



'EFFORTLESSLY READABLE. GRIMDARK
GASLAMP AT ITS VERY BEST.'
PETER MCLEAN, AUTHOR OF PRIEST OF BONES

'This city is going to burn, and when it
does, it's going to be *spectacular*.'

THE HAND THAT CASTS THE BONE

HL TINSLEY

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All characters and events in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons,

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Dedication

*For anyone who has ever felt like there's a hole in
their head where a memory ought to be.*

CONTENTS

A POORLY PAID GIG
THE MESSENGER
DEAD BUT NOT DONE
TWO DOWN, FOUR TO GO
WELCOME HOME
NO ALLY MORE USEFUL OR ENEMY MORE DEVIOUS
SPECTACULAR
CRUEL AND UNUSUAL PUNISHMENT
GOOD GRACE
JAVIER
ONLY FLESH
A FACE ONLY A MOTHER COULD LOVE
NOT MARIANNE
DEBTS
THE SWEET KISS OF THE LASH
DEFINITION OF LEGITIMATE
FIGHT OR FLIGHT
A CONNOISSEUR OF CARMEL
THERE'S NO SAVING YOU NOW
REZA ASIL
DELLA
DAISY TWO-FINGERS
SALVATION
A MONOPOLY ON GRIEF
TWO WORLDS
YOU CALL YOURSELF AN AMIDIAN?
TROUBLE
STITCHES
OVER THE EDGE

NO ONE EVER GAVE A DEER A PISTOL

THE HAND THAT CASTS THE BONE

BODY LANGUAGE

A HORSE CALLED HORSE

THE VOID

CHERRIES

A BEAUTIFUL DAY FOR A SLAUGHTER

WEeping AND WAILING

CARROT AND STICK

RUIN

ENTIRELY SATISFACTORY

FIRST LOVES

TASTY LITTLE BISCUIT

PARASITE

THE BEST WAY TO SUBDUE AN IRATE MARE

GREEN FIELDS AND BLUE SKIES

TEA

MASTER OF WAR

NO GLAD TIDINGS

MONROE

HALF-MADE GIRL

RUN YOU BASTARD, RUN

HELL HATH NO FURY

A Poorly Paid Gig

There was an indisputably distinct smell to the Hook. Downwind the neighbourhood had the aroma of an old wet dog. Upwind wasn't much better. Given that the city had been unseasonably warm for weeks, there was no longer anywhere you could go to escape it. The sun had rendered the area so pungent you could taste the smell, and John Vanguard was only responsible for half of it.

He lifted one arm to wipe his brow and wished he hadn't. Six days of continuous wear and his shirt had ripened, withered and leathered like a second skin. At this point he wasn't sure where his socks ended and his feet began. He glanced up at the darkening sky. Thick, purple clouds hung low yet refused to break. They were weighty with the promise of rain and ought to hurry up about it.

Ahead, working day done, the men of the docks lingered, delaying their homeward journeys. They talked and drank. They argued and drank.

Perhaps this would be easier than Vanguard thought. Maybe they would drink themselves to death and save him a job.

Slipping one hand into the bag at his side, Vanguard stood, sandwiched between a sheet of rusted iron and a half-rotted wooden fence.

There was a pain in his left shoulder. It crept up the side of his neck and nestled into the crook. He rolled the arm back a few times, trying to loosen the joint. It didn't help. Vanguard tried not to think about it. Any man who survived having a building dropped on top of him should expect some lingering after-effects. Vanguard supposed he ought to count himself lucky.

Several men stood gathered outside the sheds. Their silhouettes grew longer, casting shadows across the boatyards in the low light of early evening. The most inebriated of them wore a black band around his arm. Vanguard had been following that one ever since he left the churchyard earlier.

Trailing a mark around the Hook wasn't Vanguard's idea of a good time, but then, dispatching a man in the middle of burying a family member seemed crass, even to him.

"Whassit bleedin' called? That song they was singin'?" You know, ya do." Pitching forward, the young man let a bottle slip from his fingers. The glass shattered, casting shards across the ground. A loud, enthusiastic cheer went up from his companions. "Shurup, yer bunch a bastards."

People in the Black Zone had a unique style of mourning. In this case, however, it seemed more an utter indifference to the whole affair.

Sebastian Tennet - recently bereaved son and broker-of-hard-to-procure products - wiped his mouth with a dirty sleeve. "I need a piss."

"Not here. Go downwind," His companion grunted, one hand waving towards the far end of the docks. "Stinks enough already."

The gaps between the huts were treacherous. A veritable labyrinth of discarded junk, they boasted an obstacle course of loose chains, old crates and the odd barrow lying half-cock on broken wheels. The Hook was infamous for being one of the few places in the city where you were more likely to accidentally kill yourself than be offed by anyone else.

