



# BURDENED



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The setting sun cast elongated shadows from behind the trees, each the silhouette of a dagger ready to strike. The row of blades was a stark reminder of the bleak shroud hanging over the Empire of the Free Cities, and the bloody deeds Brisket feared were all too commonplace in its murky alleys.

She sat cross-legged in the centre of the pitch, perfectly positioned so her body overlapped into both halves. Even here, in the old stadium that held so many precious memories, she couldn't shake her forlorn mood. The world was changing.

And not for the better.

Once, Guild Ball had been a unifying force. Of course, the Guilds had indulged in their petty squabbles and games, played out on the pitch as a masquerade of animosity. But that had all been from on high. Down on the pitch, the bonds and pacts, the scheming and shady deals, the lies and half-truths? None of that mattered. Every team had shared a strange sense of camaraderie. There had been purity in the challenge, in the competition. Win or lose, an opponent at the end of a match reached out their hand to pull you up from the dirt, and shook yours with respect.

Perhaps that had all been the romantic ideal of a young squaddie, she considered. She remembered the Master Butcher, and how his smile never reached his eyes. His mysterious meetings with any number of anonymous Longshanks and the presence of Guild officials at their matches, always observing. The latter

especially should have been a warning to her. Since assuming the captain's mantle herself, she had become acutely aware of an inescapable truth.

They were always watching.

Now, it seemed the rules had changed. Any hint of friendly rivalry between the teams had gone, replaced by a deep and unsettling spitefulness. It bled down from above; the politicking of Guild Chamberlains and Magisters like a fresh corpse suspended above each team, infecting them with the same rancour.

The rot didn't end with the players, though. The crowds fed off the same energy, the escalating violence on the pitch matched in the stands. It had even reached the streets now, supporters clashing before and after matches. There were no friendly faces in the stands anymore. Only blind fury and hatred.

It seemed so senseless. But for those learned in the history of the game and its origins, there was another concern, slowly building momentum. In the aftermath of the Century Wars, Guild Ball had been the binding introduced to hold the Empire of the Free Cities together, intended to prevent hostile conflict from breaking out once more. And now that bandage was beginning to fray under the strain.

Brisket feared where it could end. For twenty-five long years the Empire of the Free Cities had existed. The union had fought against prejudice the entire time. Rampant nationalism and weary bitterness ingrained from decades of conflict had only recently

begun to abate. It simmered under the surface of public consciousness still, a wound covered by a scab and not given time to heal.

It wouldn't take much to ignite once more. And what would that bring back? The Century Wars? Devolution of government and a return to feudal rule? Standing armies patrolling the borders, just waiting for any slight or insult as an excuse to go to war? Mass starvation and economic disaster as communities and traders saw free movement between states end, and taxation soar?

Behind the trees the sun had almost disappeared from sight, leaving skies turned bloody red in its wake. For a long while Brisket watched it and thought of the holy iconography of the Solthecian order. They were to blame for this unbinding. Their hateful sermons and violent actions on the pitch had spread to every corner of the world where their religion held sway. The numbers attending games had swelled like never before. But the Solthecian church was not building a supporter base for their team.

They were building an army.

No one knew what for. Maybe demonstrating their influence, exerting their dominance over the Guilds. Maybe something much more sinister.

Brisket sighed. The Ferryman had told her she'd been able to stop this, if she joined his side. She'd refused him on the spot, her mistrust and doubt too much to overcome.

A week later, and he was found dead.



Obulus had been one of the most formidable individuals in the Empire of the Free Cities, his puppet strings running into every institution and wrapped tightly around the throats of several major players. He should have been untouchable. Yet, for all his power and connections, in the end the Ferryman was proven just as vulnerable as anyone else. The tide he feared had risen over his head. Now even the most decisive action felt impossibly pointless.

Brisket had lost her opportunity.

And with it, all hope.



Usually, the night before the Sovereign States' semi-finals was a festival of bright lights and vibrant colours, rich scents of cooking foods, loud music and excited chatter. People travelled from all across the Empire of the Free Cities to see these matches each year, and traders of all kinds would line the streets, pushing their wares. People young and old and in varying stages of inebriation sat and talked, warmly welcomed old friends, or danced to one of the many tunes floating on the air.

This year, the streets were empty.

Brisket walked along one of the widest thoroughfares, her eyes chasing ghosts in the low lamplight.

A bittersweet smile for a memory from three summers ago, when Cornell the bard played in one of

these doorways, surrounded by a spellbound audience, a rain of coins landing at his feet between each song. Another for the old tinker that had brought his stall to the midnight marketplace since as long as anyone could remember, toothy grin wide as he demonstrated his clockwork toys to excited children, and more intricate gadgets to their parents.

Here and there she recalled meeting different people, or the lively events that had coloured her memories of these streets. The lad who would become her first love, over by the fountain when she was but a slip of a lass. The huge fight over by the Golden Fleece between the Butcher and Mortician supporters, an event that had led to the Watch patrolling these streets ever since. A dozen half-remembered melodies from musicians, singers, and street performances.

The cathedral's bell rang over the quiet city and broke through her thoughts as it did the eerie silence, sonorous and dominating. On the horizon, the building sat high atop a natural hill, standing sentinel over the rest of the city. It reminded her of a stern judge, intolerant and watchful for any hint of transgression.

