



THE BUTCHER'S CIVIL WAR



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— THE PRISONER —

Not even the slightest breeze penetrated through to these dark depths, fresh air defeated by the stench of rot and decay. The sense of foreboding misery was overwhelming, those that were banished to this place having long since given up hope of seeing sunlight once more. To be imprisoned here was to be torn from the world completely. This was purgatory, the abyss from Solthecian scripture.

It was a pitiable fate. There was no escape or respite from this hell, only the darkness.

The prisoner's world had shrunk to the dirty walls and floor of his cell, only broken by heavy iron bars. Cold metal spoiled by spots of orange rust, they were set into the stone and served as a door on one wall. The corridor beyond housed several similar cells, lined either side along its length. Each of them was just as wretched.

The only sounds were a faint drip of water from a flooded cell further down, and the murmur of the other inmates. The barrier between life and death was insubstantial here. Amongst the bundles of rags, some of their number were corpses already. Bodies that had either yet to be discovered, or their disposal unimportant enough to warrant removal. The remainder that lived clung desperately to a thin thread of life through instinct, never questioning the pathetic existence left to them.

New inmates worked out very quickly to conserve what little strength they had, and not to waste it by

fighting. There were always unfortunates who learned this too late, or who warranted special attention for one reason or another. Huddled over, they groaned from the agony of their injuries, the result of the sadistic attentions of the men and women that ruled in this nightmarish gaol.

The prisoner grinned. That would not be his end. When he had first arrived, already beaten into a bloody pulp of bruised flesh and cracked skin, his captors had been none too gentle with him. He'd laughed in their faces, as they had enacted their most violent tendencies upon his battered form, and come up short of what he had already known in the past. It was far less than what he swore that he would do to them given half the chance. The prisoner was not another weakling to be cowed into submission.

He looked at his bulky limbs, now bound by heavy iron shackles, and smiled wickedly at the memories. The chains were much heavier than those he had worn before, but still not heavy enough, if his captors made the mistake of sending another scrawny wretch to try and torture him.

The prisoner sometimes wondered what had become of those in the world above. He was not so egotistical as to think that the world would stop without him. The nobility would still live their petty and unimportant lives of indulgence, and the poor would still eke out whatever lives they could before poverty or illness took them. The Guilds would continue to war with each

other, on both the pitch, and across the negotiation tables of shadowy back rooms.

Even the crimes which he had committed were unlikely to have made much difference to daily life in the Empire of the Free Cities. Murder was rife anyhow, no matter how high profile. Every evening in the cities brought fresh bodies, all neatly laid out on the cold stone of mortuary slabs across the land. His victims were but a handful of faces, lost amongst the multitude.

Life inevitably continued, no man or woman able to stop the relentless advance of time, or the changes it wrought. Even if he were ever to be released, the world would never be the same place he had left behind. Even the destiny of a Guild was fluid, one of those mighty organisations which seemed invincible from the outside.

Of all Guilds which would have changed in his absence, the prisoner suspected that the Butcher's Guild was the most likely to have experienced the passing of time. Doubtless the murder of the Master Butcher had sent them into turmoil, with the members of the Butcher's Guild team infighting amongst themselves. They had ever been a cadre of the ruthless and violent, all brought to heel by the presence of their captain. Without Ox's approval or patronage, it was likely that few amongst their number would accept a new leader, meaning a difficult and potentially bloody ascension for the successor.

The prisoner knew it would be Fillet, the Valentian girl. She was the only logical choice. Although not

possessing the robust physicality of the Master Butcher, she was no less resolved; tenacity and determination lending zeal to her leadership. Whilst the prisoner doubted that she would inspire the same sense of bloodlust in her team as her predecessor had, the woman was extremely capable and utterly deadly. Alone she would be capable of surmounting even the Master Butcher's tally of heads, without any assistance from her team. Over time, that reputation alone would bring some errant members of the Guild in line.

If the girl was sensible and wanted it over quickly though, she would bring in assistance from outside to influence the Guild and team both. Although it would be cleaner, and strengthen Fillet's claim if she took the throne by herself, that was unrealistic. A long life of observing magisters and chamberlains had taught the prisoner that very little happened without involvement of another Guild, or the Union. Barely a meeting passed without a Longshanks lurking in the shadows close by, their presence woven into the cloth of every Guild as much as the trade itself.

Despite this, the prisoner doubted that all of the Master Butcher's old family could be swayed by the threat of violence. The loyalty of blood was too strong for some, such as Brisket and Boiler, and others embraced such an existence; bloody conflict a gift to their savage nature.

Not all would honour the Master Butcher's memory, however. The prisoner imagined that Shank especially

would soon switch his allegiance. An inherent coward, the Master Cutter knew only loyalty to coin, all other ties be damned. Meathook too was a relatively new addition to the team. The vicious Erskirii was unlikely to stay in the fold on the strength of camaraderie alone.

It all depended really on who the old family chose as the Master Butcher's successor.

Boar was obviously the strongest, the meanest, and the most proficient fighter. He also, without doubt, possessed the blackest heart. Still, the prisoner couldn't see the others following a madman, despite all that. None of them would be so foolish as to put their lives in the hands of the Beast. Instead, it would be Brisket.

By now, she would have recovered from her injuries inflicted by the Fisherman's Guild, and know the truth of the Master Butcher's vengeance. It was likely that the experience at the wrong end of the knife had changed the woman's outlook, made her harder, and trimmed away the last shreds of her light-heartedness. Those were solid qualities to have in a captain, at least in the prisoner's experience. A lack of compassion, coupled with ruthlessness, kept an individual honest and lent a certain pragmatic clarity to leadership.

Intelligent and ambitious, Brisket would have been the Master Butcher's choice, had he been able to make one.

The prisoner knew that neither of the women would back down. Too much was at stake for both, the good of the Guild warring with the fierce respect that had built the fraternity of the team.

