



THE FINAL



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The final. It had finally arrived. The last game of the season, and for some dark reason Honour couldn't quite fathom, the feeling that this would be the last game of her career had settled upon her.

It wasn't rational. She'd been over her preparations as thoroughly as ever; more so, even. This was the most prepared she'd ever been for any game, ever. Yet, no matter how she tried to brush it aside, a tiny, whispering voice had plagued her for days.

The First Lady took in her surroundings, hoping to drown it out. The excited faces in the crowd, each waving a scarf or banner in a fluid ribbon, like a colourful waterfall cascading down the stands towards the pitch. Voices raised in song and feet stamping a tattoo, easily overpowering the faint strain of music leading them. The wind rustling through her hair, softly caressing her skin, cooling the brand from the warm sun.

For the second year running, the Farmer's Guild had made it to the final. Last year, she had been the coach, on the sideline. This year, she'd joined the defending champions on the pitch, where she truly belonged. Perhaps that was it, Honour considered. She might be match fit, but she knew she wasn't the same as before. Running was that little bit harder, tiring her quicker. Long hours spent drilling shots on the proving grounds still hadn't quite returned her right foot.

She'd always maintained the importance of the younger generations as the future of the game. Now that she saw a hint of age and fatigue in herself, was

the voice merely the threat of obsolescence, a portent that would grow ever louder? And what would she even do without the game?

Not being able to answer that question had killed veterans. The Old Man, for one.

But now wasn't the time for this.

The air in the stadium was like bottled lightning; magic just waiting to be unleashed back into the world, one last time, to decide the most important game of all.

Honour smiled to herself. If the voice spoke true, and this was to be her final performance, it would be a good one to bow out on.

She shook her head clear just in time for Grange to nod at her, before he returned his eyes to the pitch and dribbled the ball forward for the kick-off. On the run up he held up his left arm aloft to salute the royal box.

Although awning hid the watching figures from scrutiny, Honour knew it was occupied by the Bacchus himself, the ordained head of the Solthecian order presenting this year's trophy to the victors. That in itself lent this match an even greater air of pomp and momentous occasion—it was the second time only the Bacchus had ever done so, the first the inaugural event the other.

The First Lady thought she saw one of the shadowed figures rise out of their chair and offer a hand in return, before Grange's boot struck the ball and she snapped her head back to the opposition line.

Fresh from their victory against the Butcher's Guild,

the Blacksmiths had quickly gone from the object of curiosity to serious contenders in the Big Leagues. Pundits everywhere were talking about their measured performances and versatility on the field. No game was easy, least of all a final, but this promised to be even more of a challenge.

No sooner had the ball passed the halfway line than the Farmers sprinted into position alongside their captain. Bushel ran her out wide like a winger, chasing the kick, while Windle loped along in support. Honour kept up the middle, sitting back from Grange, her eyes on the opposition to see what they intended on playing.

After his exertions in the semi-finals, Anvil appeared to be sitting this one out, his absence changing the line to a more offensive one. Ferrite and Iron moved to retrieve the ball, while Bolt sprinted to stay alongside Lady Judgement as she galloped down the opposite wing.

The other pairing gave Honour pause for thought. First, a shaven-headed young woman with a determined stare, that took her an age to recognise as Cinder.

It wasn't just the haircut; the apprentice had replaced her customary crossbow with a long polearm, the tip glowing brightly as though fresh from the forge.

Honour expected to see Furnace accompanying this strange vision but instead, the final figure was a woman she didn't recognise at all. Tall and exotically dressed under her plate, the final master wore a tricorne hat and wielded a sabre that might have made her more at home on the Tyrant's old team.

Honour didn't like the unknown at the best of times. She shouted a warning to Grange, who seemed to shrug it off. His indifference caused a flash of irritation, but Honour wouldn't let that put her off her game. There was a reason she felt most comfortable shadowing the young captain, after all. He was as strong as an ox, tougher and more stubborn than a billy goat, and even had a good head for the game. She had yet to teach him patience, though.

Their first goal didn't take long in coming.

Grange's kick had been short and barely rolled over the line, quickly collected before the Blacksmith side could pick up any pace under their heavy armour. Grange got to it first thanks to his head start, but passed back to Honour, who dribbled it forward three paces before sliding it out to Bushel.

The younger woman barely lost a step as she caught the pass and swiftly dodged forward, as cool and crisp as she might have been on the proving grounds. Seconds later—and what might have been a risky shot to a less capable striker—and the Farmer's Guild had their dream start.

As the crowds roared their approval and Bushel raised her hand to salute them, Honour felt a wave of relief wash over her. A clean strike like that had been exactly what her side needed to settle their nerves—and hers as well.

