchy be reinstated.

Raedland is a rustic and scenic isle, filled with large, roaming deciduous forests and long tracts of open grassland. The cities of this Sovereign State are considerably smaller than those of her peers and her citizenry for the most part is widely spread throughout small villages that continue a feudal existence, the peasantry still primarily farmers.

To the north is Maldriven, a wild and mountainous region, with its own strong cultural and national heritage. Here, the people are fierce and proud, and the Guild Houses and the production centres of the Brewer’s Guild dwarf their counterparts in the other cities of the Raed.

PIERVO

Piervo is the smallest Sovereign State of the Empire of the Free Cities, only consisting of one city and its surrounding areas of countryside, pastures and farmland. During the Century Wars, Piervo’s army was unable to do anything beyond withdraw to the safety of the city walls and prepare the populace for siege warfare.

Any other Sovereign State would have been long since annexed by a marauding army and her citizens put to death, as was the end of several Sovereign States in the Far East. But for Piervo this would not be her fate, for she is the holy city of Solthecian Order, the most widespread religion throughout the Empire of the Free Cities.

The head of state of both Piervo and the Solthecian spiritual faith is known as the Bacchus and is elected by mandate of the god Solthecius; his divine will manifested by the archbishops and cardinals. The role is unlike any other clerical or royal position throughout the Empire of the Free Cities; the Bacchus is able to influence several Sovereign States where the faith has any sort of foothold and even more so where it is the predominant religion.

During the Century Wars, Bacchus Alexandria IV and his successor, Bacchus Galbratii, were able to successfully negotiate with any Sovereign State that turned her sights to Piervo. They spared its people from the horror of the conflict beyond the walls and saved the city and its ancient religious landmarks from ruin time and time again.

Although to believers this leader is the chosen of Solthecius, in reality, any election of a Bacchus is a process of shrewd manoeuvring, underlying threats, and careful alliance. Thus, the head of state is often possessed of a considered political mind. Many followers would likely be surprised to learn how deep corruption runs within Solthecian faith and how self interested its leaders tend to be.

The Holy City is home to spectacular architecture and beautiful gardens; high domed cathedrals compete against monasteries with spires that point into the skies like crooked fingers. Statues old and new line every boulevard and street. Every hour, bells ring out and the scent of incense is thick in the air. Wherever an individual might stand in Piervo, there is at very least a low hum of penitent followers deep in prayer and every day the city is flooded with pilgrims come to demonstrate their faith.

This is not to say that industry does not exist within the walls, far from it. The Butcher’s Guild’s ruling house is in Piervo and has existed as the sole purveyor of sacred meat to the Bacchus for generations; something which its many Magisters and Chamberlains are keen to remind both visiting officials and those of other guilds. The Mortician’s Guild also holds significant influence amongst the clergy in Piervo; the two bodies frequently working hand in hand in the day to day lives of the population. In many senses, Piervo is a city much like any other.

EISNOR

Eisnor is the name given to a loose collection of townships occupying the furthest northern point of the Empire of the Free Cities. Unified more by their differences to the other Sovereign States than to each other, they share only a handful of common traditions and customs at most. There are few
cities this far to the north, the most populous being Luemmyr and Kjet. The populace lives sparsely at the edge of the known world, each a small community in which every member has a role to play to ensure survival of their village or clan. There are no ruling families or nobility in Eisnor, nor a royal family. Instead, there is a council of each settlement, which governs each region individually. Although in the smaller villages these almost always are elected by tradition and age, the elders hold no sway in the few cities and larger townships where corruption and bribery has meant that powerful guild officials vie against each other for the seats.

The people of Eisnor are a hardy and rugged seafaring race, their main industries being hunting and fishing. In these remote climes, the bounty is not the tame wildlife of the other Sovereign States, but much more primal and savage creatures. Those same creatures provide considerable wealth for the Eisnoran people; their pelts, ivory and meat highly valued by foreign traders. Even greater financial reward can be garnered if the exotic creatures are able to be taken alive to be sold to collectors from far flung states. For Eisnorans, the practice of keeping such creatures is entirely alien, but one that they are happy to profit from. Such is the benefit of inclusion to the Empire of the Free Cities.

Of all the Sovereign States, organised religion is least influential in Eisnor; her people still worshipping the pantheon of pagan deities that they have paid tribute to since settling these lands. In each town, city or settlement are multitudes of simple and ancient shrines to the Gods of the Hunt, Lords of the Deep, and the Goddess of the Harvest, to name but the most popular. Because more widespread education and literacy has not spread at the same pace amongst the Eisnoran people, many of these holy traditions and the identities of the Gods that they worship are passed down from father to son. In more progressive quarters the rites of some have now all but been forgotten; civilizing influence has begun to creep into the cities and the old statues crumble in the wilderness, abandoned to the elements.

**Castellya**

Castellya is a land ruled by dynastic families of nobles; lords descendent from old knightly orders, appointed by a royal family that died without heirs and left no legitimate claimants to their throne. The old royal palaces have long stood empty, their histories only known to those scholars that would seek to study them. In Castellya, very little emphasis is put upon the social status of such a profession, along with other academic pursuits.

During the Century Wars the armies of Castellya were some of the most active and best equipped forces through the realm. Above all others, it was the Castellyian armies that could most legitimately claim martial victory; for all that her military ambitions were eventually greatly curtailed by dwindling strategic resources.

The nobility still encourage aggressive overtures towards their neighbouring states when they are not at arms against each other. Castellya maintains large garrisons of soldiery and standing state armies, as well as each noble house being able to field their own considerable retinue. Social progression via the military is a viable choice, indeed it is how many of the lesser nobles with smaller estates have achieved their position of standing within Castellyian society.

It is unusual for the nobility themselves to spend much time in their grand residences however, more likely they will be found at the court of the ruling dynasty. Grave insult is inferred by absence at such proceedings without suitable justification and is likely followed by expulsion from court for a period of time. Falling from favour so severely is likely to seriously damage a noble families’ standing for years.

Guild houses within this region are equally as grandiose as the buildings of the nobility and whilst not as overtly powerful, they are quite capable of directing the internal and foreign policy of the governing dynasties as is required. The same impassioned and fiery Castellyian temperament that rules the nobles is also rife within the guilds and is frequently noted by emissaries from other Sovereign States to be the reason that the guild masters have never truly taken control of Castellya. For all that the government is limited by infighting and the ancestral grudges of the noble families, so the guilds fight amongst themselves in the same sense.

**Figo**

Separated from Castellya by the old pilgrim trail towards the Holy City of Piervo, Figo shares much with her sister state. Beyond subtle regional variations, citizens of both states share the same language and customs, the same hot-headed temperament in their peoples and a common ancestry which can be traced back to far before the Century Wars.

Despite this, even in times of peace and prosperity the nations have been the nemesis of each other in all things. In spite of the armistice that exists within the Empire of Free Cities following the end of the Century Wars, Figo and Castellya continue to regularly engage in border skirmishes; usually at the behest of warring noble families that have grudges stretching back for generations.
Unlike landlocked Castellya, Figo has a long stretch of coastline leading out to the expansive southern ocean. The Figeon naval tradition is as strong as that of her armies and even in these times of peace, her proud galleons and frigates are a familiar reminder that Figeon ships rule the seas.

This continues into her cities, where the presence of the polytheistic ocean gods is felt as strongly as that of the Solthecian faith. Rather than in Castellya, where the spires of the many grand cathedrals of the Solthecian Order reach into the skies, in Figo the faith is instead represented by much more sober monasteries and humble churches. These exist alongside the shrines and temples of the many oceanic deities that are worshipped here by the Figeon sailors and merchantmen. It is even known for men from far off Eisnor to frequent these holy sites when they are docked in port.

Understandably, the Fisherman’s Guild has considerable influence in the south of the State and has some ties with trade further inland, but this is by no means a monopoly. The Brewer’s Guild have their own district in the capital Gacildra, a beautiful and mysterious city built over a series of canals and elegant waterways. The Butcher’s Guild also take advantage of this bustling trade hub and stock their ships here for travel to the southern Sovereign States of the Empire of the Free Cities.

As the crow flies north from Gacildra and the cities begin to resemble those of Castellya, the other guild houses become apparent. Following an epidemic of Lung Rot, an illness which once destroyed nearly two thirds of the Figeon populace before it was cured, the Mortician’s Guild gained a position of power that has continued to exist into the present day. The current ruling house of the Mortician’s Guild is based in Fiscerano, a centrally placed city dominated by great graveyards, tombs and memorial sites to those unfortunates.

**Erskirad**

Located in the frozen north-east, Erskirad is a harsh land of broken plains of tundra, ravines, and mountains. The people from this desolate region are a pragmatic and hard race who do not suffer fools gladly. Their ancestors were able to first establish their homes in a seemingly inhospitable climate in spite of the elements and that same determination has continued to influence the mindset of their descendants.

When travelling outside of the Sovereign State, Erskirii people are regarded as miserable individuals with no sense of humour and a vile temper. For their part, an Erskirii considers those of the southern Sovereign States decadent and flippant, far too easy with their praise. It is rare that individuals other than guild officials have travelled outside of the boundaries of Erskirad since the end of the Century Wars and perhaps this is for the best.

Religion is very important in Erskirad and all of its citizens are extremely pious. The capital city, Yureslan, is the birthplace of the kathenotheist order of the Svantelit and is the only religious order that is allowed buildings or sacred sites throughout the state. Any found to be outspoken against the Svantelit, or to extol the virtues of alternative faiths are imprisoned and subject to the whim of the Svantelii inquisitorial order. Those who do not repent and convert are burned to death in one of the many public squares across the land. Perhaps unsurprisingly for such an uncompromising and intractable faith, the order of Svantelit is yet to spread further afield from Erskirad.