Fiery Valentian pride coursed through both of their veins, both possessed of a backbone and stubbornness that could never abate without conflict.

He was broken from his reverie by screaming. Another pathetic wretch had been torn away from his life above, and was being dragged down here to waste away in the darkness. The sound had little bearing on the prisoner, but it underscored an undeniable truth, and made further contemplation of the Butcher's Guild seem pointless.

The prisoner didn't belong to that world any more now.

His memories and observations were from another lifetime, the experience and musings of another man; not the one that languished in this cell. His existence severed from the lives of those above, he wouldn't even have the luxury of watching the power struggle between Fillet and Brisket play out. Here, alone in the darkness, the prisoner would remain until he was taken away for his execution. Assuming, of course, that he wouldn't just be left to starve; another desiccated corpse amid a bundle of rags.

He smiled, the edges of his lips curling up under his thick beard. It was a shame. A Butcher civil war would have been most entertaining to see. The memory of the Master Butcher overshadowed the struggle for leadership, the dark deeds of the past influencing those of the present.

Only the strong would survive this struggle for leadership. To the other? Death.

PARLEY

The torchlight flickered in the faint breeze; a caress of cool air over exposed skin. The waft of air seemed out of keeping with the confines of the stone walls, the heat from the central brazier oppressive; colouring the scene a warm collage of orange and murky red.

At one time, this had been part of a grand demesne of some lord or another, the name of that family long since passed into memory. Now, the estate had also fallen into ruin, and the abandoned chapel they stood inside was but one example of the decay wrought by time. Paint had peeled away from the walls, as the once grand frescoes chipped and broke. The carpet underfoot had long since rotted through to reveal dirty stone underneath.

The remaining faces of saints and angels stared out from the walls, their glares warped and distorted, almost pleading to join the fragments of their brethren on the floor. In grander days, this place had been a grand celebration of civilisation and the arts; now it looked like anything but.

The secretive gathering was surely the first of its kind since the end of the Century Wars, but the parley took place amongst the ghosts of the past, and marks of destitution both. They were poor omens. At least the domed ceiling had yet to fall in, although the skeletal frame was thick with ancient cobwebs and soot.

If any of their number looked truly apprehensive of

their surroundings, it was Silence. The pale man hid as much of himself away within his heavy black robes as was possible, only his face stark against the darkness. He leaned back away from the light and into the shadows, as though he tried to disassociate himself from the assembled figures.

Stoker by comparison leaned forward into the brazier, embracing the hot, smoky air. His smirk was feral and wicked in the light cast by the flames, combining with the hard ridges of his mask to transform his expression to that of a devil.

Harmony ignored them both, her features betraying her disinterest. The slender Mason held her arms crossed and shoulders squared, body language closed and unwelcoming. A few feet away from where she stood, Decimate mirrored the stance almost exactly, the scabbards that housed her vicious rapiers glittering in the light.

The final one of them looked most at home here in the darkness, although he was an unfamiliar face to Brisket. She knew his name to be Jaecar, but little else about the man. Like most of the Hunter's Guild, he was a mystery.

Brisket looked at them all, only a handful of those she had invited to this clandestine meeting, and none nearly so influential as she had hoped. She wouldn't let it be seen, but inwardly she cursed her hubris. These five were peons amongst their Guilds, those whom held no favour at all.

‘Why are we here, Butcher?’ Harmony spoke first, her tone haughty and unkind. Easily the least capable fighter of their number, the young woman made up for the deficiency in proud aloofness.

‘I too am curious. Pray for your sake that you have not wasted my time.’ Silence’s voice was a snake-like hiss, low and urgent.

‘Is it not obvious?’ Stoker slyly stared around at them all. ‘The Butchers seek revenge for their fallen comrade.’

Harmony waved a delicate, disdainful hand. ‘Such a worthless aim. Leave the weak behind, and move on.’

Brisket almost drew a knife then, at the implied insult to the Master Butcher. This was already going poorly, and once again she doubted her wisdom in summoning such a conclave. She had done little but that over the last few hours.

‘Clearly, not one amongst you has the slightest idea. Be sensible and wait for your host to speak, lest we all waste our time.’ The new voice was without accent, flat and monotone. Pin Vice stepped forward from the darkness of the doorway. Behind her, Corsair followed ungainly, face flushed from a skinful of rum. Brisket’s heart quickened. These two were exactly the rank of player whom she had hoped might attend.

Captains. Men and women with real power.

The new arrivals settled in beside the others, all eyes expectantly upon Brisket. The only sound was the crackle of the fire, the echo of footsteps stilled. Tension lay heavy in the room, each player the enemy

of the others. There were no friends here.

Brisket cut through it. 'I won't pretend to avoid the truth. None of us trust one another, most of you trust the Butcher's Guild even less.' Corsair belched loudly, and grinned at her. 'But I am not standing with you as one of the Butcher's Guild, or at least not one of their lackeys.' Brisket paused, to let that sink in.

'There are those of us within who still remember the Master Butcher, who still belong to his family. We remember his sacrifice and legacy, and refuse that which is being forced on us now.'

'Now? Now your people are wild dogs, running off the leash. They need to be muzzled or put down.' Silence leant forward, his features both earnest and serious. His eyes nervously darted back and forth between the others.

Jaecar smiled at the Mortician, bared teeth portraying lethal intent. 'I can do it if you'll pay well enough, Spook. I'll put each of them down for you, slowly, just like your Silent Terror.'

Brisket thought she heard the hint of a chuckle from Corsair. Silence backed away without another word, retreating hurriedly into the embrace of the shadows. It was clear that none within earshot believed the Hunter's threat to be insincere. Brisket cleared her throat and continued.

'What I am asking of you is only that we have your support, when the time comes. The support of you, your teams, whomever you can bring.' Brisket hadn't expected

that last part to sound quite so needy, and offered them all a steely glare to hide the implied weakness.

