



DEATH OF
THE BETRAYER



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The storms after the finals had easily been the worst in recent memory—if not for their ferocity, then at least for their persistence.

For a week they had lashed Castellya and Piervo, a seemingly unending tide of misery tumbling downwards from the northern mountains. Merchants had been grumbling for days, floods forcing caravans traversing the trade routes to stop far short of their destinations and turn back towards home. It had even wiped the smiles from the Farmer's Guild in the aftermath of their victory, crops crushed or drowned by the unseasonal deluge.

Brisket liked it just fine. She didn't care much these days for bustling market streets, or loud evenings in taverns. The populace of the cities under this grey blanket preferred to keep to themselves, remaining in the dry sanctuary of their homes. Those who did dare venture out did so under thick shawls, walking quickly, their heads down and inattentive.

Besides, this evening it suited her purpose.

Wet from the incessant rainfall, she stood outside of the grand cathedral's outer walls and stared upwards. Her gaze was cool and calculating, her mind uncaring of the water soaking through her hair and outer clothes, and wetting her upturned face. At her side,

her hands were balled into fists, her body absent of any hint of the fear that once dominated her.

Ever since finding Boiler's corpse, Brisket found herself with purpose once more. She might have called it a sense of justice or duty, and perhaps in time some bard might tell her tale that way, but to lend her sentiment such notions would have been a lie.

A thirst for vengeance drove her.

Nothing else.

There were no guards standing at the threshold, each of them retreated to their pillboxes or having sought refuge from the elements at some dry station. The church didn't care much for their breed anyhow. Even under the strict new Bacchus, Piervo had never maintained a standing army. In their arrogance, they felt themselves untouchable.

Hidden under a veil of dark robes and shadows, Brisket slipped inside unnoticed.

The smell was the first thing she noticed. Hundreds of years of candles, slowly burning through each day and night, had stained the stone of this place. Their scent was mixed with a faint sense of damp, which was soon replaced with old dust; gritty sand threatening

to settle on her chest. The stone underfoot was dry, bare of any wet footsteps beyond her own. Only the faint drum of rain upon the tiled arches high above interrupted the silence.

She wasted little time picking a direction and stalking through the corridors. The outer walls circling her destination housed a ring of halls, greeting rooms, and holy cells for the servants and lower caste monks.

Knowing little of the grand cathedral, Brisket simply chose what seemed to be the most direct path, following where the tapestries and dressings looked most lavish or venerable, and avoiding corridors that wore a layer of dust and neglect.

The place was a maze of antechambers that seemed to have been constructed and decorated at vastly different times. Several passages hid doors that might have easily been mistaken for bland walls had Brisket not been familiar with the Soltheccian order's taste for impracticality and secrets, disguised in the open by the distracting allure of elegant domes and colourful murals.

Brisket cared little for the affluent display. It meant little to a Butcher. Of more interest to her were the candles lining the walls, their heights indicating when she might expect a servant to pass by to replenish

those that had faltered.

An abrupt turn in the path took her beyond the outer walls and chambers and across a courtyard into the inner sanctuary. Beyond here was the cathedral itself, standing in stark relief to the night skies, the windows coloured by bold candlelight from within.

The same light illuminated the trees and bushes in the gardens surrounding her, turning their twisted branches into jagged fingers, ghouls reaching out from the crypts that surely sat beneath.

Statues of forgotten priests and saints observed her passage silently, their faces cast in shadow. The statues were joined by a murder of crows in the eaves of one mausoleum, their tiny shadows unmoving, only distinguishable by the reflection shining over their eyes.

This time there were guards at the entrance, standing to attention under an alcove with bright sconces set into either wall.

There wasn't any pretence in Brisket's approach. She was an intruder, and there was no excuse for her to be here, even given her station as captain of the Order.

Neither man had a chance to ring the bell by their

post as she swept out of the darkness with her blade bared. She hurled her heavy cloak at the first soldier, the sodden cloth weighing him down whilst she drew a thin line of red across his surprised companion's throat. As her victim fell to the ground, hands groping at the red mess of his ruined neck, she leapt on the figure trying to free himself from the dark cloth and stabbed hurriedly.

Five, six, seven times, and he still struggled. On the eighth his strength faltered. The ninth robbed his legs of their ability to stand, and the tenth left his eyes glassy as the cloak fell away at last.

