

# A FREE CITIES CAROL

Obulus was dead, to begin with. There was no doubt whatsoever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the Lord Chamberlain and witnessed by the chief clerk, and the undertakers had carried out their grisly duty in full view of the professional mourners. Scalpel had signed it too. Inheritor of the Ferryman's mantle, Scalpel's name was now good to whatever she put her hand to.

No-one and everyone would miss him.

Scalpel had been the closest soul to Obulus, one of the very few he had indulged in any sort of confidence. Even then, she'd bore him little goodwill. Their interactions had been business-like and brief, with no confusion of affection or friendship. The respect she offered him was that of one predator acknowledging the apex predator and little more.

Others knew only to fear the Ferryman.

He'd never done anything to the contrary to refute that position. While he was alive, every shadow had eyes, each passer-by a pair of ears seeking the greatest of secrets. From the upper echelons of the nobility right down to the undercity scum in the sewers, Obulus' reach extended into people's lives and left them dancing like puppets. Regardless of your station in life, the Ferryman's talons had scratched at your skin or over your door.

No longer. Obulus was dead. Dead, as the common man said, as a door-nail. Not that a piece of iron could truly ever be dead without a soul.

The Spirit Weaver leaned back and rose from her perch, walking off the stiffness settled into her bones. Though she couldn't see the waning daylight, she knew from the absence of voices and footsteps echoing down into her crypt that it would be dark by now. It was the end of the year, the time when those of the Solthecian faith celebrated and gave gifts to each other, even the sternest of chamberlains and magisters retiring for the holiday. Most would be leaving early to go to places of warmth and cheer.

It didn't matter to Scalpel. Her haven was always cold and bleak no matter the time of year, the chill air stale and rank.

Across from where she sat lay several of the old tomes and ledgers Obulus had kept in his quarters, his secrets and lies laid bare at last. It was fascinating, if time intensive reading. For the last three days Scalpel had seldom stopped, her eyes poring over the words in the grave candlelight.

Her fingers found a crook in her neck, and she massaged it away with a grimace. Tilting her neck side to side with only the slightest of clicking sounds, the Spirit Weaver absentmindedly reached to the cold tea left by the side of her desk. She sipped it thoughtfully before taking a longer draught, wetting her dry throat. Over the top of the ceramic cup she surveyed the

space, searching the assembled spirits for the balefire glare of her tormentor.

She was relieved to see Ghast maintained his absence, lurking still in whatever depths he'd chosen to haunt following the murder. Once upon a time, Scalpel had feared nothing either alive or dead, but the Silent Terror frightened her to the very core. The shade had almost overwhelmed her and wrested control. His return would doubtless be equally as traumatic. The memory of his eyes burning into her left Scalpel with a shudder like feet over her grave.

Head suddenly muddy, Scalpel raised a hand to her brow, finding a layer of cold sweat. When she removed it, she was no longer alone. A fresh dread crept over her flesh at the sight of the grim shade now standing opposite.

'What do you want with me, Ferryman?' Her voice turned to a low hiss, filled with malice.

'Much. I have plenty to reveal to you, my trusted aide. My blade in the dark. My murderer.'

'Lies! Your secrets are all here, shade. Laid out in your precious books, scribbled by your own hand.' She turned away from the apparition, tottering uncertainly on feet that felt suddenly heavy and drunk.

The interior of the Ferryman's study awaited her, rich firelight dancing over the stone walls and wooden shelves. Eyes wide, Scalpel felt her heart racing in her chest as she recognised the scene.

'You cannot escape me, murderer. My legacy will always surround you.' Obulus' voice sounded from behind, echoing boldly from the walls.

She whirled to confront him, only to see the dreaded vision of the Ferryman hunched over in front of the fireplace once more, as he had been that fated and bloody eve. His shade stood patiently to one side, staring her directly in the eye.

‘Step forward along your ill-omened path, murderer. Fulfil the destiny of this violent past.’

Scalpel felt her leg moving, propelled by some otherworldly possession she was unable to resist, relentlessly drawing her ever closer. She opened her mouth to offer retort but no sound came, her voice entirely muted.

‘How does it feel, becoming the victim of forces beyond your control?’ Obulus’ voice was as even and dispassionate as she recalled in life, his tone somehow conveying a scathing rebuke nonetheless.

‘I was afraid.’ Silence stepped out from the shadows besides Obulus, long robes soaking up the warm light until his face alone seemed to float disembodied. ‘Uncertain of myself.’

‘Craven? Or merely wearing a coward’s crown as a pretence?’

‘I was enthralled. My pulse racing, the blood chasing around my body.’ Silence replied where she couldn’t. ‘I am become the Thorn, the needle which draws the blood of its master.’

Scalpel tried to shake off her disbelief and pull away, rewarded only by a second footstep over the carpet. Another and she would be on top of the kneeling

figure. Her hands began to raise unbidden, long knife reflecting the light in a bright burst.

'He is coming.' Silence's voice couldn't hide the sense of fear she felt, as a third figure swam out of the gloom.

Riven by a festering canker, the shade bled more malevolence than ever before, stealing warmth from the air. Jagged teeth rose from the wreckage of a broken and rusted mask, fallen to reveal a stare absent of anything but hatred for the living.

Her body a deadened mass beyond her control, the Spirit Weaver nonetheless felt herself recoil from Ghast, her soul desperate to escape the apparition's gaze.