What she asked was treason against Guild in some cases; this would be the moment when she could truly gauge the reaction of the unlikely group.

Stoker was unafraid of her glare, and met it with his own. 'I speak for Esters, and her allies. She would doubtless agree to what you ask, if you were in a position to extend a similar gesture of goodwill.' His thick accent coloured his words, but the meaning was clear.

Brisket nodded. Once, the idea of supporting a leadership challenge amongst the Brewer's Guild would have filled her with both indifference, and a deep sense of trepidation, especially siding with a man with as poor a reputation as Stoker.

Yet necessity made for strange bedfellows, it seemed. Brisket knew she would likely have to offer something similar to every man and woman in attendance before the evening was over. Looking at all of them, each had their stories of dissent within their own Guilds. It was probable that they all had attended to secure the same support as Brisket.

She was gambling she knew, by laying a hidden thread of rebellion out in plain sight and lending her own face to it. It left both her, and the Butcher's Guild very vulnerable, as the predators circled.

Brisket did not intend to show a single one of them any weakness that might be exploited, however. This was a cry for strength of arms, not the death throes

of a man that shed his blood. If she had to agree to back a hundred rebellions, she would. Later, once her own was over and done with, there would always be a way to break the contract, or twist the knife without excessive bleeding, should it come to it.

‘Trust that I can speak for the Mortician’s Guild, Butcher. What advantage do you offer me for supporting your claim?’ The hiss had returned, Silence never quite earning his moniker. Corsair laughed.

‘You speak for shit, Spook. Not a single person here believes you to be anything more than a puppet to your master.’ The Fisherman turned to face Brisket, skin around his nose and cheeks rosy red, even in the light. ‘I piss on the grave of your Master Butcher. The bastard took my leg, and stole my team from me.’ He scratched his chin, heavy with stubble. ‘But he did at least murder that worthless cretin, Laurentis, saved me a job there.’

Brisket responded with a vicious retort. ‘Aye, and why was that? I have a host of jagged scars on my belly that give voice to your good nature.’ She took a deep breath, calming herself. ‘As I said, none of us much trust one another. Believe me, I don’t doubt that several amongst you would prefer to see me floating face down in the canal than speak with me.’

‘My piece is said. I will not waste my breath relaying it again. If you are with us, then well and good. Show me an indication, and if the time comes, I will call upon you. If you are not? Then cease this pretence and leave.’

In the ensuing quiet, Pin Vice was the first, striding towards Brisket. Up close, the aloof Engineer was taller by several inches, and she looked down dispassionately at the Butcher. Her eyes betrayed no trace of any emotion, and her mouth was hidden by a dark wrap, leaving her unreadable. Long seconds passed before the Artificer Queen spoke, the air between the two women cold.

‘You have my allegiance, for as long as it suits me.’ It was all Pin Vice offered before departing once again, her pace strangely mechanical and steady over the uneven floor.

Brisket didn’t care for the Artificer Queen in the slightest, but her support was worth a great deal. Even outside of the Engineer’s Guild, it was obvious the woman held significant influence. Others would follow her lead, now she had committed herself.

Sure enough, Stoker was next, repeating again that he vouched for Esters and her own backers. He was followed by Silence, for all that the untrustworthy Spook was worth. Even Corsair nodded to Brisket before he left. Harmony strode out without the slightest indication, and Jaecar only offered a smile, which could have suggested any number of meanings.

The last to leave was Decimate. The woman carried herself nervously, her mask offering no barrier to the way that her eyes refused to meet Brisket’s.

‘I cannot... that is to say, I will take your proposal to Rage.’

‘You can save your bullshit. I know that your kind only respect coin. Once your traitorous master has finally decided how greedy he is, send an envoy to tell me how much will buy your loyalty.’

Decimate shuffled away, not even having the stones to pretend at indignation. Brisket watched her go, smiling. How different things were now for the Union. Once, they had ruled even the Guilds themselves, able to dictate their presence and involvement in affairs that had no ties to their shadowy organisation. Now, they were the worst sort of sellswords, untrusted and underpaid. Their desperation was palatable in every meeting.

Brisket was left alone by the brazier, the warmth unable to penetrate her icy demeanour. Ahead of her was a long and hard struggle. Today she had taken but the first steps along that path. There would be many more before she was done, and each fraught with just as much risk and danger. But it was worth it, for the memory of the Master Butcher, and the preservation of his family.

COURT OF THE USURPER

Despite the name, not all of the undercity was completely within the shadows. Although most areas belonged to the sewers or forgotten dungeons; in some places the light still shone during the hours of daylight. Presently however, it was not the golden warmth of the rich sun that illuminated Fillet's path before her, but the icy chill of the full moon, colouring the way in ghostly, silvery blue.

As the Butcher hurried to her destination through the open air, she finally felt the absence of the eyes that had watched her from the shadows. Wretched and abandoned souls lurked in the musty and foetid depths, those places where the sun had long since given up claim. The eyes had followed Fillet as she made her way through their reclusive lair, but close to the surface where the air was fresher, their owners chose not to tread. Now Fillet travelled alone, as she had hoped.

Surrounding her on all sides were broken down buildings and walls, gutted by fire, or rotting away to bare stone. Weeds choked the gaps between tiles underfoot, or broke the stone in two, forcing themselves towards the light. Stillness pervaded the scene, adding to the sense of a forgotten and desolate kingdom. It amazed Fillet that such places existed without the knowledge of those who passed above, ignorant of the existence of the undercity.

But then, it served its purpose marvellously. This meeting was away from prying eyes, the words not to be repeated by the uninvited. It could only have taken place somewhere like this.

The war in the Butcher's Guild had escalated, and it was time that Fillet took control, reigning in the disruptive elements of her team. Her first step would be to offer them a head, a shared enemy. But to do that, first she would need to know who to offer as sacrifice to the wolves.