It had been simple and straight out of the playbook, putting them up before some of the Blacksmiths could leave their line, and before the Farmer backfield had

even broken into a sweat. The rest wouldn't come as easy, she knew. But her time as a Mason had left a profound appreciation for solid foundations.



The goal kick soared through the air, landing with a hard bounce and rolling into open field. Bushel had already been tracking it through the air, jogging back after her goal, and her instincts had served her well.

She wasn't the only one though; heavy clanking sounded from behind, forcing Bushel to get her head down and sprint until her legs ached like they were on fire. She reached the ball first, but only moments before her pursuer, who turned out to be Ferrite.

With a delicate punt Bushel rolled the ball and backpedalled as fast as her feet would take her. Having the ball was one thing—dodging past this heavily armoured opponent would be quite another.

The Blacksmith followed, and Bushel marvelled at how easily Ferrite moved despite the weight, using the momentum to help her shift from foot to foot.

Somewhere to her left she could hear an unmistakable huffing and puffing sound getting closer, which she knew to be her brother. His presence was extremely reassuring. If Bushel could just keep the ball a touch longer, Windle could easily tip the balance of this exchange in favour of the Farmers.

Relief quickly turned to dismay as Iron beat Windle

to the fray, his huge frame intimidating in an entirely different manner to his Master. Ferrite was agile and moved like the wind in spite of her uniform, making herself as wide as the pitch; Iron was so huge, he might as well have been a barn.

He didn't dance like Ferrite, instead barging roughly past his teammate with a huge gauntlet held out in front and head down ready to charge.

Bushel was reminded of bulls fighting in the fields. For all her match experience this and last season, her mind went blank, and she stood rooted to the spot. As Iron thundered towards her, fear left her feet like heavy stone.

Before the charging Blacksmith could reach her, Windle's swinging fist caught him under the jaw. Iron went down, but not without dragging her brother into the dirt with him, where the pair continued to fight like wild dogs, rolling over and over as they struggled.

As Bushel watched, Iron's helmet rolled off to reveal his face, nose broken and bloodied, lip painted red but smiling sadistically as he pounded Windle with heavy punches.

Even if she'd thought she could somehow help her brother, she couldn't afford to get involved. Ferrite hadn't let herself get as distracted by the exchange as Bushel, and pressed the advantage, feet snapping out to tackle the ball away.

Bushel resorted to a desperate shove with both hands, catching Ferrite off guard and giving the Farmer the opening she needed to snap a pass away,

back towards Grange.

Her heart sank as Farris intercepted, long mallet skilfully putting the ball to the ground then deftly moving it alongside her horse's thundering hooves. Bushel's view was interrupted as the sky wheeled overhead, her mind tumbling after with the realisation she'd been tripped. Breath whooshed from her lungs as her back hit solid earth, the shredded grass doing little to cushion her fall.

Ferrite loomed above, kicking Bushel's weapon away. Disarmed, Bushel immediately rolled to her left, eyes pinched and body tensed for the inevitable knockout blow.

When it never came, she snuck a look up to see Ferrite wink at her.

'Nice move, lass. But that's still my ball!' The Blacksmith leapt over Bushel, sprinting hard towards the Farmer goal.

Bushel's muscles relaxed and she found herself wearing a lopsided grin of her own. Ferrite reminded her of the First Lady, straight as a rod up and down. Looking to the side for her brother, she saw him scramble unsteadily to his feet, Iron face down and unmoving.

'Sleep it off, bully-boy.' Windle offered the apprentice a hard kick in the ribs, then seemed to immediately regret it as his toes painfully bounced off the steel plate. The crowd closest to them chuckled, their mirth shared by the apothecaries that had arrived to treat Iron.

Bushel dragged Windle's arm as he stared balefully at his tormentors.

'Come on! You can set them to rights later!'



Grange anticipated Ferrite's pass to Farris before it happened. He was too far away to intercept, but could easily reposition ahead of Lady Justice's path downfield by leaving his position and dropping into the centre back role.

Unfortunately, his current opponent had other ideas.

He'd encountered Cinder several times before now, the apprentice a familiar figure in the Blacksmith side, pelting the opposition from afar with her crossbow. He'd even admired her inventiveness with the weapon—whilst he couldn't think of any take-outs she'd caused, he could all-too-easily recall the number of times she'd punctured the ball and forced a new one to be kicked into play, or created a weak spot in an opponent's armour with a superheated bolt.

Despite how irritating others found her particular approach to the game, Grange had never been able to deny a soft spot for Cinder—she wore a mischievous grin, and kept a cool head under pressure.

The young woman standing across from him now was near unrecognisable from that easygoing memory. She whirled a long polearm around her, the molten tip leaving a bright trail seared across his vision. Her expression

matched the deadly intent of the weapon, stony and cold, absent of even the slightest trace of humour.