Brisket stopped in her tracks and tried to muster the willpower to offer a defiant glare back, only to find she held neither the strength or conviction. She was defeated and had reached her lowest ebb.

Ashamed, she turned her head away, only to be confronted by a stalker emerging from a nearby alley. A long robe surrounded their frame, but the wind

wrapped it around them to suggest a painfully lean body underneath, spindly arms doing little to dissuade that image. As light found the figure Brisket recognised their identity, though it wasn't one that put her at ease in the slightest.

'Butcher, look here!'

Hemlocke's voice was wispy and ethereal, putting Brisket in mind of a mummer playing the part of a spectre in a street play. She didn't know the witch, and had never held a conversation with her either before or after she defected to the Mortician's Guild. She'd never even heard Hemlocke speak, and couldn't tell whether the tone was affectation or not.

Brisket offered a simple nod in greeting. She was more than content to let the witch do the talking.

'So angry, Butcher. Always so furious, your kind.' Hemlocke's face cracked open in a smile, revealing yellowed teeth. 'Do not concern yourself. I am not here to fight. I do not wish for enmity between us.'

She stopped pacing forward and held up her hands in a conciliatory gesture, palms open and empty. 'See? I offer no harm.'

'Why are you here, then?' Brisket was unable to hide her sense of mistrust, the words tainted with unintended aggression.

Hemlocke tilted her head to the side, offering a thousand-yard stare that bled deeply into Brisket as the witch's grin grew wider. Eventually, she spoke.

'I come at another's behest, come to offer you a gift.'

‘A gift?’

‘A promise, Butcher, nothing more.’

Hemlocke’s reputation had long preceded her. She was a dangerous heretic to some, an eccentric lunatic to others, and a drug-addled and confused vagrant to the rest. Brisket didn’t know where she landed, but knew enough to always be wary. Hemlocke had powerful new patrons who were convinced the Solthecian order had orchestrated the death of the Ferryman. Being approached by a Mortician in the dead of night would ordinarily be frightful enough; under the current circumstances, it gave the sense of even greater threat.

Brisket probably should have walked away. But there was something here in Hemlocke’s words. Strings and loose threads that Brisket couldn’t help wanting to pull on, despite her concerns.

Hemlocke read Brisket’s indecision and continued talking. ‘This will mean little to you now, Butcher. But your promise could change the world... if you are brave enough to fulfil your fate when it comes upon you.’

Her face suddenly lost all hint of mirth, smile receding and replaced by a frown, cracking the powdery paint around her jaw and mouth.

‘I know that you refused once. Do not make the same mistake once more. The Ferryman can reach beyond the grave for a short time only. After that, his spirit must retire from the world, never to be seen again.’

The witch’s eyes were full of sadness, visible even in



the low light. 'Already, he has outstayed his welcome, incurring the anger of the gods. Such a pity. He was a strong soul, once favoured. When I saw the omens of his passing, I...' her voice fell to soundlessness in her throat, face twisting strangely for a half-second, her stare suddenly aimless.

Brisket waited patiently. Despite Hemlocke's riddles and confused meandering, she sensed something hidden was being revealed to her.

'Never mind.' Hemlocke snapped back into reality, eyes focussing once more and returning to Brisket. Her bony hand reached into a satchel slung around her hip, and carefully withdrew a tiny silver vial, a metallic slither that gleamed when the light struck it. The witch bent down to place it on the pavement in front of her, the action further revealing how painfully gaunt she had become.

Brisket couldn't help but wonder if the Mortician was match fit, a thought quickly replaced by curiosity if the Mortician's Guild even had a confirmed roster in the aftermath of Obulus' death. She'd long understood the team were only tied together by pacts and bonds to their captain. With the Ferryman dead, their future seemed uncertain. Even Silence, the most predictable of their number, hadn't been seen for weeks. Like the others, he was rumoured to have gone to ground in the aftermath of the Ferryman's death, whether he'd return a total mystery.

And where this particular exchange sat was another

riddle entirely. Hemlocke's business and tone didn't feel like it was Guild sanctioned.

Having left the vial, Hemlocke ghosted backwards, foreboding expression still cast over her features. She raised a single hand to wave goodbye, and for a moment, Brisket thought she saw a silver coin in the woman's palm before the shadows claimed her.

For a long moment, Brisket waited in the silence, watching for any sign of movement, listening for any hint of an ambush. When she was at last satisfied that none would come, she approached the tiny vial, deftly snatching it into her hand before padding back into the light.

In her own palm it seemed even smaller than it had betwixt Hemlocke's frail digits. The vessel was plain and unadorned metal, but the liquid inside lent it a sinister weight. The lack of scent surrounding the cork betrayed the contents as a poison of some description; its complete anonymity something only desirable to such a substance.

She pocketed it nonetheless, Hemlocke's words still echoing in her mind. She didn't know what to make of the meeting at this stage. Nothing ever was as it seemed in the Empire of the Free Cities; even less so when dealing with an individual as unfathomable as the witch.

Brisket finally cast her eyes over the cathedral sitting watch on the horizon, feeling the weight of the poison in her pocket like a burden hung around her neck.

Even as she cut the strings of one puppet master, another set wrapped around her from elsewhere.

There was no escape from the stage she had been thrust unwillingly upon.

With the memories of yesteryear chased away, all that remained was lonely darkness. Brisket resumed her quiet journey, entirely alone with her thoughts.