Erskirad is a place of extremes. It has long-standing institutions which dominate society; the military and its mighty history of expansion, the Royalty that wars bitterly at court and of course, the guilds. As with Valentia, the difference between the affluent ruling classes and poor citizenry is extremely pronounced. Whilst the politicking in higher society leads to uneasy alliance or disenfranchisement, the rich negotiate lucrative trade agreements and the poor lead simple and bleak lives.

Almost all of the population are centred in huge, sprawling cities. Each of these has carefully demarcated areas for the common and privileged, areas set aside for industry, residence, and commerce. For a citizen, there are only two methods to improve his or her life, which many are loathe to embrace. The first is advancement within the military, which can lead to a respectable standing, if limited by a glass ceiling of patronage and nepotism. The Erskirii Military does not offer an easy existence however, and many will spend long years away from their families at a cold and lonely outpost, left to fend for themselves.

The second is considerably both less reputable and more dangerous, and is to become a member of one of the many undercity gangs. In each of the colossal cities exists a vast hive network of sewers and slums, where self appointed gang leaders extract protection money, fight turf wars and trade in illegal goods. These gangs are always welcoming of fresh members as fighting between them occurs on an almost daily basis in some form or another. It is hope of each ganger that they might attract the attention of one of the guilds within the city, who may employ them as a henchman, pulling them up out of the grime, to a new life.
Early afternoon sun bathed the courtyard outside of the Butcher's Guild in Aldebrecht, where the group of hopeful apprentices had been running exercises under the watchful gaze of the Master Butcher all morning. The guild house was a large, expansive building festooned with intricately detailed banners and imposing statues; it resembled a fortification from the Century Wars more than anything else. Standing out even amongst the extravagant residences in the cosmopolitan Skaldic capital, the March city, the Butler's Guild had sought to dominate its surroundings with its construction, form over function.

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

A vicious cycle, designed to harden them mentally.

Some of them were new to this. Others, like Boiler, had already been at the guild for some months now, the relentless drills and exercises had become slightly more tolerable as their muscles had tightened and become stronger, their minds focused, hungry, ruthless. For the new arrivals it was like being a piece of meat crawling towards the edge of the training ground in shame. 'I don't care either way.'

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

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

'Shit. Pathetic.' The Master Butcher spoke, angry eyes staring down the assorted apprentices before him as he resumed walking around the yard. Most couldn't meet his gaze. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Boiler, Ox saw the rook sprawled out behind the rest of them. Snarling, he strode purposefully over to him.

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

'Ox,' he called a stop once again. Standing with his back to a huge red and white sign: 'Don't bother making any friends, you won't be staying here long.'

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

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

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

One piece had managed to land embedded in Greede's left shoe. Grimacing at the damage done to the fine leather, he reached down and plucked it out, before tasing it aside. He strode past Avarisse, the larger man comically hopping up and down on one foot and flailing his arms wildly, trying to keep his balance with one steels toe stuck in the door. Greede ignored Avarisse's plight, examining the door and its frame, running one finger thoughtfully along the broken lock.

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

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

Greede looked up at his accomplice, still trapped.

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

Grunting, Avarisse bent his knee and hopped closer to the door, almost losing the battle for balance completely as he did so, until he was able to push both hands against the door frame. Leaning into his arms for support, he wrenched the trapped foot clear in another shower of tiny shards of wood. Before he followed Greede, he took a moment to compose himself in the alley, straightening his hat across his forehead. Though Avarisse, the larger man comically hopping up and down a passageway beyond.

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'Do you not consider that this is a mistake for both of them. Some rows back, they hadn't been noticed. Yet. Boiler had doubts it would stay that way.

One rook not much older than Boiler was sitting in the dirt of the courtyard, utterly exhausted. His legs were straight out in front of him, his arms rigid behind his back, holding him up. His head rolled back, drawing in deep breaths, each desperate gulp of air as if he were a drowning man suddenly given life again. Boiler couldn't remember the boy's name, his own mind blank from exertion.

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The corridor ended in another plain door which was unlocked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Neither Greede nor Avarisse were lesser men. They continued into the depths.
buildings, packed closely together in irregular fashion; starkly different to the carefully spaced inner city residences that he was used to. Clearly it had been their contractors’ aim to waste any available land that could be turned into dwellings for the spread of the low born, barely human residents. Dirty alleys ran between each of the buildings; the filthy walls receding into darkness, thickest thing leaning against them and staring aggressively at every passer-by. It amused Lundt to think that the whole shanty town would probably go up in smoke with the slightest spark.

Overhead the houses bulged outwards, each one looking more structurally unsound than the last. There was no pleasing aesthetic here; no thought or care in what could be laughingly termed as their craftsmanship. Mankind in no thought or care in what could be laughingly termed as their craftsmanship. As if this district had no shame, no respect. As if the Mortician’s Guild had made its home was desolate and miserable in comparison to the vibrant Guild District that the Butcher spent most of his time in.

The man was modestly dressed with little regard for current fashions. In every respect he looked smart, his clothing functional. Smoking from an ornate pipe with a gold coloured mouthpiece, he lounged back in the Lord Chamberlain’s chair, his boots propped arrogantly on the office expensive antique desk. Thick smoke clouded the room, betraying the that the man had been here for some time. As always, Lord Chamberlain Vincent de Laurentis wondered how his strange guest managed to enter the Fisherman’s Guild and his office unseen by everyone, and how long it would be before Laurentis would be out on business and when he would return. This was not common knowledge to any but a few trusted servants and his junior staff. For the Lord Chamberlain, a person who prided himself on knowing everyone and their business, it was entirely too infuriating to not know even a name for this man, let alone anything else, whilst at the same time being so apparently predictable himself.

Did you that you find my office and chair to your satisfaction? Laurentis asked bitterly.

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

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

Unsurprisingly enough, something extraneous to your own activities, outside of your considerable sphere of influence. But then you never invite me here at the best of times.’ The man opened his arm wide as he elaborated on the subject; as if to emphasise the point. He ended the movement with folded hands behind his head; resting ever so insidiously on the point of the act.

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

Laurentis offered the smiling man a hard, cold stare. Corsair represented a significant guild commodity in terms of the amount of training and upkeep that had been afforded him over his career. Whilst Corsair was by no means indispensable, the gall of the stranger in asking so casually for the Fisherman’s Guild to throw paid visits to each of them, exploiting them all in the same fashion. It made no sense to exploit any one alone, when you could easily do the same to all.

Far better then to play the long game. Laurentis was a politician and understood all too well how to build a long term strategy. At the present, he simply did not have enough information on the individual before him nor his mysterious organization to act. More than anything, he wanted to know the man’s agenda. He could only make wild speculation at present and Laurentis did not entertain such concepts. Anything that hurt his rivals could easily be turned into something that benefited him; even considering the web of half truths and lies that the man spun.

He could refuse to throw away the man in the process. He could refuse to throw away the one of many, potentially incuring the wrath of another more powerful entity in the process. He could refuse to throw away the asset as he had been asked and both he and the Fisherman’s Guild would incur that same ire. He had little doubt that the man’s threats were sincere.

His only consolation was that he didn’t believe that the Fisherman’s Guild were alone in this. Although none of the other guilds would admit weakness in their dealings and little revenue for meaningful discourse existed between them; Laurentis was of the firm conviction that the man could easily do the same to all.

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

‘Are we understood?’

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

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‘Yes.’
submission and then the old man scuttled off into the darkness of the guild's
get out of the wind and huddled his arms further around his body.
thick coat and the layers beneath. He stepped closer to the gothic building to
open doorway. Lundt shivered. The cold late winter air cut through his
stone arches covered in leering gargoyles and cryptic script rose up around the
entrances to the building. Murky stained glass windows lined the walls; their
Scolding himself for thinking something so irrational, Lundt forced his gaze
interloper in their midst, promising damnation to that which did not belong.
the conflict; eternally judging the combatants. Lundt did not feel comfortable
angels locked in mortal embrace. Others represented divine gods watching
colours muted with age and giving the appearance that they would barely
behold his head held as high as possible. Screw the Spook and his piss-poor
guild in the middle of nowhere.

Abendroth watched the Butcher leave. He detected the younger Magister,
like all of his kind now. So openly brazen in their dealings, supremely
confident in their own abilities, honed by exploiting each other like children.
No understanding of the subtlety of discourse, of how to properly reach
accord. A more worthy man would have demanded that the Mortician
had met him on neutral ground, would have insisted that the gatekeeper
permit him entrance. Abendroth could remember the Butcher's predecessor.

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

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

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

You misunderstand. This time the Mortician's Guild stands to profit
from my intervention. Although, of course, I can easily withdraw my offer
and instead make it to one of your rivals. Perhaps they will find the venture
more to their liking.' The man paused, watching for any sign of reaction from
Abendroth. 'The frankness of the reply surprised Lundt. He had expected some
negotiation here, a power struggle to retain some bondage over the Butcher's
Guild. He had been prepared for that, not to have the bond so carefully
dismissed. Unsure of the moment, his next words faltered, caught in his
throat, unnecessary.

You may leave, Magister Lundt. I have tasks remaining of me, and little
time to waste with you.'
Laurentis stood in front of his desk and appraised the large man in front of him. He knew much about the one that had been named Shark, although he had never spoken to him. He did not often have any contact with the Guild by allowing them to think that he offered them any patronage at all.