The answers likely waited with the infamous figure waiting ahead.

The open square was clear in the light of the full moon, strangely serene. Rage was already there, standing in the direct centre of the abandoned street. Clad in his long coat and top hat, he looked strangely out of place amongst the derelict surroundings, too clean and neat. His jaw moving slightly, betrayed by the movement of his moustache. Fillet thought she heard him whispering under his breath, but he was alone when Fillet arrived.

The Union captain's hard features were fixed into a scowl, and smoke from his cigar tainted the air with its earthy aroma, a sign of how long he had been here. Fillet was pleased to see that his cleaver and knives were at least hidden under the coat, and not in his murderous hands. Although she would if need be, the Butcher did not want to have to fight Rage.

Fillet had known his kind before, bullying, hateful men, with short, fiery tempers and little control over their own violent impulses. They were pathetic creatures, driven by their base urges. Of all men, they were the most predictable, and easily led.

He reminded her very much of the Beast. Unlike many others, Fillet had never feared Boar. He was simply an instrument, a blade which was to be aimed at the opposition's throat, unleashed and then left to rampage. Any time he did, she brought him to heel sure enough, splattered with blood and dirt, after he had sated his bloodlust.

She could not do the same with the Union captain, but Fillet knew how to handle him. She had spent a lifetime working around the murderous threats of men like Rage and Boar, and knew just how to manipulate them to get what she wanted. Doubtless the man ruled his pack of hounds by being the biggest and most belligerent amongst them.

Fillet was not so easily impressed. She had no intention of backing down from Rage, but now was a time for words, not violence. That could wait for the pitch, when something might be achieved by the bloodshed.

Rage coolly watched her approach, hands clasped together at his waist. Fillet nodded at him, holding out her own by her sides to clearly show she did not carry any blades. He mirrored her, smirking. It was an almost pointless gesture, since both kept enough

sharp metal on themselves at any given time to start a minor war. Or end one. Steel was always within easy reach for individuals that lived lives like theirs.

‘The Flashing Blade herself! What brings you to this misbegotten stretch of the undercity? You’re a stranger to these parts.’ Rage cocked an eyebrow in her direction. Certainly no one could accuse him of being laconic.

‘Pursuit of knowledge. The truth.’

‘The truth? That surely is an objective term.’ Fillet wondered at Rage’s eloquence. It was said of him that speaking from one moment to the next could be like speaking to different people. Fillet conceded that perhaps she had sorely misjudged his ferocious intelligence, thinking it only low, animal cunning.

‘Perhaps.’ A careful answer. Time to draw out the truth, if she could, let him run and speak.

Rage offered her a nod. ‘This is a strange place to find the truth, girl. Your predecessor walked upon these stone tiles, but you? I do not think that you are welcome amongst the lawless scum that dwell here.’

‘That may be. But I go where my answers might be found. And who better to ask than the monarch of such villainy, the lord Usurper himself? I come here for your court.’

Rage grinned dangerously. ‘My court? Tell me then, why should a shithole like this be my only court, girl? Am I not deserving of better?’

‘You tell me. Is one that murders his own worthy of any home, other than a neglected stretch of forgotten

land?’ Fillet danced on dangerous ground, she knew.

‘Murderer I may be, but I am no fool.’ Fillet detected the rising anger in Rage’s tone. ‘At least I do not pretend to that which does not belong to me.’

‘The throne of the Master Butcher is mine! Mine, and none other.’ Fillet hissed the words. Rage had stroked a fresh wound.

The Usurper laughed. ‘Perhaps we are not so unlike each other, Butcher girl. But tell me, what is to stop me from gutting you where you stand? You look lovely all dressed for the part, but I think I’d stain you with more red before I’d be done. Much more, and all of it your own.’

There was the switch. She had pushed far enough, now to bring him back to the predictable Rage she had expected.

Fillet scowled at him. ‘If you think your threats will work on me, you are sorely mistaken. Unlike the craven sycophants in your gang, Rage, I don’t fear you.’

The Union thug only offered a thin smile back. He puffed thick, arrogant bursts of smoke from his cigar. The grey mist hung in the air between them, unwilling to dissipate.

‘In the past, men and women have been wiser than you in their words, and for good reason. Look at you, pretty and fragile. I could snap that delicate neck of yours in a moment and feed you to the rats.’

Fillet wasn’t impressed. ‘If you truly think like that, then come and try it. I promise you, I will bleed you out. I am no innocent victim.’

‘No? I doubt that, very much.’ The words almost didn’t seem for her, Rage listening to something else, flesh around the edge of his left eye pinching. With alarming suddenness, his gaze swung back to her. Another change in his personality. ‘Say I humour you. Why are we here, girl?’

Fillet had heard that Rage was given to fits of insanity. His sudden switch didn’t startle her, but it did suggest to her that she find out the information she sought sooner rather than later. If the man was deranged, there would be no telling how long he might entertain lucid thoughts, before giving in to darker impulses.

Fillet cut through to the point, all pleasantries forgotten.

‘Who killed the Master Butcher? One of you?’

There was a moment of silence between them, Fillet glaring at the Usurper accusingly, whilst he took infuriatingly calm puffs of his cigar. Rage blew out a stream of smoke as though it were the fiery breath of a dragon, and watched it settle into the air before replying.

‘That will cost you. That secret is not well known for a reason, and will be most expensive.’ His voice became a lecherous chuckle.

‘Meaning that you don’t know.’

The mirth died in his throat, very abruptly. ‘Meaning that I will tell you only if you have the coin to satisfy me.’

Fillet shook her head. ‘I doubt that would achieve much, somehow. If you had done it, then you would have told me by now. A mark like the Master Butcher? I

imagine that you would have lorded such a kill over me in an instant. Quite the scalp for a petty thug like you.'

'I have gutted men for less insult, girl. Watch your next words very carefully.'

