



GOODBYE



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A strange near-silence had settled over the Butcher end of the stands, any excitement from the start of the game quickly turned sour. A simmering fury sat thick in the air, most supporters wearing frowns or even outright snarling their frustration. Hostility reigned as the crowd vented its frustration with the game, the opposition, the heat from the afternoon sun, and even their own team. They were a beast with several heads, snapping at anything they could see, and each other to boot.

Below Brisket's place in the stands, a flustered official with a gammon red face collected the ball and booted it back into play. The man quickly jogged back to the sideline, head down, as the angry spectators began to pelt him with detritus.

Brisket snorted. She was already tired of this game, and now wondering what whim had possessed her to attend. She certainly wasn't scouting; the Order were long knocked out of the Sovereign States. She might have called it sentimentality for her past life, but that was a weakness she was uncomfortable with and would rather not face. She'd spent months trying to forget her ties to the Butchers. Wallowing in her memories now would be accepting defeat.

Besides, this was a terrible game.

Once upon a time, if you'd asked her what a team led by Boar might play like, Brisket would have laughed at the concept and then made a joke of it. Even at her most scathing, she'd have offered the Butchers a better account than a mindless charge, absent of any hint of a game plan. Yet somehow, that was exactly the scene below her. And for their troubles, the Butchers had conceded a goal, and the Beast was being stretchered off.

They didn't even have anyone in the backfield, to stop another shot.

Tenderiser was out of position and marked by two Blacksmiths but, strangely, it wasn't his presence that the team missed. Ox and Brisket had both played Boiler in the backfield as a counter-attacking player, the lad waiting for the opposition to expose themselves before gutting them. Unlike the relatively new goalkeeper role, Boiler had been a permanent fixture ever since he signed up, the Master Butcher seeing the boy's immense versatility and potential.

The team missed his presence.

And, so did Brisket.

Brisket would be the first to admit she had a soft spot for Boiler. They'd spent long hours on the road

travelling together in past years, the lad honest and carefree, lacking the wary caution older players had learned during their careers. She even missed the doe eyes he wore for her when he thought she wasn't looking. She'd never harboured even the slightest romantic feeling for him, mind, but it had been rather sweet.

Brisket snapped out of it. Enough time wasted. It wasn't particularly safe for her to be standing in a crowd of Butcher supporters either, even with her hood pulled up and a shawl covering the lower half of her face. It was time to go.

She turned and began to elbow her way through the crowd, shooting scornful glances at the people screaming and waving their fists. More than once, she ducked a clumsy forearm or winced at a particularly abusive burst of language.

She missed the days when the stands sang, and that was all they did.

The turnstiles below the stands were far quieter without the people crammed into the entranceways, the cries and stamping feet from above the only sound to break the silence. The game wasn't yet over, although she doubted the Butcher's Guild had long left. Then the space would be flooded by a furious

mob, just looking for an excuse to fight.

Better to not be around to see that happen.

Brisket had seldom been in sections of the stadium like this, and for a moment found herself distracted, considering how the match day experience of the supporters compared with her own. She'd always been a player, either out on the pitch or watching from the dugout. She knew several players scouted personally, but that had never been for her while she was a Butcher.

Brisket quietly continued her path over the stone underfoot, exiting the thoroughfare into a courtyard where the main gates were located.

There, on the horizon were cathedral spires once more.

They were inescapable.

Torn between the grim reminder of her present life and the bittersweet memory of the past, Brisket turned on her heel and stalked back around the courtyard, this time looking for an entrance to the team area. Following a path that led around the perimeter of the wall and under an archway into a second reception, she quickly found it. Two guards dressed in heavy

hauberks waited in front of a large wooden door, crossing their spears as she approached.

'Piss off, eh? Only Guild types allowed in here.'

'Trust me, mate, you don't want anything to do with them anyways. Snooty bastards.' His companion wore a kindlier expression.

Both wore the Solthecian sun painted over the cloth parts of their uniform. Brisket didn't much care for flaunting her identity even in her younger years, let alone now, but she'd also accepted her new status with the Order did at least have some perks. She reached up and pulled her shawl away from her face, shaking the hood free.

Ashen-faced, the first guard almost dropped his spear. 'Lady Brisket!'