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

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

Silence. Laurentis knew that as a native of Luemmyr, a Sovereign State in the northernmost part of the Empire of the Free Cities, the man did not speak Skaldic as his first language. Perhaps Shark simply did not understand Laurentis’ words. For a moment, he entertained the idea that he had not quite kept the words very final and Laurentis suspected that he had not quite kept the phrase the next part to Shark to ensure total understanding. He decided on a direct approach. ‘Corsair is no longer a concern of you, or this guild.’ The player blinked and understood. ‘Will you need me for anything else Lord Chamberlain?’ Shark’s voice had sounded sinister. The man had reached the door now and at the casual wave of his hand. ‘No, Shark, you may leave now.’ Laurentis dismissed him with a snatch of his hand.

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

Many would think that in a ruthless sport such as Guild Ball, where players accept the risk of crippling injury every time they run out onto the pitch, death would be commonplace. In reality nothing could be further from the truth. Guild Ball’s rules expressly forbid any one player from taking the life of another, something established early after peasant football’s evolution into Guild Ball.

In the cut-throat Empire of the Free Cities a person could be forgiven for being surprised at this policy; seemingly at odds with the guild’s typically callous disregard for the concerns or lives of the population. However, to those more educated observers, the reasoning behind it is simple. The guilds consider their players commodities; pieces in their political machinations. Each one represents considerable investment and financial expenditure. The rule is fundamental therefore in protecting the guild’s interests above all else; the beneficial side effect for the players being a degree of safety from an untimely end.

Any player or team found to be deliberately violating this rule is treated with extremely strict and brutal reprisal – although of course, accidents have been known to happen. Guild Ball has a high council made up of representatives from all of the guilds which oversee such incidents and pass final judgement in such matters. Over the years, these select officials have become almost an autonomous body of their own, aloof and apart from their peers. Even amongst the guilds themselves it is of constant frustration that they are as such unable to exert any of their considerable power in influencing any decision that the council might be called upon to make.

A much more regular occurrence however is injury. These range from simple sprains or concussion; all the way through to more career threatening injuries such as severe blood loss, smashed joints and broken or even severed limbs. The rules of Guild Ball do little to protect a player from this and the game is rife with hidden agendas – those of teams with long standing rivalries, players with personal vendettas and the guild’s own intrigues and conspiracies. These often manifest themselves on the pitch as symbolic displays of barbarity.

Fortunately for the unlucky players on the receiving end of these injuries there is one guild which remains neutral in both the Empire of the Free Cities and in Guild Ball. For a modest stipend that is annually charged to all of the guilds, the Physicians Guild maintains the apothecaries that brave the open war of the pitch during games; dragging badly injured players to safety and treating their injuries at the side of the pitch. Those that have trauma too severe to be so easily helped, the Physician’s Guild will send to one of their local guild houses to treat, where they are able to induce their mysterious and secretive accelerated healing. By these means players are never out of action for a prolonged period, often only missing a match at most.

Of course most of the guilds, particularly the older and more established, have attempted to coerce individuals from the Physician’s Guild to become private apothecaries for their respective teams. As yet, not one has betrayed their oath of membership to the Physician’s Guild. Little wonder when you consider that despite their role as leaders within the Sovereign States of the Empire of the Free Cities, the Physician’s Guild are still just as likely to resolve betrayal with swift violence...
The Brewer’s Guild supporters were legendary in the sport. By nature of their team’s shadowy gang affiliations, many were dangerous and ruthless criminals, the remainder often easily led to violence by the outlaws in their number. The Brewer’s Guild turned a blind eye to the behaviour, not even bothering to acknowledge it officially. Intimidation was just another part of the power struggle; whether it was towards a guild directly or just their people. With the Brewer terraces always volatile, the opposition knew not to flaunt their victories over them lest they suffer brutal retaliation from an unforgiving mob.

The crowd that Ox stood amongst now definitely qualified as that. They were a tough, seasoned group, each one proudly wearing scars from previous fights and segregated by their underworld clique or connections. Each looked around warily; the slightest jostle or push could spark off confrontation with their neighbours. Today however they were unified, united in the single purpose of supporting their team.

And their team was losing. Badly.

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

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

‘Rough crowd today, eh?’ Ox turned his attention to the small man who had spoken to him, but made no effort to reply.

‘Never been to a game before? I can tell. You don’t look the type. Not into this at all, are you?’ Ox’s hand closed on the stranger’s forearm, crushing it in his grip and causing the thief’s fingers to spasm outwards. The eyes looked straight at him, wide eyed and afraid. Ox chopped the pickpocket in the throat without another word and released the arm as the man slumped to the floor, making a strangled choking sound. No one around them seemed to much care.

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

Seconds later the Brewer’s Guild goal post was rattling violently from side to side and Flint was sprinting back up the pitch, grinning like a madman with hand raised high in familiar salute. The Mason’s crowd stamped their feet and cheered their hero. A group of female supporters who had collectively adopted the sobriquet of ‘Flint’s Bedrockers’ sang his name as if he were the second coming of Solthecius; several of them throwing lovingly woven strips of delicate material on to the pitch. As the flowery embroidery fluttered through the wind around him, Flint offered the ladies a wide smile, not committing himself to even one token.
Very few people looked uncomfortable at handling the wrapped around them as makeshift handles. The weapons in a muddy brown cloak giving out wicked looking shivs; his head slightly so it wasn't obvious that he no longer reflecting off a metal blade a couple of feet away. Turning Stave, surely.

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

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

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

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

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

Some hero. Ox wasn’t impressed.

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

Ox couldn’t be sure, but he thought that he saw even more gangsters rushing in from outside the court, underneath the large metal crescent that marked the entrance to the stadium. If that was the case, this boded very badly for the Mason’s supporters.

They had looked outnumbered already and had nowhere near the wild fury of the Brewer side. Certainly the main entranceway was blocked if nothing else. The officials that had tried to flee were surrounded nearby, being blindedigned into the dust by a circle of things wielding clubs and metal bars.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tapper tried to get the ball and his players loose; crossing to Friday who was fighting her way out wide. It was intercepted by Friday's defenders. Ox saw one crash into the referee, Marbles leapt over the ball, completely overwhelming the players trying to control it but unable to do so whilst simultaneously defending against a tackle from Brick. Heaving listing from his injuries sustained brawling with Hooper and trying to continue fighting; the Mason didn’t pay attention to the ball either, though his left foot did by chance accidentally punt it away back towards his team mate Flint. It rolled through the grass and over the bare mud, slowing its momentum drastically, but still maintaining a trajectory reach.
Perhaps they had finally found the heart to fight back, or perhaps it had been the fires licking ever higher, but the Mason supporters had managed to, at last, break out against the front. Several groups still fought running battles with the Brewer gangers, trying to escape into the city. Injured men and women from both sides lay everywhere; as did pieces of wood, metal, rock and the odd weapon. Most were very bloody, the weapons stained dark crimson. The Mason's stand had collapsed in on itself long since, girt by the fire and scorched black.

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

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

Suddenly, Flint was away with the ball and running out of the scrum, down the pitch towards the Brewer goalpost, unmarked. He didn't know why guild officials from both sides were suddenly running onto the pitch waving their arms, but Flint had no intentions of stopping. He couldn't make out whatever it was that they were shouting at him over the sound of the raving fire the air began to clear a little, revealing more of his surroundings as the raging fire began to clear a little, revealing more of his surroundings. Under the shadows of the trees, a large, burly man was standing with a broadsword in his hand, giving him a wide berth now. He started down the stone steps, silent footsteps taking him deeper into the underground passageways that he preferred to use instead of the crowded avenues and roads.

'Look here lad; I think this one wants the boy for himself!' One of the gangers sneered a predatory grin towards Ox. The rest joined in on the laughter like chattering jackals, the sound echoing through the tunnel and making it seem as if there were an army of them. Ox tore his eyes from the boy to the thugs, stepping his back to the wall instead.

The laughter stopped. A nervous silence descended once again. Ox's thumb continued to graze along the handle of the cleaver inside his cloak. One of the men openly began to pull his knife free, but Ox's thumb continued to graze along the handle of the cleaver. 'Better look elsewhere for your sport if you know what's good for you. This one is ours.' The second speaker was no less threatening.

'Please! Please, don't leave me to them! I just wanted to watch the game with my father, I didn't want to fight with anyone!' He was very young, Ox realised. 'Listen, you have to help me!' Tears streaming down his face, the boy started snivelling again. Ox looked at him, a long, hard stare. 'You're not him, boy. He's dead. And I don't care about those not strong enough to stand on their own two feet.' The gangers were completely confused by the unexpected statement and behaviour, the boy even more lost. 'You scum can have him. Now get out of my way.' Ox glared right back, an alpha male amongst his pack, daring any of them to challenge him. His thumb, unseen by any of them, rested on his concealed cleaver, rubbing back and forth over the pommeled butt. 'Better look elsewhere for your sport if you know what's good for you!' Ox made his way past them, stepping over the bodies. "This one is ours." The second speaker was no less threatening. Ox tore his eyes from the boy to the thugs, stepping his back to the wall instead.

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

Ox didn't look back. Jacques was long gone, and so was the Master Butcher's favourite.
The afternoon heat was sweltering, anything at distance seeming hidden behind a hazy optic. Every player felt it; their clothes sticky, tiny beads of sweat leaving trails across their skin as they stared each other down across the halfway line, waiting for the horn to sound that would begin the match. The restless crowd murmured amongst itself, a frustrated, petulant beast tormented in the harsh unrelenting sun. A strange noiseless calm permeated the game, each side daring the other to be the first to break the silence.