In the pale moonlight, Rage's face was cold and deathly as his stare. The embers on the stump of his cigar were a burning hole in the world, a fuse that slowly burnt down towards an explosion of violence. Fillet was satisfied that she would learn no more from Rage. His lack of boasting, and evasive answers had given her all that she needed.

The truth was not here. If the Union were responsible for the death of the Master Butcher, then it was clear that it was not at the hands of the Usurper or his gang. Time to move on, and seek out one of the Longshanks.

'You will earn no coin from me this day.'

'No? Then the fate of your Master Butcher will forever be known only to me, and me alone.'

'Somehow I very much doubt the truth of those words, Rage.'

He cocked his head to one side. 'Are you really willing to waste time, only to be led back to me and my court once more?' His grin returned.

She shook her head. It was a poor ruse, from a man with an even poorer hand.

'We are done here. You can remain king of all that you survey, in silence. I have no further interest in you.' Fillet backed away, careful steps opening up space between them. She didn't break eye contact,

hands resting on the hilts of her long knives, sheathed at her side.

Rage looked at her as she departed, amusement clear in his eyes. 'I thought you said that you were not afraid of me, Butcher?'

'Oh, I'm not afraid of you. But I am not foolish enough to show you my back either.' For the first time during their meeting, Fillet smiled. 'Look at the last man to do that, and how he met his fate.'

Rage's sinister expression broke into a vindictive smile by way of reply, and then gave way to roaring laughter. It was tinged with more than a hint of madness, berserk and deranged. The sound followed Fillet until she was out of earshot, echoing from cracked paving and broken walls long after it should have ceased.

— THE GUILD AT WAR —

It was a typical autumnal evening, the temperature cool and clear, muggy days of the summer passed into memory. The rustling trees had already begun to adopt spotted yellow and brown, visible even in the light of the overhead lamps. Only early in the evening, there were still plenty of people on the streets, lining the walkways and spilling out onto the cobbles. Most were in varying stages of inebriation, their drunken voices louder and more foolish than usual. Whores, both males and female, plied their ancient trade from the shadows of alleys, a night of pressed flesh and coin ahead of them.

Boiler had no interest in the whores, nor the lure of alcohol. He was still young, and had yet to develop the taste for either. He kept his head down as he walked through the crowded and dirty streets, trying to avoid being recognised. Guild Ball fame brought with it the death of anonymity, and Boiler frequently preferred to keep himself away from the limelight. He was not one for embracing the life in the same way as Shank did, or Brisket once had.

Brisket.

Boiler desperately missed the old Brisket from his memory, the woman who had been the first to embrace him into the fold of the Butcher's Guild. Once, she had been a big sister to him, doting and kind, her words friendly and encouraging. That had been before that

terrible day, when Boiler had come across her bleeding out on the pitch, her life staining the grass crimson.

Since her recovery, Brisket had become a changed woman. No longer did she share mead with the rest of them, that was as over as her flirtatious laughter. Now all the soft words had ceased, replaced by uncompromising hostility.

Boiler had been as taken aback by it as anyone, although it had hit him hardest. Brisket had been the closest person in his world. When the death of the Master Butcher came shortly after, Boiler had still looked to her for support, only to be stonewalled. Brisket had worked through her grief in isolation, leaving Boiler to wallow in his despair alone. Weeks had passed since that time, yet the air was still uncomfortable between them, as though both had words to say, but some unseen barrier prevented it.

While previously Brisket might have used her charisma to get her own way, now her first recourse was cold, deadly steel. She had never turned it upon Boiler of course. Their relationship was strained, pushed well past what it was before, but they still shared a kinship in the Master Butcher's family. That bond was lifelong, a brand forged from blood and comradeship that could never be broken.

He followed her now because that sense of family remained such a defining part of who he was, and because over all else, it had been to the Master Butcher he had pledged himself. If Brisket had been his sister,

then Ox was undoubtedly the only true father figure that Boiler had known in his life. The death of the Master Butcher had been the most earth-shattering event Boiler had ever known, forcing him to grow up and face some of the world's unpleasant realities.

The path it had put him on, however, along with the other members of the Master Butcher's family, was terrifying. To look a Guild in the eye and refuse their commands was near unknown as far as Boiler knew, and far more dangerous than what he faced on the pitch, or in the proving ground duels.

Boiler was torn. Torn between where his heart told him to be, allied with his friends, his family, companions through bloodshed, victory, and defeat – and where his head warned him to be, alongside the powerful Guild which had taken him in, and offered him a shot at life beyond the miserable existence of a gutter rat.

Boiler even liked Fillet, though he struggled to accept her as the Master Butcher's replacement. The woman was strong willed, determined, and one of the deadliest duellists he had ever seen. If Boiler looked at his teammates on her side, Meathook, Shank, and Tenderiser, he saw a much stronger and more welcoming fraternity. Other than himself, the only other that stood with Brisket was the Beast. Boar had always left Boiler with feelings of unease. The man was a slaving dog, a wild animal that threatened to run amuck, out of control, lashing out at anything near.

Boiler refused to believe that was where his future lay, bound to a raging berserker.

But Brisket did not stand alone. Her shadow was the same as that cast by the Master Butcher. That shade trapped Boiler in place, and would not relinquish the firm grip it held over him. And so, Boiler's side was picked for him.

The Butcher's Guild proving grounds were as lonely as they had ever been, Boiler the only soul in sight. The wind had picked up again, and whipped around savagely, leaves fallen ahead of time skittering around the empty stands, banners and pennants stretched taut. Hands in his pockets like a petulant child, Boiler aimed a frustrated kick at a pile of leaves that had stacked up against a post. His boot hit them and they exploded outwards, scattering in all directions.

'Feel good, kid?' The lethargic drawl was instantly recognisable as belonging to Shank. Boiler's eyes soon saw the Master Cutter, perched on the edge of a terrace step, partially hidden by shadow.