Truth be told, Grange knew he'd underestimated her. He could feel his leg burning from where her weapon had lashed out and punished him already, souring his mood. He deflected another thrust with a saw blade and kicked her feet away, sending the Blacksmith into the dirt. He didn't have time for this.

Millstone watched Lady Justice approaching through narrowed eyes. Far behind her, the rest of the players were all marked, fighting it out. Grange was closest and might have put down Cinder, but even at a sprint he had no hope of catching Farris. Buckwheat had been with her, but the mule had taken one look at the towering stallion and bolted.

It looked like it was down to Millstone alone to stop this goal.

She might have smiled. It was always this way.

Although, it had been a fair while since she last brought down a runaway horse. And lazy carthorses were a world apart from Judgement.

'Come on then!' Millstone didn't budge an inch. Even so, she wasn't in a hurry to step into Farris' path. No sense in being trampled. She'd have to play this like a goalkeeper and try to block the shot.

Lady Justice had the advantage and she knew it. If anything, she urged her steed on faster, the heavy barding slapping furiously against Judgement's flanks. Her mallet rolled the ball alongside, keeping it away

from her steed's hooves.

The pair were probably in shot range, but Millstone guessed the Blacksmith would want to get close enough to tap it in, rather than risk a punt at longer range.

Millstone felt her back soaking through with sweat. She had once chance at this.

Farris second guessed her and took it early, the mallet unexpectedly making contact and hitting the ball towards the goal. On instinct alone, Millstone reached out with a hand to punch it clear and succeeded, the ball ricocheting back towards the Blacksmith at pace. Her triumph quickly turned to dismay as Judgement leapt the ball but didn't wheel to collect, still hurtling towards The Farmer goal, and Millstone between the two.

The weight of the stallion would have been enough to take the wind out of her, but being crushed against her own goalpost did the rest, a loud crunch from her chest accompanied by searing agony. Millstone tasted blood flooding her mouth as she dropped to her knees, the last sight before she blacked out Ferrite collecting the ball and lining up a shot.

Mercifully, she never had to hear the crowd roar a moment later.



Honour wasn't happy to see a Blacksmith goal dent her team's spirit but, truth be told, she was more concerned about Millstone. It was fairly evident that

her teammate wouldn't be back during the match—she only hoped the sawbones would be able to patch the woman up.

Head back in the game, Honour reminded herself. They just needed one opening. The goal kick had landed at her feet, and she was quickly approaching pass range to Bushel. Ferrite and Faris were both on their way back up field, but with Iron out for the moment, Windle could mark one, and she would drop back for the other.

Ahead, Bushel waved her hand frantically, open and unmarked. She wasn't too far out, and Honour would have risked a pass once upon a time, but the gnawing doubt settled in her belly reminded her of a dozen missed kicks.

Her hesitation allowed the new Blacksmith master to step between them, making it that much more difficult again.

'Aha, The First Lady herself!' The Blacksmith actually offered a theatrical bow, a conspiratorial cast to her expression. 'It shall be a shame to defeat you in the field, my lady.'

'You and what army, Blacksmith? I am not one for being easily defeated.'

'Of that, I have little doubt.' Her opponent wore an amused expression. 'Alas, army I do not have. But Navy? Fortunately enough, that I can provide.'

The new master drew her sabre with flourish, holding it aloft for a moment. Spying her chance whilst this strange woman was distracted, Honour

passed the ball straight past her, rolling it to Bushel's outstretched foot with precision.

'Nicely done, just as I would have expected!' The Blacksmith didn't seem concerned. She swept in a circle, sword coming to rest pointing at Bushel, already running on goal.

Honour didn't get it. Her eyes followed Bushel, her path right up to the goal, leg swinging around to take the shot, and....

The Blacksmiths had turned their goal into a cannon.

As Honour watched in horror, a figure like a seadog from some ship or another lit the fuse, and then scampered back several feet. The First Lady opened her mouth to shout warning, but her voice was drowned out by a monstrous roar as the cannon erupted in a huge burst of smoke, the blast rolling it backwards over the ground.

Poor Bushel left her feet as though dragged by a wild horse, flying weightless through the air before landing in an ungainly heap. From where Honour stood, she didn't see her protégé moving.

Miraculously, the ball rolled into the cannon, scoring the final goal and winning the game for the Farmer's Guild, but Honour barely noticed, still staring at Bushel's crumpled body with incredulous eyes.

A horn sounded to end the match, but for the first time in their lives, even the crowd didn't know quite what to do.

Stunned silence reigned.

The Blacksmith offered her another bow. 'It appears the gods have seen fit to bless you after all. Well done.' She seemed amused somehow, as though she'd never really cared about the result in the first place. 'I am Culverin, First Lady. And I play a very different game to the one you do.'

Somewhere in the stands a slow clap started, the sound almost mournful to Honour's ears. She shot her opponent a hard stare through narrowed eyes.