Finally, the sound came.

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

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

Overhead, the ball soared into the sky, all eyes fixated on its arching path as it sped towards the Alchemist’s Guild players. One or two ran underneath, taking up position on point as Midas nodded to Calculus to intercept it. Across from them, the Fisherman side waited, ready.
Emitting a bestial roar to rival that of the huge crowd, Katalyst slammed into Kraken in the middle of the pitch. Dirt flew up underfoot as Kraken absorbed the brunt of the charge. The Alchemist's stoic silence was a stark parallel to the two men wrestled with each other for long moments, on his broad shoulders, his boots scrabbling for purchase in the mud. The two men did not speak to each other for long moments, each second a drawn out struggle of a forearm turned into a thudding sound echoing out. Unconcerned for his own safety, the Alchemist let loose a muted howl from behind his mask and head butted Kraken squarely on the bridge of his nose. With a line of thick red crimson running all over his shirt this forced the Fisherman back two steps, before he barreled forward to intercept Katalyst once again. The crowd cheered on their heroes, locked in mortal embrace.

Calculus slipped inwardly at the smashed form of Flask at her feet. Brutes! How could they do such a thing to a harmless creature like the automaton? It served no greater purpose than bringing her fresh flanks. At least the apothecaries had ignored it. The Alchemist's Guild's own engineers would have to look in the slightest. It was time to introduce the unstable elements at her disposal into the equation and demonstrate the superiority of her followers. Angel didn't waste time wondering where the rest of the Alchemists were. Only two remained before them now: Midas, and Mercury. Midas looked as if he was about to make the mistake of taunting, his arms crossed and sneering down at Angel. Time for the Fisherman's Guild to sprint to the finish. Anything else was another world away.

Too late for that. Two early goals and the lead had set the pace, but that had been broken by the Alchemists scoring one of their own and then equalising. Time for the Fisherman's Goal stands to hop and smoke fish and Aluminium, keeping the crowd happy. To their left, Midas stood at the Fisherman's Centre Forward position. The cheers from the Fisherman's Guild stands grew louder with every step closer to the Alchemist goal post. As she stepped in, the kinetic energy was blocked and rebounded and Vitriol's momentum drove her into her own weapon, causing the woman to crumble in an inexcusable heap before Angel. Gaping and groaning for air, Vitriol tried to regain her feet as Angel looked around at her unexpected victim.

Shark charged in from the side as he slashed his spear around through the air back to his side. 'I'll take care of her, get going!' Angel nodded and sprinted off up the pitch back into formation, the acid burn on her arm for moments. By the time that she had caught up, she could see Grey's had possession, Siren was on her left, drifting in and out of the traditional centre forward position. The cheer from the Fisherman's Guild stands grew louder with every step closer to the Alchemist goal post. As she stepped in, Grey's offered her a nod.

'You need more time now. Midas, and Mercury. Midas looked as unassumingly pedestrian to her eye as he ever did, except for that bright shining hand holding his accursed blue gem. Angel had underestimated him once before, and preferred to make that mistake again. Mercury could have been one of the towering oggies that the farmers of her village let ablate each spring, meant to represent the ancient gods that would bring favourable harvests. The flames normally soaring around his fists flared out, leading the appearance of a mighty creature of legend, wreathed in fire. He would be a formidable opponent.

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

The Alchemist Captain smiled as he approached, the self satisfied grin of one lost in his own importance. It seemed odd to Angel that he didn't follow the ball as she had expected, instead preferring to face her down. Thankfully, her steps slowed, an eye kept on Siren moving into position to fire off a shot at the goal. If she could keep him engaged then he couldn't defend. Midas smiled on, eyes laden with murderous intent. Siren, ball rolling out in front of her, passed out of sight behind Midas for a moment. The crowd stamped their feet rhythmically, although Angel couldn't tell which side. She guessed it was her own.

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

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

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

She and Midas faced each other down. Without taking his eyes from hers, the Alchemist palmed the Crucible and smooth skin began morphing into sharp, jagged metallic shards. Angel didn't wait, darting to her flank to chase the ball, hoping to use her greater speed to gain the advantage. Midas followed. She knew that any attempt to fight him off would have been pitifully one-sided.

The ball had come to a rest, bouncing near to the boundary, almost over the line. Unprompted, an overzealous Alchemist Guild official booted it back up the pitch before Angel could get to it. The Fisherman supporters in the stands let loose a torrent of abuse at him, matching the cheer of their rivals against. Angel watched the ball pass over her head, disheartened.
line, the roar of the crowd louder than ever. The Fisherman skipped around the recently returned Calculus and her battered metal man, the ball skilfully rolled between her legs. They pounded down the pitch together, towards the goal. Shark still in possession, long since forgotten. She snarled at Mist, the wrath of a thousand ambient noise of the crowd, their complaints about the weather force of will inside forced her to fight on. Exhausted and couldn't last much longer; exertion, the heat, the burns on her arm throbbed painfully as she moved, even as air passed over them. She dared not try to deflect any blow with the limb. She was forced a retreat away from the Alchemist lines. The unreal world around them shimmered, the colours all too bright, edges indistinct, blurry. Mist was there, always gloating, sneering, too far away to reach by a heir's breadth any time she tried to get him. Again and again she tried to trick him with sudden turns, lunges or grab at his cloak. Each time, the same frustrating failure. The misdirection was absolute. Siren could not tell where she put on the pitch any more than she could have known what happened to the sound. It was deadly silent. The crowd, now muted, seemed to her to be moving at unusual, fractured angles, pointing their fingers as though to do so was to conduct some onerous duty, their arms moving in what should have been agonising directions. They might have screamed or sighed, mouths opening and shutting in either slow motion or at increased speed, totally at odds with reality.

Past a grimacing face many times the size it should have been, Siren saw what they might have pointed at; the ball sitting at rest in a patch of green grass turning brown amongst great oceans of mud, bright orange in this odd world. She punched through the apparition in front of her, making long strides towards the ball. Mist seemed to sense the change as it happened and she was suddenly assaulted with doubts, wild accusations of inadequacy and insults; all delivered in a mocking, singsong voice from leering masks surrounding her. Her scream sounded shrill, not her voice at all. The reply was thunderous, a chorus of the childlike voices all at once, repeating her eventual demise, that she belonged lost, forgotten to all. Her back was slick with sweat, soaking through her robes. Just foosteps, edges indistinct, blurry. Mist was there, always gloating, trying to trick him with sudden turns, lunges or grab at his cloak. Each time, the same frustrating failure. Siren paused, mind churning through the impossible, somehow plausible. The thing that was now Siren carried on talking to her.

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

You understand me now I see. So concerned with forging your path forward that you never stopped to look inwards. Never once wondered what crawled out of that broken husk that day, Siren stared at her younger self with blank eyes; except that she was no longer Siren after all. She was something unknown.

You must be exhausted, you have travelled so far, with a wound in your heart so large an ocean could flow into it. Siren's voice continued, soothing, calming, erasing all frustration. The thing that was now Siren carried on talking to her. The thing that was now Siren carried on talking to her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘You wish, gutter rat.’

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

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

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

Boiler turned to look at her and immediately wished he hadn’t. His face now an even darker beetroot, burning red at the sight of the topless woman before him; he fled, her laughter ringing in his ears.
If Boiler had thought that inside the changing room was cold, outside was proof that it could be even worse. Now wearing his match clothes instead of the thick robes he had been attired in when he arrived earlier, the piercing frost took the breath out of him at once. He would not have to worry about a red face for long out here. Somewhere, even in the dugout, the wind found its way to sweep down and set a chill into his bones. Over the empty pitch it looked desolate, grey.

Ox and Boar were already out here, talking to another figure that Boiler did not recognise. The man was tall, almost eye to eye with Boar, but nowhere near as broad shouldered, being instead seemingly slender under a long coat that hid most of his features. He wore the same curious furry cap with no peak that the more affluent Erskirii people seemed to; although his bore no decoration on it, unlike the majority of others that Boiler had seen. With the high collar pulled up against the cold and the hat covering most of his head, Boiler could barely see his face, and what he could see was covered by a thick white beard. Presuming somewhere from that thatch of hair was an ornate brass pipe that the man was smoking; Boiler’s eyes widened over it as a sweet smell of his tobacco remained.

As an official from the Fisherman’s Guild scampered past, Ox was already out running. The three looked over at him briefly and then continued speaking. Ox nodded. ‘No surprise there. Last time around we were to be a superior of some sort. The man chock marked, as well as all the rest. He heard the crowd scream, one or two even cheering his name. That had to be a first.

Ox nodded. ‘Finally, my associate in Valentina warns me that the Fisherman’s Guild currently pursues an agenda that might have some unhealthy repercussions in this match.’

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

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

‘Very well then, Ox afforded him little extra respect; for all that he appeared to be a superior of some sort. The man checked in response, mirroring the exasperation that Ox expressed.

‘Asak’ya, Master Butcher.’

‘Asak’ya. Ox spoke the strange Erskirii word surprisingly fluently.

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

Meatloaf ducked the blow and swept her right hand upwards, delivering a vicious uppercut to Jack. His vicious hooked blade caught his temples and a spray of rich red blood flew up into the air, moving in the opposite direction to his heavy steps. staggering and unable to right himself, the Fisherman’s knees buckled and he hit the ground hard, the frozen soil having seemingly little give to it. Meatloaf twisted her blades for the crowd who roared their approval. The whole movement had seemed to boisterous as it never was during a match.