You'd think grief would make a man more aware of death in his presence; after all, it was rather the whole point - to remind you that, someday, your turn too would come.

Vanguard saw Sebastian stumble forward, attempting to negotiate a path. Slipping from his hiding place Vanguard walked across the space between the fence and the shack, passing by Tennet's colleagues who neither turned their heads nor noted anything amiss.

"Shit." Tennet careened violently to the left. "Where's thas come from?" He slurred, rubbing his knee, having navigated into the handle of a barrow.

Once satisfied he was a reasonable distance from his companions, Tennet began to fumble with his buttons. Vanguard was close enough now that he should have been noticeable, but Tennet did not see anything. Instead, he clutched his stomach, more concerned with the ominous rumbling of his gut than what might be lurking in the shadows. Tennet moved behind a stack of boxes. Vanguard watched the rope netting around them drawn taut. There was an audible sigh and the beginnings of a great cascading.

Eventually the noises slowed, and then stopped. Tennet was done and would not be made to depart the world with unfinished business. Knife in

hand, Vanguard moved into position. A quick calculation, taking into account Tennet's size and height, and Vanguard had the mark exactly where he wanted him.

He moved, lurching into the small space behind the crates with more speed and vigour than intended. That was his second mistake. The first had been to assume Tennet's throat would be where the knife could find it. It was not. Tennet's throat, along with the rest of him, could be found a few feet lower than that.

The young man reacted in exactly the way you might expect someone to react to a scarred, old man with a blade jumping out on you mid-shit. "Who the fuck are you?"

Propelled by his own body weight, Vanguard cursed the miscalculation. Losing what balance he had, he crashed forward. Tennet made an attempt to stand, resulting in them meeting one another in the middle. Vanguard thrust out one hand trying to find purchase and instead caught a handful of something warm and fleshy. Shit.

Now Tennet was pushing up. Vanguard felt his feet almost lifted from the floor. The younger man forced him back, until they were a tangle of arms and legs and he could barely keep hold of the blade, much less use it.

Sebastian made a grab for the knife. "I'll fucking gut you!"

He had one hand up in defence, the other wrestling for the blade and his trousers round his ankles. The crates shuddered. Tennet pushed again. The situation no longer called for delicacy.

Flesh was flesh. Vanguard drove the tip of the blade down. Thrust. Slash. Hope for the best.

It had been a long time since it had taken more than a single blow to bring an end to a mark. He punctured skin, hit bone, the knife stuck and twisted. One jab, two, three – and then he stopped counting.

Finally, clutching his stomach, Tennet slid down the wall. There was a sound like somebody throwing soup onto concrete. Vanguard stood and watched the young man blink a few times before slumping. It wasn't a good way to die, but he expected there were plenty of people that might argue a man like Tennet deserved a lot worse.

Vanguard reached back and touched his shoulder. The pain had intensified, muscles protesting at the exertion. He had nobody to blame for that but himself.

He checked Tennet's pockets, finding nothing but a few gambling receipts and, troublingly, a walnut-sized ball of hair which, judging by the colour, definitely wasn't his.

There wasn't much he could do about the body. With no Red Badges coming for this one, he would have to leave him there, insides out and mingling with the piss and shit. Vanguard would get nothing from the man's death, save the knowledge there was one less hunter prowling the streets.

He wiped his blade and put it back in the bag. As he did, Vanguard noticed the frayed edges of the strap where the material was wearing thin, but had no time to dwell on it. There was still one more job to do before the night was over.

Half a mile from where he stood, the people of the Hook gathered to mourn the loss of Francis Tennet, recently deceased father of the even-more-recently-deceased Sebastian.

Vanguard kept his head down as he made his way to the outskirts of the docks and an unassuming-looking house in the area populated by shipyard employees, where many had congregated in order to pay their last respects.

Most of the guests were already half cut on cheap liquor. Sebastian had disappeared shortly after the event began and with Francis's own son not bothering to stay long enough for the flies to settle, anyone still lingering was only there for the drink. Entering the house, Vanguard glanced around. Nobody noticed anything amiss, save for Miracle Ben, who sat just inside an open cupboard clutching a jar of pickled eggs. The old drunk was well known around the area, named for his talent for miraculously turning up anywhere there might be free food, despite an inability to walk under the steam of his own legs most of the time.

The old man lifted his nose and sniffed. Vanguard couldn't afford to stay long. He didn't often conform to social etiquette, but there was one unspoken rule upon which most people could agree - if you were going to attend a wake you really ought to turn up smelling better than the man they just buried.