'Not particularly.'

Shank chuckled. 'Never has, that kind of violence. Next time around, aim your foot at someone else, instead of dead leaves.'

Boiler nodded, dejectedly. The thought that he shouldn't be speaking with Shank, one of the enemy, was the last thing on his mind.

'When did it get like this, Shank? Were we always

this way? Was I just blind to it?’

‘Aye. We’re all a pack of killers, we only follow the strongest.’ Shank stooped down pick up a leaf that had brushed up against his foot. He twisted it in his fingers, before snapping it in two. ‘The Master Butcher just held us together, that was all. One mean, vicious bastard of a dog, with the loudest bark.’

‘You do him dishonour with those words.’ Boiler could feel the hairs on the back of his neck raise in anger.

‘Do I? I don’t really care. I only ever followed him for the coin, and the protection, back then. The fact that you care so much is why you’re on one side, and I’m on the other.’

Boiler smiled, shaking his head. That was true enough. Shank had been the first to ally himself with Fillet, no shred of loyalty or honour to be found in him at all.

Boiler looked around at the pitch, illuminated gently by torches set evenly into the stands. Some of the greatest memories he could recall took place here, victories all of them. If he closed his eyes, he could have pointed out the scars in the dirt where particularly brutal tackles had taken place, or spots of shredded grass from shots at goal. Once, the Butcher’s Guild had been a hard, unyielding, dangerous team, feared by all. Now? There was a game in two days’ time, and Boiler doubted that they could even field a full team for it. The fall from grace had been a very hard one.

‘If you let go of that ghost, it might not be too late to join the Guild again, boy.’ Shank’s voice snapped him back to reality.

Neither of them really believed the words to be true. The conflict had escalated too far, become too personal for that now. The lines were drawn in the dirt and could not be rubbed out, except by some unlikely miracle where one side backed down. More than anything, Boiler was saddened by this ignoble end, wrenching his heart in different directions.

'Yes traitor, it would. You are no longer welcome here.' Tenderiser's deep voice was dark, and without humour. The man sounded like laughter had been a stranger to him for his entire life. He wasn't wearing his mask for once, allowing Boiler to see the hard scowl accompanying the words. It looked more pronounced thanks to two long scars, each running out from a corner of his mouth toward his ears. They were ugly, deliberate lines of tissue, cut to match the spiteful intent of whoever had put them there. Looking at the tall man, Boiler imagined that the perpetrator was long since under the ground.

Fillet's enforcer walked up from the dug outs to join them, stopping directly in front of Boiler. Behind Tenderiser's broad shoulders, Boiler could see Shank shrug.

'Perhaps it is then. Don't look at me, kid. I don't much fancy putting myself to the trouble of helping you, especially against him.'

Boiler backed away from them both, keeping his hands close to his knives. It had been a mistake coming here, absent minded nostalgia and sentiment leading

him astray.

‘That cowardice is just like you, Shank. Ever wonder why Ox didn’t trust you?’ The truth was all coming out now, although Shank didn’t look too surprised. ‘Forget it, I have no interest in siding with those who would disrespect the Master Butcher, anyhow.’

Boiler looked directly at Tenderiser, one hand twitching towards his favourite knife. ‘You might be big, but I’ve taken down big lads on the pitch before.’

Shank laughed behind them. ‘Some stones, boy.’

‘The Master Butcher taught me well enough. You’re the one hiding behind the enforcer, like a craven coward.’

Tenderiser made no move to follow Boiler, as the adolescent’s steps took him further towards safety. ‘Next time we meet, boy, we shall be enemies, and I will not watch you go. Take this warning back to your den of treacherous scum – if any of you return, I will gut each of you in turn, and feed your entrails to the pig.’

‘Fuck you, Tenderiser. I’ve yet to see strength in anything but words from you. We’ll return soon enough, for that day of reckoning. Maybe then we’ll see whether Truffles gets a feast, or becomes one.’ Boiler thought he even saw a flash of respect cross Shank’s features. Boiler was not afraid. One benefit of the death of the Master Butcher, and being forced to grow up quickly, was learning to master fear.

He strode from the proving grounds, leaving them, and his past life behind him. If ever there had been cause to underscore what Brisket was trying to achieve,

it had just been laid in front of Boiler, as viscerally as a carcass that had been splayed open for butchery.

Those who had no pride themselves had no respect.

It was obvious that the old days of unity were over. The division was too pronounced to continue without violence. Now, there could only be an end in blood.

THE TRIAL

It was deathly still inside the Guild house, a scene of morbid anticipation. The only sounds were the heavy winds outside raging against the stone walls, and the occasional crackle from a brazier. Tension was thick in the air, the scribes and magisters broken from their duties to nervously watch the confrontation between the two women.

Fillet and Brisket glared at each other across the floor, their body language openly hostile, eyes conveying murderous intent. They stood at the head of their respective supporters, the expressions of the figures behind just as cold and determined. As yet, no one had reached for a weapon, but fingers strayed dangerously close to hilts and grips, the scene never more than a heartbeat away from violence.

Fillet considered Brisket with undisguised venom, a predator staring down its prey. This was it. The end of the road, the culmination of the last bloody weeks, the moments when the future of the entire Guild had been in question.

It was the first time that the two women had been in close proximity for months, ever since the outbreak of this bitter rivalry. The following weeks had seen an increase in tension, to the point of breaking the team apart, harsh words quickly giving away to violence. The civil war had even dragged in other Guilds, different teams and individuals throwing their support behind

either side as it progressed. The concept disgusted Fillet. Outsiders had no business or place in this, and Brisket's efforts to draw in allies from outside was another sign of her weakness.

Most of the Butchers had come over to her side willingly when Fillet had vowed to break the old family once and for all. Within the Guild administration itself, the majority of the supporters for the Master Butcher's legacy had chosen to remain voiceless. Those who did speak out had been swiftly eliminated, their bodies left unseen and lost in the darkness.