'I don't care who you are. Have the decency to step aside, so I can reach Bushel. The girl doesn't deserve to die alone.'

Culverin ducked out of the way. 'Of course, although, do not concern yourself unduly. I am no Butcher, and use lightweight ammunition. A broken limb she may have. Death will elude her this time, you have my word.'

Honour spat on the ground between them. Then, without a word, ran to tend to her teammate.



Under that same brilliant sun, proud as could be, the Farmer's Guild side lined up shoulder to shoulder on the podium. Honour stood second in line, after Grange, dwarfed by his broad shoulders and puffed out chest. He wore a smile as wide as one of his saw blades, eyes sparkling in the light.

To Honour's left, Bushel leaned heavily on her good leg as she stood to attention, the other heavily bound.

The young woman's face was white as a fresh bed sheet, but she held her chin as high as her captain, her expression stoic.

Honour found herself mirroring them both. This was her fifth time receiving the champion's medal, but the experience hadn't grown tired. She imagined it never would.

The fanfare was deafening. Musicians stood either side of the team, flanking the deep red carpet that had been rolled out. The sound of their trumpets easily defeated the crowd, and the proximity of the sound caused her to wince when they hit higher notes. They were military players and not figures from the Entertainer's Guild, Honour noted. Each wore their own regimental dress, the disparate uniforms unified by the sash they all wore across their chests—a gold Soltheician sun pinned high upon the breast.

Suddenly the music reached a crescendo, and then abated, leaving a ringing in the First Lady's ears. It was soon joined by a drum, hard sticks ricocheting from a snare skin. At the entrance to the pitch the wide doors were pulled open and the Soltheician procession appeared, marching onwards in the simmering and hazy air.

It seemed the crowd couldn't quite decide whether they wanted to cheer or not, a handful of solitary voices and awkward claps soon lost in the reverent hush. Honour's ears detected a low murmur which had to be prayers.

She herself still wasn't sure what to make of this.

The presence of the Bacchus and his entourage should have been a momentous occasion; a sign of unity that the church was at last engaging with the architecture of the unification, and all that it stood for.

Instead, it felt uncertain and threatening. The approaching figures put Honour in mind of the emissaries that rode out ahead of an army, before the battle began.

The mood of the crowd didn't help. As the priests continued their path, elegant robes trailing behind them, the stands seemed to be cowed, faces lowered to stare humbly at their feet.

This wasn't the celebration Honour had seen in previous times.

The procession had finally reached a few paces away, and the First Lady saw the Bacchus properly for the first time. He wore the ceremonial headdress of his position, a large crown encrusted with precious jewels of all colours, arches trimmed with gold over silver sunbeams. His robes were purest white, lined the same crimson as the musicians' sashes.

The drums stopped.

Pious VI stepped forward, away from the other figures, followed only by a woman holding a small case. Honour recognised the Saint immediately, even without her mask. The mixture of authority and contemptuousness with which she carried herself was unmistakable. In a remarkably short period of time, everyone had learned to despise Grace. She played

Guild Ball, but clearly had no love for it.

Grange received his medal first, the Bacchus retrieving the round disc from the case and leaving it in her captain's hand. When Grange mumbled a word of thanks and held out his other hand, the Bacchus seemed amused by the concept, although the mirth from his smile didn't reach his eyes. The hand was retracted quickly, when it became obvious that the gesture wouldn't be reciprocated.

Honour found herself face to face with the head of the Solthecian church.

Pious VI had a patrician nose and high cheekbones sitting atop a long face, that would likely have trouble looking anything other than judgemental. He was exactly clean shaven, which lent him an air of sobriety. His eyes were cold when they met Honour's.

'You are the one they call the First Lady...' His voice was a hoarse whisper. Where there should have been other words, he only smirked; a deadly wolf looking at a sheep.

Grace handed him the medal. It caught the light blindingly, branding a multicoloured flare into Honour's eyes, and by the time she'd blinked it away, the Bacchus had pressed the medal into her hand and moved on.

Grace remained a moment longer, cruel smile cast over features that once might have worn a kindly expression. The Saint gave Honour a look that was a mixture of satisfaction and triumph, and then followed Pious VI.

Honour didn't know what to make of that.

Ordinarily, she would have remained staring forward as was customary and respectful, but her curiosity got the better of her, and she stole a quick glance at the coin in her hand.

Raised lettering circled the edge, with the year and the location of the finals, separated by wreaths at the bottom the same as ever. In the centre, the embossed Guild Ball badge was where it typically sat, but with a Solthecian sun shockingly stamped over the top.

The First Lady forced herself to look forward once more, and hoped that dismay hadn't etched itself across her face. Above, the sun disappeared behind heavy clouds, stealing warmth and colour from the scene.

Honour wondered how she hadn't seen them before, and how long the storm would be in coming.