'You have betrayed not only me, but the creed of your people, murderer.' Obulus' mocked her, his lip turned cruelly upwards. 'A Spirit Weaver must never let themselves be ruled as they seek to rule others, lest their own destiny be stolen. That warning, passed by your ancestors, went unheeded this eve.'

Ghast leered out of the darkness, rotting flesh milky and pale despite the warmth of the fire. Balefire blazed in the depths of hollowed sockets, malignant and unrelenting. As her knife reached towards the Ferryman's throat, the Silent Terror's mouth dropped open in a scream, a wretched and hideous screech to match his morbid visage. The moment Scalpel's blade pierced the Ferryman's skin, the spectre vomited spoiled blood outwards in a tide, a stream of red choking the air.

Silence took up the wail echoing inside her skull, as the crimson taint in the air rushed towards her in dark and unholy ribbons, wrapping around her body and holding her fast. Scalpel felt the air strangled from her body, constricted and chased away. Over it all, Silence's scream reached a new intensity.

Death swam before her.

'Enough!' Obulus' hand slammed downwards onto her desk, breaking the scene and returning Scalpel to her crypt. Fallen to her knees and gasping for air, she could only listen as he addressed her. 'You are weak, murderer. Did I die... for this weakness?'

'N-no.' Her voice felt like it had been dragged across hot sand, cracking from the blistering heat.

'Then you are even more the fool than I thought.'

The world shimmered and changed once more, this time the cold grey hues replaced by a less severe glow, emanating from scores of candles. A murmured chorus rose to her ears, the gentle sound of hundreds of voices raised in carol. When she caught her breath and raised her head to see the world at last, Scalpel found herself in the aisle of a great cathedral, long rows of robed supplicants standing to either side.

The Ferryman's shade hovered as persistently as ever. 'In life, I was condemned as the evil corrupting the Empire of the Free Cities.' He offered a disdainful stare at his surroundings. 'This is the blight threatening you all now.'

Scalpel found the strength to rise to her feet, just in time for the shade to round on her, snarling his

recrimination. 'You say that I did not die for your weakness, yet you served these devils like a dog. Do not think that I was blind to the Saint's visit, murderer. They used you. And now look at their power! Their ranks swell beyond all comprehension.'

Scalpel's eyes roved over the ranks of devout followers, unable to comprehend the sheer press of bodies. This was an army more than a congregation, each figure wearing a determined mask over their features, eyes glazed from some mass delusion. At their head stood Grace, just as Scalpel recalled her. Azure blue and eggshell white gleamed in the light as the woman raised her arms and led the faithful in song, her expression triumphant.

'Before I showed you the past, and your infamy. This is the present, where the result of your pact is rejoiced by the Solthecian church, led by a figure more hateful and ignorant of your beliefs than I ever might have been.'

'I am no lamb, Ferryman. I stole your life in exchange for the future of the Guild.'

'You cannot cancel your sin by refusing reward, murderer. Still you have fulfilled their wishes. You would call yourself Puppet Master, yet you are little more than puppet.' He paused. 'If you had backbone... if you had backbone, you would be the woman who sits now alone in the lonely graveyard, one soul pitted against a hostile and unforgiving world.'

Scalpel didn't know who Obulus was referring to, but it didn't matter. Her cheeks flushed in shame. His logic was irrefutable.

‘No matter.’ The vision dissipated at his words, leaving the pair of them back in Scalpel’s lair once again. Scalpel looked around her, her mind calmed by the frozen stillness of the room and the low light. The spirits had fled, she noticed.

‘Tell me, murderer. What do you see now? Do you really possess the blind hubris to think your actions can possibly be your own?’

Scalpel didn’t offer him a reply, preferring to keep a sullen silence.

There was but a moment of calm between them in the sudden quietude before the Spirit Weaver detected a faint slither, the sound of leather scraping across hard stone tile. She turned back to the shade. ‘What do you visit me with now? More nightmares from this hellish present you have created?’ It was impossible to keep seething hatred from her voice.

‘We are done with the past, and the present. Now, comes the future.’

She turned back to the entrance to her cell, alarm taken root in her belly. Her feet a leaden burden, she watched with growing trepidation as a trickle of yellow light began to paint the rough edges of the brickwork surrounding the entrance. The slither had grown to scraping footsteps, scratching insidiously into her mind.

‘I refuse your future, Ferryman.’

‘You cannot.’ His voice was cold and dead when it reached her ear, a whisper from beyond the grave.



Before Scalpel could give retort, a figure lurched into view, but a child at first glance. Lank hair ran like long streaks of oil from her scalp, its dark hue a stark contrast to the deathly pallor of her skin. In a hideous parody of the Solthecian carollers, the girl held a large candle in the palm of an upturned hand, seemingly uncaring of the molten wax which dripped down to sear her flesh.

Horrified, the Spirit Weaver turned to speak once more to the Ferryman's shade, only to find him absent. Her gaze swept to the open pages of his tome, a single silver coin placed on its aged parchment the only indication of his presence.

She returned to the doorway just as the mournful child lurched through, the grave light illuminating the metal discs set into the vacant sockets of her eyes. Scalpel didn't need to look closely to know they would be one and same as the Ferryman's tokens.

The Murderer bowed her head.

Dead he may be, but the Ferryman's legacy lived on.