She left it with the corpses, a morbid tribute to the murder.



The moment Brisket stepped into the narthex, she knew she was no longer alone. The candles were much brighter here, and there were far more of them, all freshly lit. A low whisper intoning absolutions tickled her ears, the hairs on the back of her neck rising in tandem with her fury.

The wretched order might find forgiveness from their god, but Brisket would have none.

It was a long walk down the lonely nave, flanked by the

empty pews. Observing only a lone supplicant kneeling at the altar with their back to her, Brisket remained light-footed, but didn't try to hide her approach. By the time she reached the foot of the altar, the figure had finished her own passage, and risen to look down upon her.

The Saint's surprise was quickly replaced by disdain, her lips twisting into a cruel sneer. 'Why do you blaspheme this sacred ground, Betrayer? Surely even a wild dog such as you might understand the futility of the gesture? If you are here to cause me injury or raise diablerie, you shall be sorely disappointed.'

Brisket's only reply was to wipe her long knife clean, replacing a red smear with purest silver.

Grace's eyes narrowed. 'I am not some contemptible pawn, Betrayer.' Her voice was a low rasp, strained from long hours of prayer, made sinister by her words. 'Do not doubt that I will not hesitate to draw blood against transgressors and sinners, even upon this sacred ground.'

Despite her words, the Saint made no move to reach for a blade to defend herself. Brisket knew why. Somewhere in the depths Benediction doubtless stalked towards them both, ready to strike. Uncaring of the danger, Brisket began to ascend the altar steps

towards Grace. She didn't harbour any illusions of surviving this night's bloody deeds.

Benediction revealed himself as Brisket reached the top, dressed in holy vestments rather than the armour he typically wore, but no less an intimidating figure for it. Pale and milky eyes glared in her direction as he stepped smoothly between the two women and drew his sword, raising it in challenge.

Brisket knew speed was of the essence. She had no hope of matching strength with Benediction, and doubted Grace would be long in joining this encounter. Her first attack went straight for the large man's legs, feigning a dodge to the flank and away from his blade, before crossing back towards his exposed knee as he blocked.

Unburdened by his armour, Brisket underestimated Benediction's speed. As her knife inched towards his body, she was met with a weighty backhand that sent her tumbling head over heels, falling painfully onto the steps. Before she could right herself on the uneven surface a kick struck her flank, and sent her crashing to the bottom, her descent arrested with a jolt as she struck a pew.

The fight far from beaten out of her, Brisket leapt back to her feet, gritting her teeth at a spike of pain in her

ribs. She saw Benediction advancing cautiously down the steps, like a hunter stalking a wounded animal, waiting for it to lash out.

Somewhere beyond the cathedral, the sound of bells broke the air. At first a single tone, quickly joined by others. Brisket didn't need to see a clockface to know it wasn't the chiming of the hour. By the time Benediction had reached the bottom of the altar steps she could hear raised voices, and the familiar echo of spear shafts over stone tiles.

Brisket saw Benediction close his eyes to concentrate on the sound, a momentary flicker of uncertainty registered across his features. She took her chance, leaping forward, knife darting across his leading arm, slashing to bleed him rather than cut deep. The blade sank in and came away in a ribbon of blood, crimson painting the marble tiles. She didn't wait for him to react, sprinting up the steps and towards where Grace had been.

Benediction's hand caught her ankle and unbalanced her, causing Brisket to pitch forward, hitting her jaw on stone no less forgiving for the carpet trailing over the top of it. She kicked out and he released his grip, quickly snapping the hand back as she followed up with a wild knife slash at his outstretched fingers.

No longer content to let her hulking giant do all of her dirty work, or perhaps content that Brisket had seen enough of the fight beaten out of her, Grace was descending the stairs.

'Betrayer... unbeliever.' Her voice was scornful. 'Enough of your persistence!'

'I'm glad you saved that horseshit about illumination, at least. That's a sorry joke I'm long tired of!' Brisket struck upwards, taking Grace by surprise. The metal bit into the Saint's flank, blossoming blood forever ruining robes of pure white.

It didn't look like a deep wound, but Grace seemed stunned nonetheless, eyes moving from the rapidly expanding stain and then back to her assailant. She tripped a handful of steps as Brisket tore her knife free, leaving the Butcher with the higher ground.

There was commotion outside now.