Boiler jogged back to where Kraken had left Meathook a ditch yesterday. No, Snakeskin was here with an entirely different agenda. Seeing Kraken closing in on them, Boiler quickly passed out to Meatloaf and sprunted out wide, the other Butcher mirroring his movement. Princes kept to his heels. Predictably, the larger man opted to followed the ball at the back, changed direction and pointed the ball out sideways back to the Boar. She was rewarded with a big meaty fist in her side, just into her lower ribs; she crumpled to the floor. Boiler didn’t bang around to see what happened next, pushing the ball out before him, taking aim and kicking it as hard as he could. He hit the goal squarely. He heard the crowd scream, one or two even cheering his name. That had to be a first.

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

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

‘Yes, in 2-1, we have the lead!’ Boar smiled crookedly back. Meatloaf nodded, turned to make her way back downfield, and winced at a sharp shooting pain. She swore two unfamiliar words of her native tongue.

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

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Snakeskin faced off against Brisket. The tough Butcher couldn’t have known it was her though. She had carefully disguised herself as one of the rookie Fishermen, a resemblance so carefully created that the trick had even fooled that old trout Greyscales. Snakeskin had been forced to listen to the old goat wheeze on for hours of pointless trivia and meaningless advice before the game, just nodding and forcing herself to smile politely. Loved the sound of his own voice so much that he let his eyes lie to him, which was fine as far as Snakeskin had been concerned.

The Butcher girl eyed Snakeskin warily, the ball at Brisket’s feet. The crowd simmered, watching the confrontation. With the Butcher side on two goals, another would secure their advancement to the semi-finals of the Championship and send the Fisherman’s Guild crashing out. Understandably, the next goal was probably worth its weight in gold to the player that scored it. Brisket would do nothing to keep possession.

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

Brisket chanced a quick look left and right, clearly hoping for one of her team-mates to be lurking nearby and be able to help, but Snakeskin knew that they were otherwise engrossed fighting off the Fisherman’s side. Shank had been taken out early by Kraken and thanks to Shark, Boar was sleeping off a concussion in the dugout; one of the extremely rare instances that someone had been able to knock the big bastard out of a game. That left the Butcher side with a numerical disadvantage, which Ox naturally countered by pushing his team hard to waste the opposition and pick up bodies again. A more astute captain might have tried for the remaining goal to finish early, but it seemed that Brisket was the only Butcher with a sensible head on her shoulders.

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

But she was. So Snakeskin couldn’t care less for either of those things, instead focusing on her delicate and fragile neck that connected the two. Enough time was left. Let’s do this.

Snakeskin xmliffed directly forward towards the Butcher, hoping her disguise as a rook would fool Brisket into a predictable dodge in turn. She surprised Snakeskin by instead sidestepping and pushing the ball out of her reach, as if she were trying to show off her skills. A pretty head on pretty shoulders at that. A shame that she should be the one. Always the pretty girls.

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Brisket eyed Snakeskin more carefully now. She had lost some of her advantage in the exchange. A line of red across Brisket’s bared stomach said otherwise though. Her left hand was pressed to the wound, thin lines of blood trailing downwards between her fingers. Not fast enough.

Snakeskin doubted that the Butcher had seen the concealed knife on the approach, even less so as it flashed out between them as they fell. Snakeskin still had plenty of surprise for her opponent. The ball temporarily forgotten, they played out the duellist’s jog once again for the onlookers. It never failed to amuse Snakeskin how the players all forgot the game once they realised still had plenty of surprises for her opponent. The ball temporarily forgotten, approach, even less so as it flashed out between them as they fell. Snakeskin had carefully waited for during the match. Snakeskin might have long since tried to run if it were not for that anchor, something Snakeskin was causing the wound to keep bleeding heavily and open further. The pain must have been considerable. Brisket had been lucky that properly, although in a sense, it had only delayed the inevitable.

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

Clever girl. But I am left handed.

The stiletto flashed in the sunlight as Snakeskin stabbed into her adversary, the lower back, just below the ribcage, aimed upwards. She twisted it as she pulled it back out, feeling the grip lessen on her wrist. The first strike hit the same spot, the blade this time a muted red from the surrounding dirt and shredded blades of grass from their struggle.

The crowd had worked out that something was amiss by now, several jeering or shouting to get the attention of the other Butchers. This would have to be finished quickly. The last two cuts were hurried, one driven into her forearm to allow greater movement and the third thrust cut deeply into Brisket’s stomach. She started upright at that one, spraying a fine mist of red over the surrounding dirt and shredded blades of grass from their struggle.

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

‘This looks bad. Real bad.’ Boiler couldn’t be sure whether he was speaking to himself or for the benefit of anyone else. Either way, it did look bad. He didn’t know the human body had so much blood in it, as it lay in crimson puddles before him, staining the snow pinky red. Brisket wasn’t moving. Even the nearby crowd, usually bloodthirsty, were quiet. A sense of dread hung heavy in the meat. Boil was trying to roll Brisket over onto her side, her own injury sapping her strength. Boil had trapped out of his reserve and hardened to help her.

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

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

He looked up to ask Meatbook what to do next, only to realise that she too had passed out. Princess muzzled her maw at Brisket, making an unusual whimpering sound. She had never heard from the savage animal before. Boil felt totally helpless. In an absurdly dark comic moment, he giggled as he lamented that butchers knew all about cutting people up, but nothing about how to make an unusual whimpering sound. He looked up to ask Meatbook what to do next, only to realise that she too had passed out. Princess muzzled her maw at Brisket, making an unusual whimpering sound.

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

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

Thanks to the meddling efforts of the Union, their agents had managed to crop up in not only the Fisherman’s Guild side, but in nearly every team this season, all of them pursuing their own agenda. There seemed now to be too many to count; the exiled Erskirii, the thug in the top hat, the monster that made Laurentis shudder just remembering him. The list went on. Worst had been the Chameleon. That one had made Laurentis feel profoundly uncomfortable just being in the same room as her, even if it were his own office. After much consideration during long, sleepless nights, Laurentis had decided that it had been the aura of promised violence that had been so unsettling about the woman more than anything.

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

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

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

This was a setback.

After spending some time in the darkness inadvisably cursing himself, he instead made a route of the circumference of the walls; crawling on his hands and knees his palms ran over the brickwork and the rough floor. This revealed nothing, but standing alongside the wall with one hand resting upon it, he was at least able to conform five paces by six paces. Satisfied, he groped around for the straw that served as his only bedding and tried to sleep. He had awoken after some indeterminate period of time and realised his new predicament.

He now had precisely nothing to do.

Initially, he had tried to relax and bring his thoughts around for the straw that served as his only bedding and tried to sleep. He had awoken after some indeterminate period of time and realised his new predicament.

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He now had precisely nothing to do.
The torturer, for there could be no other word for a man as mean spirited and vicious as this one, slapped him square in the face again. Longshanks’ vision blurred even more and tears sprang unbidden to run down his cheeks. He had long since stopped feeling the stinging sensation on the skin on his face at least. The pain he felt elsewhere was another matter of course. Through his impaired vision he dared not look at his feet. Once he had tried to do so and the messy blur of red gore with little white flecks showing through had made him retch. He couldn’t feel anything anymore down there beyond a constant dull ache.

Then he screamed, clenching his teeth, biting his tongue once and tasting blood as well as the bile. Spikes of savage pain that left him with a bizarre phantom sensation of the injury being inflicted over and over again. When nails were ripped out, sharp spikes of savage pain left him with a bizarre phantom sensation of the injury being inflicted over and over again. The pain he felt elsewhere was another matter of course. Through his impaired vision he dared not look at his feet. Once he had tried to do so and the messy blur of red gore with little white flecks showing through had made him retch. He couldn’t feel anything anymore down there beyond a constant dull ache.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Longshanks did look then, with growing horror, as Laurentis reached down to his foot and pulled off a chunk of his skin, the meat and gristle beneath peeling away with it. The Fisherman held it up to the light from a torch on the wall next to him. It was the end of one of his toes; Longshanks could still see the nail hanging off one side. He hadn’t felt it. That was a very bad sign.

You stink. And this makes me disgusted. Even more than you used to when you smoked that disgusting pipe. Just completely steeped in filth.’

For an all too brief moment Longshanks smiled, remembering the taste of the tobacco, rich and flavoursome, imported from Sultar.

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

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

Longshanks was stunned. Amazed.

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

Longshanks’ smug grin slipped off of his face completely and his expression turned hard again. Through tears that now accompanied the laughter, Longshanks saw that the Lord Chamberlain’s eyes flashed dangerous intent, but he didn’t care. He had never feared this man, especially now.

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

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

that lost some of its shine, suddenly seemed hard edged, real

of defeat and then the acidic tears when the Old Man was

over. But he couldn't and they all knew that. The pressure to

years in the game. He hid it well and she had loved him so.

tired then, although she didn't say it. Worn down by too many

been; the old veterans reserved, stoic. The Old Man had looked

proud, chests puffed out; the young ones starry eyed as she had

Again, she had watched them all as the Old Man spoke to

previous year's victory from being injured in the semi final.

mercenary contracts. That night she had toasted with them all

work and she wouldn't have to go back to the uncertainty of

victory and the restitution of the Mason's Guild's power. That

the air with the rest, cheered and run out onto the field, to

been inspired as the Old Man had given the speech. Punched

been fresh herself, her début season. Then, she had listened and

allowed herself to accept the Old Man's mantle.

out of the trenches. Defeating the Mortician's Guild that day had

every word she knew, every ounce of saved up spirit and zeal,

stared each of them in the eye the same way she had the men of

her mercenary company when they were about to charge up and

of the trenches. Defeating the Mortician's Guild that day had

been her reward and finally, as she proudly lifted the cup aloft,

she allowed herself to accept the Old Man's mantle.