The other guard held her composure, her lips pursed as she offered a curt nod. Only her eyes betrayed a hint of curiosity. 'Forgive me, milady, but I'm under orders to ask what business you have here before I let you through.'

Brisket kept her tone even. 'Understandable. Guild business. Scouting for next season. The Free Cities Draft are guests of the Butcher's Guild.' She had no

clue if they were, of course, but Brisket doubted the guards would have the slightest idea either. It might even be true.

The female guard didn't seem convinced, but Brisket could tell she didn't particularly care either.

The other guard was another matter. 'Illin, hurry up and let Lady Brisket through!' He shot his companion a sideways glare, and jabbed a heavy thumb towards the door.

The female guard offered him a longsuffering stare, before rolling her eyes and stepping to one side with a sigh. Brisket allowed a sympathetic smile for the woman's benefit, then quickly ducked through the door.

The moment it closed, her hood was drawn up once more.

She found herself in a huge hall fit for an army, tall arches soaring towards a vaulted ceiling either side, the opposite end at least half a pitch length away. A balcony interrupted the wall on one side, jutting out from the stone and proudly bedecked in red and blue curtains and banners, each showing the black eagle. At the ground level a towering statue of a knight broke an otherwise empty space, looking for every inch like it

would suddenly come galloping towards her.

All was still quiet with no officials to be seen, presumably all watching the game. This was the main entranceway for the teams, Brisket recalled, having been here once before some years ago with her former allies.

The entrance to the passages leading to the dugouts were on the opposite side, and it was in that direction she found her feet taking her.



The crowd was louder in the dressing rooms, softly emanating down the corridors that led to the dugouts. Brisket was surprised she hadn't been stopped before she got this far, in truth. Entering the hall had been one thing; here, quite another. Yet, somehow, the only figures she'd seen had been another pair of guards standing a lonely vigil over the entrance to what she guessed was the royal terrace, where most of the attending dignitaries would be watching the game.

Royalty held no interest for her. The handful she'd met had been contemptible fools, somehow unaware that they were pawns in the hands of the Guilds, even more so than she was. Nonetheless, their affluence could be felt. Old Unbloodied was magnificently dressed, even these quarters carpeted like the main hall, every surface dusted and clean, but for the scent of the players themselves still in the air.

Looking around the space brought back a flood of memories. Sweat smelled the same wherever it was, and the grey stone walls were anonymous enough, but the arrows and crosses on the chalkboard were a bittersweet memory from her past. Brisket smiled to see familiar plays and names. Towels and robes in Butcher red lay haphazardly on the low benches or protruded from metal lockers. A skinning knife protruded from one bench, blade sunk into the wood. Her grin grew wider.

Her family had always been a rowdy crew, ill-suited for a lavish venue like this.

A loud cheer drifted down from the direction of the pitch. It didn't disturb Brisket from her reverie. She doubted it was the end of the game yet; the sound wasn't nearly loud or sustained enough, even muted through the stone.

Much louder shouting followed, accompanied by several hurried footsteps.

She looked around frantically, pulse racing. The exit was too far away to reach, and the space open. Her eyes urgently sought refuge, eventually settling on a tiled alcove set in the closest wall. Tucked into the shadows, and with her plain robes offering little to attract attention, it would have to do.

Moments later her eyes grew wide as Fillet stormed into sight, a furious scowl written plainly across her face. Three magisters followed her, each babbling terrified apologies. Brisket's trained eye noted the Flashing Blade was a touch heavy footed, favouring her left leg.

'I don't know what you expected. The Beast has no business leading pigs to the slaughter, let alone our team.' Fillet snapped at the closest figure, her words

unforgiving. She pointed viciously, fingertip jabbing the man firmly in the chest. 'And if Boar's piss-poor excuse for leadership gets my little Erskirii injured...' She shot them a venomous look. 'I'll slit the bastard's throat myself.'

The man was visibly shaking, his words tumbling out in a strangled sob. 'Lady Fillet, please accept our apologies. We did not have Meat—Lady Meathook on the roster for this match.'

His stammering earned him a spiteful retort.

'Of course you didn't. I sent her out because Boiler no-showed, and we were about to start with a player down—not that the Beast even bloody realised.' Fillet turned her attention to the chalkboard. 'I have no idea why he suddenly dropped Boiler. He's there for all to see in the damned gameplan!'