As Benediction joined her, the Saint regained some of her colour, her mouth opening into a wide smile, teeth bared and bright in the light. Brisket wondered why, until she heard another set of footsteps. She risked a look backwards, deeper into the shadows leading to the antechambers behind. Her heart sank to see a tall figure wearing ornate and lacquered armour, blade

drawn and striding confidently towards her.

These weren't odds Brisket could ever win, but she'd take as many foes with her as she could. She turned her back to the figures below, and ascended the final steps, ready to face this new threat. Tasting blood from where she'd bit her lip hitting the steps, and spat it onto the altar.

'I don't know you. But I will not sell my life in vain, or cheaply.'

The paladin looked impassive. 'Your kind always offer empty gestures before the inevitable. It matters little. You have defiled this holiest of all places, and there can be but a single punishment.' A slight smile tainted his neutral expression. 'Prepare for illumination.'

'Piss on your illumination. She'll not die today, and not your hand, tin man.' The sounds of struggle outside had died, and a familiar voice took reign over the scene.

Ox. The Master Butcher.

Brisket felt adrenaline surge through her veins, replacing the lead that had begun to settle there from the fight.

Something else, too. A feeling she thought she'd forgotten entirely.

Pride.

'The Master Butcher himself. Do you remember me from before?' The paladin looked straight past at Ox, any trace of smile replaced by a deep frown.

'Aye—and we have a score to settle,' Ox snarled. 'I spent long months promising myself I'd find you and cut your heart out. Time to pay the Master Butcher's due, de Corella.'

Ox wasn't the only Butcher. Gutter danced past him, a whirling dervish of steel chain and vicious hooks. She charged into Benediction, glee all-too-evident on her face as her opponent tried to parry strikes that were far too fluid for a sword alone. Without Benediction's armour to protect him, Gutter's chain exacted a terrible toll, lashing his body and leaving him listing heavily within mere moments.

Each time the metal barbs hit, Gutter cackled viciously, taunting the inquisitor, and Brisket realised that the Union woman too had a score to settle here. The Sanguine Blade would make this hurt, beating all strength from her prey until he could stand no more. Only then would she execute him.

Quick motion dragged Brisket's attention back to her own surroundings and she was forced to dodge to one side, as the paladin charged past and towards the Master Butcher, baited by his pride.

That just left Grace.

Without her hatchet men, the Saint didn't look nearly as confident as she had before. Her wound appeared to be more severe than Brisket had first thought, red painted over Grace's belly and legs by now. As Grace backed away, each step came with a visible wince.

Brisket might have found some measure of sympathy for another soul. Death was no trifling matter, and a horrible thing to see approaching. But for this wicked devil, masquerading as an angel? No. There could be no atonement, no forgiveness, and no mercy. Brisket remembered the names of all of Grace's victims, the faces seared into her mind.

'Any final words, Saint?' Brisket strode forth to close the space.

Grace was unarmed, one hand outstretched to ward her assailant away, other arm cradling her body. 'I giv... give you n.. o, no satisfaction, Betray—'

She never finished the sentence.

Brisket sidestepped Grace's guard and plunged her knife deep into the Saint's chest. She snarled in triumph, batting the other woman's feeble hands away, grasping the back of the Saint's head with her free hand and pulling the inquisitor close.

'Meet illumination, Grace. May your god still find you, after I close your eyes!' She gave her blade a savage twist and the Saint shuddered violently, a broken shriek leaving her lungs. Satisfied, Brisket pulled the knife clear and kicked the body to the ground.

Grace looked pitifully small compared to her threatening presence in life, the robes of her order clinging to her flesh to reveal a wiry frame underneath. Remembering her promise, Brisket stooped over and roughly forced the Saint's eyes closed.

Grisly duty done, Brisket started towards the other Butchers, but Ox already had other ideas. 'Go! Finish the job—Butchers know better than to leave spoiled meat on the cutting board!'

The paladin seemed to realise what that meant and his face grew ashen, but Ox pinned him in place. 'Oh no, bastard. It's just you and me now. No band of thugs to beat me bloody!' Ox swung his cleaver in a wild arc, forcing a hurried block.

At the opposite end of the cathedral, shouting guards swept in.

Brisket nodded. There was other business at hand, and there wasn't much time. She broke away, heading for the doors that de Corella had emerged from.