Now she stood in the dugout with her team and found that

had used up all of her words already. Is this bow he had felt in

165? Exhausted eyes, run dry of emotion and a mind searching

for words that didn't sound an old cliché? Honour looked at the

team, each individual.

Flint, sitting hunched over on a bench, feet evenly spaced. His

eyes rested on his knees, hands clasped, head low, eyes closed.

If she hadn't known him she'd have been worried, but this was

just his typical pre-match routine, his mental preparation. She

envy when she stared at him; how well she thought she knew him.

Harmony looked bored already. As she ever did when faced with

time she had been here before, waiting. No help from him either.

The next time was two years later, having missed the

previous year's victory from being injured in the semi final.

Again, she had watched them all at the Old Man had given the speech. Punched

the air with the rest, cheered and run out onto the field, to

victory and the restitution of the Mason's Guild's power. That

had been simple. Just one of the crew, her eyes wide with the glory of it all. Stunned that this career might actually

work and she wouldn't have to go back to the uncertainty of

contracts. That might she had boasted with them all as the crowd's deafening chanting still rang in her ears.

The crowd, simmering for some time already in the early

afternoon, were loud already. They had long since reached the

level that would have been expected of a normal game, each

stand trying to outdo the other before any players had arrived out

of the dugout or the game had begun. Flags and banners waving

frantically, they shouted their heroes names at the top of their

lungs; defiantly daring the opposition to answer with their own

names, only to be drowned out. The struggle carried on for nearly

an hour, circles of spiralling noise eddying in the air. Musicians

within the stands blared out a cacophony of sound, overlapping

each other; none complimentary in the slightest, but joining the

struggle to be louder. There came the pandering from both sides, as

the first of the guild officials strode out upon the balled-up turf.

Both sides began to stamp their feet in unison, almost a military

tattoo, or the breathing of a mighty, feral animal in anticipation

of seeing its prey at last. As all voices died out, the final officials

took up their position standing at the side of the pitch. Most wore

determined or worried smiles. For both guilds, today would have

profound consequences, but only one would see the culmination of

their efforts result in total domination. For the other, shamefaced

oblivious amongst their peers awaited. Next came the officials

from the Physician's guild; marching out all in their traditional

white, ghostly apparitions almost lost entirely through their

anonymity. The stamping feet continued relentlessly, increasing

in tempo on both sides, catching members of both stands unaware. For a shattering moment the stamping lost its cohesion before

returning stronger, faster, and louder.

And then the first of the players ran out of the dugouts, band

held high in salute, the sun shining off of their armoured forms, a

vision of when titans strode the land. The stands exploded with a

Deafening roar so great that it seemed that those down on the pitch

might well be buffeted to their knees by its power, those noble

warriors stood their ground, basking in the exhalation.

But it broke him soon after. Honour remembered the bitter taste of

defeat and then the acidic tears when the Old Man was

forced out in ignominy days after. That double blow had been

the end of the boygloom with Guild Ball. Everything after

that lost some of its shine, suddenly seemed hard edged, real

rather than fairytale.
Everyone was at their marks for the kick off; Honour and Flint stood waiting by the ball. The former with her back to the Fishermen, the latter with his hands set to his hips making two small diamond shapes either side of him. Angel might have seen an unusual look in his eye, but she didn’t know him well enough to be sure. The crowd still chanted their support, but quieter now, hushed, waiting. Almost time, any moment now. Sweat tickled its path down Angel’s back beneath her heavy tunic. She heard Greyscales breathing next to her and readied her body to sprint. A shrill whistle. Kick off. The stands roared their approval and the Fishermen started to run. Honour still had her back towards them but now hopped aside, turning and moving, leaving the ball alone. Angel heard Greyscales mutter something next to her but couldn’t be sure what it might be. And then was so surprised that she didn’t think any more.

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

‘Never seen anything like that before.’ Greyscales managed to find his voice first, sound suddenly alien to Angel’s ears. And then that same visceral, bludgeoning scream from the Mason stands. A worse start to a game even Greyscales couldn’t think of.

‘One to nothing, Mason’s Guild.’

‘You never get used to this, no matter how many times the tides wash you up here.’ Greyscales was shouting in Angel’s ear, trying to make himself heard at best he could over the noise. She nodded, trying to fight back tears, tears that she couldn’t be sure were from fear, or happiness, or something else entirely.

‘Don’t bother, let them run. Blessings from the Lords o’ the Deep girl.’ Greyscales offered her a wise grin, having seen her watery eyes. Angel snorted back. She had been the last out of the dugout, still tying her boots when Shark led the Fisherman’s Guild onto the pitch. She hurried over to join the others in their half of the pitch, leaving Shark standing at the halfway line behind her with a Magister from the Fisherman’s Guild, awaiting the approach of Honour and the Mason official for the coin toss.

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

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

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

Greyscales floated where he was needed but to start would be with her, until they knew where the Mason’s Guild planned on playing Harmony. She was the wild card, the one to watch.
fight. To Greyscales’ eyes, it was a scene from the decks after a boarding action. Wherever it was, the Mason’s Guild’s pet ape masquerade lay like a beached whale, unmoving. Damned thing had almost done for Greyscales. Kraken was probably out too, down to one kneel and not looking too steady at that. Greyscales tried to help him up, Kent’s big with dwindling his hand as he clamped it, but the other end was all dead weight. The big man’s eyes couldn’t focus properly, his movements slack. The old Fisherman let go and watched Kraken topple over sadly. No time to stop, had to get back in the game; this sort of trade wasn’t the way to win.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You might have had, the poor guy was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Angel offered him an apologetic smile as she turned away to run back up the pitch, before he could see her get upset at his anguish. The look on Tower’s face was pure devastation, the worst thing that could have ever happened during any game, let alone the Final. But as much sympathy as she might have had, the poor guy was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

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

"Tower, I thought you were made of sterner stuff! Suck it up man and get back in the game!" The incombable rookie seemed to snap out of it a little, which was good. The Masons needed their defender on top of his game and Honour feared the silly mistake would cost them more than an easy goal against. Mallet, nice work. I want another out of you now.

Flint received it on his chest and dropped it down at the pitch, hungry, looking to keep the momentum. The Masons remained their safety, Siren wouldn't be able to get through on a burst of speed and tried to shake him.

"Harmony! About time you got your arse in gear and put in an appearance!" Honour spared her sister none of her harsh words. Harmony shot her a foul look from behind on the scoreline.

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

Harmony kept the ball with her, dribbling it easily on her right foot and not wanting to give it up to Flint unless she had to. Angel approached, but seemed unsure of the best way to cover two players on her own. She kept back, wide steps retreating slowly but staying between them both. The Fisherman's eyes betrayed that she was looking out for Siren, searching for some sort of support. Holding up a hand to signal the play to Flint, Harmony dodged left, kicking the ball right towards her vice-captain and removing any option that Angel had. The young rookie chased the ball as expected but Flint, the much more experienced player, shook her off easily and kicked the ball loose. He passed back to Harmony who was petting forwards, the sound of the crowd louder in her ears as they stamped their feet and cheered the sudden change in pace.

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

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

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

Her face flushed and bead down in shame, Harmony kept going, trying to put pressure on Jac as an official booted the ball over to him. Luck was on his side this time as the space the faceless assistant was a few feet short of Jac; the burly seaman had to lumber forward to close the gap as Harmony did likewise. He got there first and tried to clear it wildly away from goal, but Harmony leapt forwards and blocked the ball, stealing it. The crowd screamed her name and the young Mason basked in the glory as she put home an easy goal after all, Jac unable to prevent her. She offered the nearest stand a bow and a curtsey, hair dropping down over her face.

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

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

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

A new noise. A sharp spike of pain. Suddenly, as if a curse had been cast over him, he sat a lot of pain. Numb ache and sharp needles. His hand reached up to touch his forehead where it felt like a razor blade had been drawn across him, breaking the skin. His fingers returned back, slick red, stark against the clinical white background. Maybe one bad.

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

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

"Oh my. Really, you really are quite a remarkable specimen." The voice betrayed no meaning. He started struggling up.

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

"No, you really must... that is, this is highly improper." The woman was backing away, anxious, as if to placate him. "You must wait for me to finish your treatment." "Treatment? Brick didn't care to know. He had a pressing memory somewhere just beyond reach, an urgency that he couldn't quite place."

"Where am I?" He tried a third time, voice raised. He did not intend to ask again.

"Who is this in my leg?"

"Listen to me." Her voice was nervous. High pitched, like nails on a chalkboard scraping across the table to shaky feet and stumbled forwards.

"You were injured during the game, knocked out, amongst a multitude of players on the pitch, just feet away from him. They were cheering, they were shouting, they were laughing, they were celebrating. The world was spinning."

"Get up. Get up. Get up."

"Stitch me up, Sawbones. I have to get back to the game!"

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

"Now, win!"

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

"Get up. Get up. Get up."

He rolled over in the dirt, onto his front and pressed down with his hands. Someone else's hands?

No, his, he could start to feel them again. Pushed off balance and to the ground. Brick tried to see anything past the melee ahead. "Win!"