That only left the leaders, Ox's faithful soldiers, his own blood.

The war ended today. It was time to spill that blood. There was no way that Brisket walked away from this confrontation smiling.

'You know the rules. No one leaves the Guild. No one. Especially not under my captaincy, and not you, most of all.' Fillet hissed snakelike at Brisket, each word spoken with as much vehemence as she could muster.

'Of all the old family, you're the one I would cut to strips and feed to the dogs, Brisket. I can muzzle the Beast, and cow the boy. But you? You are different. Obstinate, spirited, and unyielding. I know as much as you do that you will never bend the knee for the good of the Guild.'

Brisket nodded, but the look in her eyes lacked conviction. Fillet sensed hesitation for once, as though some great burden affected Brisket, leaving her unsure

and faltering. It was thrilling, even enthralling, that Brisket saw her fate at last, laid out before her in plain terms.

‘This team belongs to me, not to the ghost of a man long passed over. I will lead, and your people will follow. But for your betrayal?’ Fillet offered a thin smile, vicious and deadly. ‘Death. You cannot be allowed to live.’

Brisket took a deep breath, appearing to steel herself. ‘Then why don’t you try to cut me? Are you craven?’

Fillet looked through narrowed eyes, staring Brisket down. ‘Do not doubt me. This has gone on long enough... I invite you to take the trial.’

Beside Brisket, Boiler gasped, the look on boy’s face anguished and dismayed. He had good right to be both. The trial was a tradition born in ancient times, almost as old as the Guild itself, but more than that, it was the most brutal end imaginable for any dispute.

In the most aged and influential Guild houses there would always exist a bloodstained circle, set into a pit carved out of the rock, deep underground. Such places were made to be far away from the eyes of outsiders, far from the world and its petty laws. The trials which took place there were vicious duels to the death, adhering to as barbaric a code as had existed in past days of gladiatorial myth. The pits had existed for long years as the last resort for internal conflict. Even speaking of a trial without good reason was near forbidden, let alone invoking one.

This was a strong enough cause. Each of the pits were an archaic and primal hell, reeking of years of

death and violence, and Fillet intended to carve the hide from Brisket's bones in such a dark place.

Brisket seemed to be surprised at the reply, but her courage remained, at least. She steadily returned Fillet's gaze. 'I accept. We go to trial.'

Fillet nodded and drew one of her long knives, carefully cutting a thin line through the flesh of her left palm, bright red blood welling up from within. Without hesitation, Brisket did the same and offered her hand to Fillet. Fillet studied Brisket for a moment, and grasped the proffered palm, shaking once, enough to mix their blood together. She detected the faintest trembling from Brisket, and smiled cruelly.

The pact had been made, and sealed with warm, vibrant blood.

The light in the pit was as brooding and murderous as Fillet had ever known it. The flickering light from the torches along the walls illuminated only their immediate surroundings, leaving the centre of the pit cast in deep shades of crimson red.

Neither woman was a newcomer to the pit, both having spent time in the outer circle watching previous trials. It was the third time that Fillet had stood in the centre. She didn't know or care about Brisket. It was understandably rare that a Butcher would enter the circle, and many didn't step out again.

Precisely half of those who entered, in fact.

Fillet had only spent so much time in the circle because of her meteoric rise through the ranks, and the bad blood it had caused. Each time had been a necessary but unwelcome distraction to her ambitions. But that experience was now a significant advantage which she planned to exploit – and this duel, she had been looking forward to.

Eyes following her opponent warily, Fillet slowly circled the pit, Brisket keeping pace opposite. Every few steps, one of the women would both pass near the flames. The light reflected from their knives, lending the blades a harder edge, an unnatural sharpness. The musty scent of sweat permeated the air, still edged with a faint musk of dried blood from the last trial.

Fillet could see how it had ended, long arcs of dark brown blemishing the sand on the floor, and staining the stone beneath in a foreboding reminder.

The other Butchers surrounded them, standing underneath the dark granite arches. They were deathly silent as they watched the duel, even Boar, although the Beast grinned inanely at the promise of bloodshed.

Some part of Brisket seemed to find words, tried to offer resolution before the inevitable, a last chance before the end.

‘Let me go. There is yet to truly be blood between us. I can still walk away.’

‘No blood? Do you put aside the pact so cheaply, traitor?’ Fillet snarled her reply, still circling, one foot

carefully stepping after another.

'Fillet, listen to me. If you don't let me go now, I will have to gut you and leave you for dead.' Brisket's voice was level, somehow retaining a sense of calm.

'And if I do let you go, I look weaker still. Tell me, what did you think would happen once the trial began? Don't play the fool.'

Fillet abruptly danced in, long ritual knife glinting in the unsteady light. The khukuri were long, curved blades designed for these murder-duels and little else. They were much closer to the machete blades which Fillet favoured than the throwing knives Brisket was used to.

The two weapons met with sharp sound which stung the ears as Brisket parried, already moving aside from the thrust to find space. Fillet followed with a fluid sweeping movement, slashing through empty air as Brisket dodged again, backpedalling away but unable to stop Fillet from stepping inside her guard.

Springing forwards from her back heel, Fillet delivered a stiff knee to the ribs, her fingers reaching for Brisket's knife hand. She missed, barely blocking a retaliatory strike as Brisket hurriedly reversed her grip and stabbed downwards, more like a stiletto thrust than the slashing action the curved blade was designed for.

The two women separated again, both breathing heavily as they prowled around the circle. In the stories and plays, duellists always spoke throughout, taunting each other and invoking curses from their

gods. Fillet had never known a dance to play out that way. This silence would only ever be broken by the voices of others, both women utterly focused on their deadly confrontation.

Fillet stepped forward once again, almost within arm's reach, her knife raised in a neutral position. Brisket followed the line of the blade carefully, unable to step back into the stone pillar she knew was behind her, but clearly unsure how to press forward.