Brisket followed the other woman's gaze. She wasn't lying. Boiler's typical position was plain as day, an asterisk circled once, a large arrow protruding upwards from it.

The Flashing Blade's blood was still up. 'Can't the bastard even count higher than the number of fingers on his hand to know he's missing a player?' She quickly shot down the reply. 'No, don't answer that.'

Another cheer erupted nearby.

‘Well, I hope you’re damned well happy. Your shitty decision cost us this year’s title.’

Fillet turned on her heel and stormed out the way Brisket had entered, her entourage tripping over their robes to catch her, leaving Brisket alone once more.

She hadn’t realised that she was holding her breath, releasing it at last, shoulders sagging as the tension left her body. Silence reigned, but for the sound of dripping water behind her. Noticing the tiles around her for the first time, Brisket realised she must have ducked into the showers.

Her gaze settled on the chalkboard as she processed the conversation she’d just witnessed. Intimately familiar with Guild machinations from her years watching the Master Butcher, Brisket had already suspected Boar’s appointment was due to the meddling influence of the men and women in the high chairs. Fillet’s words had not only confirmed that, but Brisket’s eyes had seen why—the Flashing Blade was carrying an injury.

It didn’t look like Boar would be wearing the mantle long after this, regardless.

Brisket’s eyes settled on the asterisk. And where was

Boiler? She thought back to the start of the match, curiously watching the arguing officials. She wasn't sure the Beast had dismissed the lad, as much as Boiler hadn't shown up. Boar might be guilty of many sins, but he was no fool to get into a fight outnumbered.

The drip behind her was distracting now she'd noticed it. An inexplicable feeling of dread settled as she followed the hypnotic sound around the corner, tiny pools of water splashing underfoot. The only light source was the domed glass ceiling above, heavy staining reducing visibility as much as the layer of steam that had settled in the air.

As she'd feared, there, lurking within the gloom was her answer.

Boiler.

His corpse sat propped up against a pillar, directly under one of the showerheads. A wicked shiv protruded from his belly and left a puddle of blood slowly circling the drain, but the bloodstain on the pillar gave away the true cause of his death. His head had hit the stone hard enough to leave the back of his skull a bloody pulp.

Where the water dripped on him it gave the impression the boy was crying, drops that could have

been tears rolling down his cheek. Brisket found her eyes watering. Unable to hold back the tide, she broke, mirroring Boiler's tears with her own.

For long moments she sobbed, the whole world reduced to the murky gloom.

She couldn't stay.

But her feet wouldn't let her move. Not yet. Not until... until what?

Boiler had been the last one to turn his back on her after the trial. She remembered the moment all too well.

*This is for the good of the Guild. This is for the future.*

Some fucking future.

The Master Butcher had returned, but the Guild were too afraid to truly let him back in. Fillet was hobbled, her mantle passed on. The Beast hell-bent on destroying their legacy one game after another.

And where was Brisket?

A traitor, running from corpse to corpse, caught in a nightmare. She thought of the trail of death that had

led her to this moment. She hadn't wielded a single blade, but it didn't matter. They all weighed on her conscience the same.

*Are you willing to draw blood?*

The words of the priest that set her on this path.

Brisket gnashed her teeth together in self-condemnation. The only time she'd bared steel was during the trial, and even then she'd been too much of a coward to finish the job.

Venin.

Mist.

Obulus.

Brisket had ignored every warning, every sign.

She recalled her final words to the boy.

*You too, Boiler. Please forgive me.*

Overcome in the moment, she let loose an anguished cry. A shriek, all of the pent-up frustration, fear, and tension unleashed in a deluge. When she was done, she felt lightheaded. Giddy.

Brisket was done running. She wouldn't ignore the omens anymore.

A scrap of paper had been left in Boiler's hand as a warning, doubtless threatening further retaliation, but Brisket didn't need to look at the words on soaked parchment to know the identity of the murderers. She crouched down by Boiler, softly stroking the matted hair from his forehead so she could lean in to tenderly kiss his now-cold skin.

After a moment's thought, she gently closed his eyes.

She was going to meet Solthecius.

Not the boy.

The crowd outside erupted. The game had finally reached its bloody climax. To Brisket, it was a portent of events yet to pass.