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

"Brick smashed a beasty fist into Jac's jaw, the brutish Fisherman's head wrenched to the side. Keeping his feet, Jac turned the recoil into a lunging tackle to Brick's waist, arms hugging around and taking both men off balance and to the ground. Brick tried to throw the Fisherman off, but Jac let go of an arm to block the unstretched hand. With the other hand be swung back and down, a fist aimed at Brick's face. Brick twisted his neck to one side and the punch impacted into the dirt beside him. His vision was red from the blood seeping out of the cut on his head, but he could ill afford the free hand to wipe his eyes."

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

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

"I'll fight however I need to bring down a bastard like you.'
Brick couldn’t answer other than grunting, desperately trying to find the strength in his arms again. The hips moved again ready for another knee, but Brick twisted his spin and managed to throw Jac onto his side where the Mason had been. Straddling the Fisherman, Brick let go with his right hand and savagely tried a punch of his own at Jac. It connected, although not before he could properly close his fist. The brunt of the impact crunched into his middle knuckles, breaking something with a snapping sound and a tearing pain, but the unexpected blow to his cheekbone had dazed the Fisherman. Jac’s left hand slackened its grip slightly and Brick eagerly threw the freed arm back and then downwards. This time the contact was cleaner; hitting the Fisherman in the temple with a closed fist. Jac’s eyes went glassy, leaving Brick to cradle a broken hand.

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

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

Time stood still.

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

Clean. Like he had a thousand times before.

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

Majestically it rose into the air, blades of grass spraying up around it, over his head. The ball soared forwards, reflecting the light from the overhead sun, all eyes upon it. In both stands, not one soul stood, hearts in their throats. If the Gods did indeed look upon this, then a priest might have likened the path to a spirit, flying free. Out of the hands of mortals, left to the whims of fate.
Ox and Boar hurried through the empty streets, followed closely by a pair of hard-looking Butcher's Guild thugs. Overhead the sparsely situated street lights, lit at dusk by the lamplighters, still burned dim, giving each of the figures long shadow as they passed under them. The link boys had all long since retired to their beds, their only other companion was a harsh early winter wind, lashing at their skin hidden under heavy cloaks. The skies had looked overcast all day, blocking out the stars and most of the moonlight now, the Gods having seen fit to bestow a chilling herald to an oncoming storm.

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

Ox had never been to Rue Lejourrne in all of his travels but he supposed that all Valention cities looked much like each other, all broken down buildings and rotting slums. It was unlikely that he was missing anything and they could afford to delay meeting with their contact. As always now, there was the urgency, vengeance consuming all of his thoughts. Vincent de Laureniti and the Fishermen's Guild both would pay this dark night. Blood money for what they had done to Brisket.

Staring daggers at Ox's back, Snakeskin sweated inside the thick shawl that the Butchers wore this eve and served as her disguise. Unlike them, she was used to the hard nights, having spent many amongst the Erskirii, under bridges or huddled in alleys. The weather didn't bother her in the slightest. To the hard nights, having spent many amongst the Erskirii, under bridges or huddled in alleys. The weather didn't bother her in the slightest. The skies had looked overcast all day, blocking out the stars and most of the moonlight now, the Gods having seen fit to bestow a chilling herald to an oncoming storm.

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Snakeskin was mildly annoyed by the Master Butcher's vendetta. It seemed so callous, so pointless. Killing a worm like Laurentis would achieve nothing and certainly not provide any restitution for the injury done to Brisket. Blood money for what they had done to Brisket. Apparently not.

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

She stalked on through the night amongst the Butchers. The alley seemed to curve to the left, then a definite sharp right at what might have been a crossroads of sorts. They continued. Another right, the ground feeling like it had taken a downwards slant, then straight. All the time it was deadly quiet, no noise other than that of their footsteps in the gravel. Although they were still in the open, no light came from overhead, leaving them in total blackness other than their guide's lantern. It was as if the world was swallowing them whole as they descended into its insides, only to be spat back out in a totally new place. The sense was so complete it was all Ox could do to place a hand on one of the walls around him, expecting to feel a pulse throbbing in the brickwork.

Suddenly, the man stepped dead in his tracks. Ox was following far enough behind not to collide with him, but Boar blundered into the back of the Master Butcher, causing Ox to overbalance and reach out an arm to the adjacent wall to keep his feet. There was a loud metallic clatter, which seemed to last for an eternity in the soundless dark, an arm to the adjacent wall to keep his feet. The lantern swung their way, its sudden brilliance making Ox blink and shield his eyes. ‘Are you oafs done waking everyone up?’ came the hissed rebuke.

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

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

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

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

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Ox heard a grunt from Boar behind him and realised himself to restrain the Beast from an explosive outburst, but to his surprise and relief, no other retort came. After listening for a moment to see whether they had alerted anyone, the contact seemed satisfied and motored forward to stand still and wait. He took a couple of steps forward, vaguely casting the lantern around him at the walls, obviously looking for markers of a sort. Catching a faint murmur of the man muttering under his breath, Ox was a hard early winter wind, lashing at their skin hidden under heavy cloaks. The skies had looked overcast all day, blocking out the stars and most of the moonlight now, the Gods having seen fit to bestow a chilling herald to an oncoming storm.

The Butcher could hear him scrabbling around in the dirt for a moment, his form hunched over by where the lantern had been placed on row of stone cobbles that circled a round drain. Next, the flicking sound of a concealed blade, a gentle rattle of a thief's tool set next, the flicking sound of a concealed blade, a gentle rattle of a thief's tool set
Snakekin followed last, looking left and right to see whether the blundering idiots had alerted anyone with their noise. That had been excusable; lucky not to draw attention to them. She was reminded why she was always instructed to Langshanks that she carry out this sort of work alone.

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

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

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

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

The walkway was not intended for a man of Ox's size, let alone Boar's. The Master Butcher could bear the much larger man sweating behind him. They passed by several darkened junctions that all looked identical, the guide having some private knowledge as to which direction to take. Definitely a gutter rat, Ox decided. Whoever he was, it was obvious that they would be totally lost without him, even with the lantern to illuminate their way. There was no other source of light there.

By the Master Butcher's reckoning, they had been travelling for entirely too long through the shit and slime of the sewers before the path angled back upwards and they stopped once again. At this rate, he cynically wondered whether it would be daybreak when they emerged. The stench from the stinking cesspit was so overpowering that the group had not noticed their guide's presence for hours.

'Too much further now at all, just around the corner.' He scuttled off at pace, the four Butchers following.

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

'Up there, about sixty steps, it will open into the courtyard next to the gardens. There is a heavy grille, which you should be able to push aside. There will not be any guards inside the walls this time around.'

The group descended on the corridor, the air had steadily grown lighter and the pestilential smell of rot and waste lessening. From above him. It was still dark, but he could at least make out the outlines of the walls, growing larger.

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

At last there seemed to be a small change in the light coming from above him. It was still dark, but he could at least make out the vague outlines of the rungs now. He increased his pace and after a few more steps could see a small round patch, lighter than the surrounding walls, growing larger.
Finally, his hand punched into metal above him, grazing his knuckles. He stopped and hissed to the others beneath him to do likewise. Bracing his feet on the rungs, his back resting on the cold wall behind him, he raised up his hands and forced his calloused fingers into the holes in the grille. Then, teeth clenched together, he heaved upwards, his arms tightening underneath with the strain, closing his eyes in concentration. He forced more strength into the lift as he could, given his precarious footing.

At last something broke or dislodged and his hands, still holding the grille, shot upwards in to open air. Breathing deeply into eager lungs, he carefully placed the grille down on the stone floor next to the opening, before hauling his body up into the courtyard. There was more light now than the Butcher had seen in the half light and some sort of iron vambraces, shirt sleeves too much by way of armour, just breastplates that shone dully against the wall, and chanced a quick look around the corner into the room where it couldn't be swung properly. The most use that it might see would be as a spear, still not ideal. Ox edged ever closer, flat against the wall, and chanced a quick look around the corner into the room beyond.

Two guards were inside, one sitting in a small alcove set from a doorway further inside the audience chamber. Even in the darkness, the outlines suggested to Ox that they were as opulently decorated as he had expected. A reception room. Grand doors in the back wall were embossed with gold and silver trout that leapt across their surface; these undoubtedly led to the Lord Chamberlain's living quarters. Ox knew that he would have to barrel past the guards and leave them to his boys, while he gained entry to Laurentis' rooms and murdered the bastard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nails raking like claws at the Master Butcher’s gloves, Laurentis was trying to speak, lips blue, eyes bulging. Ox didn’t care. This was how the Butchers set an example, looked out for their own.
Snakeskin had slipped away from the rest during the fighting. She had no doubt that Laurentis was a dead man; Ox unwittingly serving the Union's justice for them. Time now to find Longshanks and beat a hasty retreat before the guards arrived.

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

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

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

Snakeskin was forced now to remove one of the torches from the wall, as the lighting abruptly stopped. Surrounding her were several barred wooden doors to newer cells, each with tiny iron bar slots in them. Carefully, so as to try and not to make any noise, Snakeskin began checking each one in turn. Each metallic squeal as she opened them was deafening to her ears in the otherwise quiet dungeon, but no guards came.

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

The last door stood apart from the rest; wooden with no lock, just a metal ring for a handle. With a growing sense of unease, Snakeskin opened it. Beyond lay a torture chamber, with racks of bloodstained devices that looked much more recently used than those in the alcove earlier. At the far end, naked and with his chin resting on his chest, Longshanks was shackled to the wall. Snakeskin approached him quickly through the filthy room, carefully avoiding the large rack in the centre and the other large instruments, sure feet enabling her to step over the sticky blood smears on the stone tiles.