She chose to duck to Fillet's left, trying to force a parry from the knife rather than invite an attack as she swept for her opponent's legs. Fillet had known the move was coming before Brisket even started moving, and kicked out. The sideways punt hit Brisket in the chest, driving the air from her lungs in a loud gasp. Before Brisket could react, Fillet slashed out across her right arm, drawing first blood.

Momentum kept Brisket moving, and she rolled back to her feet in a spray of fine sand, safely out of reach. She was too far away for immediate retaliation, but Fillet saw that Brisket's fingers were already slick around the handle of her knife, blood running downwards from the spiteful cut.

Still none of the other Butchers broke the sound, observing the trial with grim reverence.

Both knew that Fillet was the more skilled of the pair. She was entirely at home in this hell, senses honed to deadly effect, the true inheritor to the bloody Butcher throne. Repeatedly she led the dance,

darting at Brisket to strike with a clash of steel, and then dodging away again. As a hunter might stalk a wounded animal, Fillet was ruthlessly testing Brisket's strength each time. Both women knew that it was ebbing away with every drop of blood trailing from the stripe on Brisket's arm.

But the traitor wasn't done yet.

As Fillet dashed forwards again, Brisket didn't try to dodge, instead lowering her shoulder and throwing the weight of her whole body forward. One foot raised from the ground, Fillet was unable to twist aside in time, and Brisket slammed her over, both women landing in a tangled heap. The fight suddenly became desperately close, each of them trying to gain the upper hand and deliver a fatal blow.

Brisket held Fillet's knife hand by the wrist, firmly pushing the weight of her good arm down to pin the more agile woman in place. Her own knife had been dropped somewhere in the fall, no use now, and her bloody fingers instead wrestled with Fillet's own. Although Brisket was the stronger of the two, Fillet could tell her opponent's free hand was beginning to grow numb from blood loss. Muscles straining, she was overpowering Brisket, moments away from getting enough leverage to free her trapped arm and end the duel once and for all.

Brisket risked a desperate head-butt.

Sharp pain flashed across Fillet's face, and she blacked out for half a second, before her eyes blinked open

again. Her nose was broken, a messy explosion leaking a stream of red. Through the haze, she saw Brisket had taken the advantage, slapping the remaining knife out of reach before Fillet regained her senses.

Still unable to see straight, Fillet recovered as best she could, spitting a mouthful of blood into Brisket's face, and slamming Brisket down onto her back as she recoiled. Blindly, Fillet rained vicious punches down, relentlessly striking Brisket's skull.

The blows took their brutal toll, as Brisket's arms, bunched over her the top of her head, began to weaken and fall away. Fillet kept hammering away triumphantly, blinking blood out her eyes even as she watched Brisket slip into unconsciousness. Victory beckoned.

Brisket's eyes snapped open suddenly, possessed by some new resolve.

She bucked, and threw her assailant off, grasping Fillet by fistfuls of her dark hair. Fillet felt the back of her head smash into the ancient stonework beneath the sand, and then again, over and over, her vision dimming from blurs to darkness, the world spinning.

Letting go with one hand, Brisket scabbled for Fillet's knife, bloody fingers closing around the smooth grip. In a heartbeat, it was between them, the blade biting against Fillet's throat, the cold edge of the blade sharp and deadly. Fillet could feel it cutting in slowly, flesh parting as she strained to breathe.

Brisket had won. She held Fillet's life in her hands.

The trial was over.

In her head, Fillet urged Brisket to finish it. She was not afraid of death. She would die as any great Butcher might, lost to the exhilaration of the duel, a worthy end. There was no shame in this fate, the trial taking its bloody toll.

At least once she had gone, Fillet trusted Brisket to unite the team again. The woman had proven her resourcefulness this day.

Her vision beginning to clear, Fillet focused on Brisket as the woman looked around at the other Butchers. They watched in silence, awaiting the final bloodletting.

Fillet felt a trickle of blood run over her skin as the knife blade dug in a fraction closer to her windpipe. She fancied that she heard a whimper from Meathook.

The gods would have to forgive her a moment of weakness, but she would miss her little Erskirii.

Brisket's eyes returned to Fillet, and for a moment they shared a long, hard stare, the metal of the knife as heavy between them as the tension in the air.

The final cut never came.

Fillet realised that Brisket couldn't do it. Couldn't take the life which the trial had chosen.

No matter how much she had been determined to win, at least Fillet would not be the one to deny the trial its toll. She tried to force her throat upwards and into the blade, to steal the choice away from Brisket, even as the redheaded woman slid the knife away and threw it aside.

Fillet knew then that she had misjudged her opponent. Brisket was nothing but weak and craven after all, a usurper unfit to lead the Butcher's Guild. Being a leader demanded ruthlessness, and conviction to follow through with the moment, no matter how bloody. Brisket possessed neither quality.

Fillet half grinned, half snarled her disgust at her opponent. Brisket could only watch, distraught, as the other Butchers surrounding the pit turned their backs to her one by one, as they sensed the same truth. Her challenge was irrefutably over, the verdict final and damning.

Brisket was exiled, forever in disgrace, for failing in her bid for leadership, and for not upholding the blood pact of the trial. Such crimes were unforgivable, further beyond the creed of the Butcher's Guild than she had thought it was possible to stray. Even Brisket's most loyal supporters couldn't respect her refusing the duty of the trial.

Fillet smiled as widely as she ever had, her teeth pink from the blood in her mouth. Although she could have demanded Brisket put to death, she would not. An execution was almost pointless, now that Brisket's power was gone. Let her wander alone for the rest of her days, shamed and cast aside. That would be a worse torment by far. Brisket's allies would soon cross the floor and re-join the Guild in shame.

Fillet had won the civil war after all, and unquestionably taken the throne of the Master Butcher for herself at last.