The Bacchus would be there, waiting.



Decorated and furnished with the most extravagant riches over the course of hundreds of years, the opulence of the inner sanctum was staggering, even lit only by meagre candlelight. Brisket couldn't help staring as she stalked through, trying to make sense of the events unfolding behind her.

The presence of the Butchers was something she'd hadn't anticipated, nor were their motives entirely clear. Would they sell their lives dearly, or settle their own grudges and escape? Was it truly possible they'd come to her aid?

She felt a tear roll down her cheek and quickly brushed it away. Regardless of their intentions, time was desperately short. There would always be more guards, and her own escape wasn't likely. She was too deep in the bowels of this spiteful beast for that, and

had too much blood on her hands, even before this final and most heinous of crimes.

Brisket's body was at last beginning to ache from the bruises she'd sustained, yet blood still rushed through her temples to the beat of her racing pulse. Her eyes roamed relentlessly for any hint of movement or hiding place.

She eventually found him waiting in a large circular antechamber, illuminated in cold light from a glass dome above.

Quite unafraid, as though he had already seen the outcome of the evening long before, the Bacchus watched her calmly and with a straight back. It seemed that if this man would meet the August Lord, he planned on doing so with tranquillity and decorum.

Or not at all.

The thought had Brisket watching him through narrowed eyes, stealing glances at her surroundings for other assailants.

'I recall watching my predecessor, Galbratii, expire.' Pious VI's voice was strong and regal, doubtless refined during long years of diplomatic service to the highest quarters of society. 'It was a fascinating experience.

The man was not suited to this office. Day after day, hour after hour, he wasted away, borne low by the attrition of the role.

‘A pity really. He was a dutiful priest, and a kind soul.’ A slither of poison crept into his voice. ‘Piervo does not appreciate such men and women.’

Brisket didn’t care for wherever this was going. She had little patience for whatever words his confession might contain. She began to advance, eyes still cautiously watching the shadows.

‘Of course, Galbratii didn’t die anywhere near quickly enough. But the August Lord is forgiving to those that are able to discern his true duty.’

‘Typical of your breed. Empty excuses for crimes against innocent people.’ Brisket’s words bled hatred. Boiler’s face swam through her mind, eyes running, this time with blood as Grace loomed above, smirk writ upon her face. She blinked it hurriedly away.

‘Oh? Are you so different?’

‘No. But at least I have honour, despite you bastards trying your damned best to steal it from me.’

Pious VI laughed, deep, and full, taking her aback.

For a long moment, the Bacchus was quite overcome by mirth. As he laughed, he shuddered, as though he were expelling the final dregs of joy that lurked within his body.

Brisket studied him suspiciously. He'd become a wailing spectre in the moonlight, painted pale silver.

'We stole nothing, Betrayer,' the Bacchus wheezed. 'You were tested and found yourself wanting.'

'Not this time.'

She crossed the final few steps in a blur, striking out. Her knife sank into his flesh, gutting him. He caught the metal blade in one hand, pale and weathered skin turning a gory shade as it prevented the weapon from sinking deep into the hilt, but it was still a mortal wound. He staggered, then fell to one knee, looking upwards to arrest her with a stern glare.

Even now, his face regained a grim measure, features easing into distaste. 'Always... resorting to barbarism. Your... your breed is pathetically low. I would have offered you more. I was the future, the order to... this world.'

Brisket pulled her blade free and laid it at his throat.

'You, who are without mercy. You, who has brought the world to its knees, and threatened the union that thousands died in order to build. You, who murdered with ice in your veins, and all to see your own standard blanket the world and block out the sun you claim to worship.'

The sharp metal drew a hard red line. Pious VI let out a guttural sigh, and sank backwards. He landed with his face staring up at the moonlight, mouth fallen slack, and eyes closed. A dark shadow quickly pooled beneath him.

Brisket's shoulders sagged. It was over. She had defeated the demon that had so terrified the Ferryman, and claimed vengeance for them all.

More than that, she had found herself once more.

The Betrayer was dead and gone. In her place once more stood a Butcher. Her life might be forfeit, but she would die with a family, and honour.

As herself, and not some puppet.

The door leading to the sanctum burst open behind her, followed by loud shouting. Brisket turned her back to the Bacchus, and dropped into a fighting stance, ready to sell herself dearly.