Longshanks looked to be in a terrible condition, hands and feet smashed to a pulpy dirty red. His chest had crusty red and brown gouges running vertically along it, the surrounding skin inflamed a raw pink. He stank of infection, sweat and bile, his chest unmoving.

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

Time to leave. The guards would already have alerted the whole house in the hunt for the Butchers by now, and she would have little darkness left with which to make her escape.
They ran, ruddy faced and out of breath, with no time to look around and see whether they were being followed. Stinking guards, who knew the Fisherman's Guild had so many? They couldn't get back to the sewers now, that much was certain. Too many light in that direction, bobbing around in the darkness, moving towards the Lord Chamberlain's residence. Ox were a cruel grin. Let them all see him, spit like a pig. The more that couldn't get back to the sewers now, that much was certain. Too many guards, who knew the Fisherman's Guild had so many? They couldn't breath without making too much noise. He counted their number. was still and they were alone, desperately trying to regain their breath without making too much noise. He counted their number. 'What happened to Skinner?' His eyes went to the remaining benchman first. ‘Haven't seen her since, uh, we gutted those guards.’ ‘Boar?’ Even as he asked, Ox could see the big man shrug. 'I saw her, then I didn't care anymore. I had meat to kill. It was obvious that was as much as could be expected from Boar.

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

Ox gave a sharp tug on a thick vine, making the plant rattle and spray droplets of water, the sound swallowed up by the storm. It seemed sturdy enough to support his weight, with a pinch of luck. But then, Ox didn't believe in luck. It was too late to start now either, best just to get it over with. He would either make the climb or fail in the attempt. One hand reaching up to snag a handful of creeper, he began pulling himself up, tired muscles bunching or fail in the attempt. One hand reaching up to snag a handful of creeper, he began pulling himself up, tired muscles bunching to grasp the plant further along.

A dull wooden thud, where his steel toecap hit the wall. Ox gave up his climb and hurriedly started brushing the leaves away, trying to clear away the growth to see what was on the other side. He was making a lot more noise now, but if this was an old door, then it was their escape. Boar helped, giant hands clumsily ripping vines and branches to the ground.

The door was decayed, probably worn by the elements in the light, but it still felt solid. Its hinges were rusted with a thick layer of what had to be rust, peeling off in flakes. The bracing bar had either rotted right through or had just been lost at some time over the years, but the heavy lock still seemed formidable enough.

'Boss, they're coming this way!' The benchman's hiss sounded urgent. Ox could bear them too, the sound of angry voices; insistence now, but getting closer. Two lights, flickering, weaving in the rain.

'Get out of my way. I'm not dying here to these pigs!' Boar's voice brooked no alternatives.

Ox weighed up his choices in an instant. They were out of time and out of options. They could climb in the dark, backs to the guards, hoping not to be seen; or smash their way through this door and hope that they could get through before the whole guild came down on top of them. Neither choice came with a guarantee.

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

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

Ox readied his own cleaver and dropping into a fighting stance. No sense in trying to duck the bolts if they were getting lucky like that. In the darkness against the backdrop of the wall, he was as hidden as he ever could be. Behind him, the door continued to protest under the assaults, Boar unrelenting and roaring incomprehensibly now as he struck it. 'My own piss poor pride, that's done.' Ox hissed the answer to his own question, as he wondered how he bad found himself here, right now, facing down maybe a dozen men on his own. Never one accustomed to sentimentality, the admission surprised him. He hadn't thought he bad anything close to that left in him, worn down by years of bloody work for nameless faces.

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

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

The moment passed.

'Comrades.' He spat the word more than he spoke it, as he ducked through the wreckage of the door after Boar.
Snakeskin ran back up through the dungeons, past the cells, not caring about the noise she would make in the empty area. Opening the door carefully at the top, she looked around and not seeing any movement in the alley, quickly ducked out, head down.

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

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

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

Pleased with herself, distracted by watching the guards, and with the storm muffling the sound around her, she didn't notice the man sneaking up on her, sword in hand. Suddenly, Snakeskin was face to face with him. Instinctively, she struck out with her knife, managing to strike her assailant across his neck. With stumbling steps and hands groping in the darkness, she began to follow it around the corner.

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

*Where was the guide? He should be waiting by the ladder for the waterway would poison her. Anything at this point seemed appetising.*

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

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

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

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

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

But she had made it.

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

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

Snakeskin rolled over onto her back and carefully, very carefully, so as to not aggravate her injuries further, rose to lean against the wall.

*With stumbling steps and hands groping in the darkness, she began to follow it around the corner.*

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

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

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

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

*New employer? Snakeskin couldn't think very clearly anymore. Longhanks is dud, de-dead,* she offered helpfully. *Saw him.*

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

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

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

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

*She didn't hear or feel the wet thaw as it hit her head, caving in her skull.*
The rain had abated at last, but not before they were soaked through, their clothes doing nothing now to fight back the cold air. There was no more running in any case. By all rights, they should have, likely they were still pursued. But some unspoken agreement had passed between the two men, they were both too tired to run now. Instead they strode through the alleys in silence, daring fate to catch them. The entrance to the undercity was now closed in any case, secreted in the shadows of the huge cathedral.

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

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

Ox couldn't even have said what faith the cathedral belonged to, having never paid any attention whatsoever to any of the myriad religions worshipped across the length and breadth of the Empire of the Free Cities. He supposed that this was Solthecian given its size and location. Whatever it was, the answer held very little interest for him. The expansive grounds were morbid behind the rails. Tall mausoleum spires surrounded by sepulchres pointed up to the heavens as testimony to the weakness of man and his servitude to the Gods. Weathered statues depicted saints smiting common man and worshipping them would in no way save a man from his fate. Ever since then, Ox hadn't given two shits for holy men and their lies. If anything, living a life so frequently close to death had convinced him that if there were any Gods, they had little mercy.

The pretence entirely spent, hidden figures around them were forced to push organs from a split belly back into their bodies. Most often when a man expired, he bled everywhere, that himself or puckered and screamed futile curses at his enemy. Never did he meet death with the serene grace that the priests told their followers about.

As they rounded the final corner of the grounds they saw the waiting man, standing unmoving between them and their destination. Attired in heavy chainmail robes and ornate, lacquered armour, his hands were pressed together as if in supplication. He was unmasked and watched the Butcher's approach through icy blue eyes. He said nothing as they drew closer, just starting until they were ten paces away.

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

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

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

And you are the Master Butcher. A worthless and spiteful butcher, man, lord and master of nothing. Ox smirked, tilting his head slightly slowly and spitting on a religious symbol carved into one of the nearby tombstones. He smiled crookedly. Get to this bullshit done and then carve their way through anyone that tried to deny them exit.

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

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

'I see your impudence is as I feared after all. I had to be prepared otherwise.'

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

For once, Ox was inclined to agree with him.

'Talk about a worthwhile sacrifice. Of course, I prioritize what I do for the benefit of my hearth and home. That's the way it should be.'

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

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

'Diablerie?' This seemed to amuse the Paladin, his lip curled and master of nothing? That may be. I have never claimed to have been either. But all I see here is the lord and master of a bunch of cowards hiding in the shadows and a miserable forest of stone.'

'That does not concern you. You are the one that they call Boar? You may pass if you wish. My agenda is with the Master Butcher alone for the present.'

'Such a pity.' The Paladin's voice betrayed no compassion at all. 'We are prelates of the Lord Solthecius. Our word is sacrosanct.' He gestured with a gauntleted hand and three of the hooded men blocking their path nearest to Boar stepped aside. Boar looked at the strangers, sizing them up. Only the Paladin met his gaze without flinching. He chuckled, a dangerous prelatory rumble promising nothing but carnage. He turned to Ox and for a long moment the two men exchanged a frank, honest silence, the Beast's eyes that did not know mercy, compassion or friendship, only hunted and rage. He saw Boar for what he was at last, what he had always known what the Beast was, yet somehow forgotten.

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

'Kill him and not much else.'

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

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

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

Ox knew all too well what happened to man when he died. He had seen it firsthand altogether too many times not to. There was no escape for the men that he had left with their lifeblood spilled out over cobblestones, into the dirt, their left screaming as they tried to push organs from a split belly back into their bodies. Most often when a man expired, he bled everywhere, that himself or puckered and screamed futile curses at his enemy. Never did he meet death with the serene grace that the priests told their followers about.

'Keep the realisation on your illumination. I do not intend to die today.'

'Such a pity.' The Paladin's voice betrayed no compassion at all. But examples must be made. And you are the first.'

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

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

'Diablerie?' This seemed to amuse the Paladin, his lip curled upwards at the edge of his mouth. 'We are prelates of the Lord Solthecius. Our word is sacrosanct.' He gestured with a gauntleted hand and three of the hooded men blocking their path nearest to Boar stepped aside. Boar looked at the strangers, sizing them up. Only the Paladin met his gaze without flinching. He chuckled, a dangerous prelatory rumble promising nothing but carnage. He turned to Ox and for a long moment the two men exchanged a frank, honest silence, the Beast's eyes that did not know mercy, compassion or friendship, only hunted and rage. He saw Boar for what he was at last, what he had always known what the Beast was, yet somehow forgotten.

Vicious, crazed eyes, dark, bottomless, like death. Eyes that did not know mercy, compassion or friendship, only hunted and rage. He saw Boar for what he was at last, what he had always known what the Beast was, yet somehow forgotten.
But Ox was a pragmatist. He knew that this couldn’t play out in his favour and how it would end.

Boar shrugged his shoulders.

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

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

That he would have to face this alone, unaided.

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

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

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

Probably not.

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