Tennet's widow sat alone at a table laden with food she clearly could not afford to provide. The black veil on her head was pinned back, revealing a pale face with gaunt, hollow cheeks.

Nobody paid her any attention. The affair seemed typical of a wake in the Black Zone. Everyone kept a wary eye on their drink and a good deal of them appeared to have no idea who had actually died. They commiserated

and clapped each other on the back, saying things like “won’t be the same round here no more” and “least we’ve done ‘em proud” in a way that suggested they knew exactly who they were meant to be mourning.

Vanguard supposed that, in a way, he had known her late husband better than anyone. At the very least, he knew the truth. He wasn’t sure cutting a man’s throat made you friends, but it did make you close, after a fashion.

The whistling in his ear was back; a low humming that reverberated into his brain. It came and went ever since the collapse of Lucien Herveaux’s club. Vanguard had shaken his injuries for the most part, but this one griped at him still, a periodic irritation. He stuck one finger in his ear. After a second of intent rummaging it dissipated, and Vanguard moved towards the woman. Passing behind her, he came to a stop and slipped one hand into the bag. A moment later he stepped away.

Tennet’s widow looked up, face wrinkled in confusion. Vanguard lingered close to the door and watched. Placing one hand to her heart, the woman’s eyes welled as she saw the envelope left on the table.

From what little he knew of her, Martha Tennet was a meek and quiet soul. She had just been cursed with abominable relations and that wasn’t her doing. Perhaps she knew of her husband’s business, their son’s involvement, the shallow graves they dug. Perhaps she didn’t.

Sometimes they knew but didn’t say anything; when you were in that situation, it was better them than you. It was a sort of self preservation, the survival of the silent.

The money would not do much to ease her burdens, but it would take care of some of the practicalities. Vanguard could ill afford to give it, but it seemed right to do so. For one thing, it was her money. Or, at least, it was what had been in her husband’s coat when Vanguard acquired it.

He was keeping the coat. He also took some of the sandwiches from the table for later. Vigilantism was a poorly paid gig.

Slipping back out onto the streets, Vanguard took a little time to walk the Black Zone, going nowhere in particular. The sky still ached to burst and he was hesitant to miss the rain. Standing at the crossroads on the outskirts of the neighbourhood, he looked left then right. Vanguard had no idea where he was supposed to go next. There were no absolutes any more. All he had was an aching in his shoulder, a knife in his bag and a handful of sandwiches in his pocket.

A full three days later, in the Golden Quarter on the other side of D'Orsee, in an exquisitely furnished room in a splendid home, a dying man rattled out a final breath and bid goodbye to the world. There followed the slightest change in the wind.

The Messenger

Captain Felix Sanquain was a light sleeper. Back in the old days it had been a habit. These days, having a whole city to run made it a necessity.

He liked to spend the minutes before the sun rose alone, contemplating the day ahead. While the rest of the city slept, Sanquain would consider each step of the coming hours with all their possible meanings and consequences.

All of which meant he did not appreciate someone banging on his front door at such an ungodly hour of the morning.

A clock on the mantel revealed it was not long past four. The captain was a man to whom peace and solitude were paramount. Any visitor to his home at this time could mean only one thing.

Leaving the soft confines of his bed, the captain walked across the floor and opened the door to be greeted by a member of the household staff. He was duly informed a messenger had arrived and brought news requiring his urgent attention. In the privacy of his room, Sanquain took time to dress and prepare himself. Whatever was to come next, Sanquain would not return to his bed.

Descending the stairs, he ensured the sleeves of his jacket were just so. The messenger stood in the hallway, face flushed and breathing laboured. Wherever he had come from, he had come in haste. The boy swept into a bow and followed as Sanquain made towards the study.

Walking across to the open window, the captain pulled it closed and motioned at the housekeeper to bring coffee.

He watched the messenger produce a letter from his bag and hold it out. "Captain, I've been sent to inform you Lord Christian Le Faye is dead. I have a report for you."

Sanquain did nothing that might indicate his feelings on the announcement. He opened the letter and scanned its contents. "It's certain?"

The boy nodded. "Yes, sir."

There was a rasping to his voice. Sanquain could hear something keeping the breaths from coming naturally - asthma, perhaps, or some weakness in the chest. Those sorts of ailments were commonplace in certain parts of the city. You could often discern from which part of D'Orsee a person came purely by the cadence of an exhalation.

The housekeeper returned with coffee. Picking up the cup, Sanquain blew across the surface of the liquid. The messenger stood quietly as the captain rubbed the side of his chin between his thumb and finger, eyes roving over the report.

Le Faye's death was important news, though not entirely unexpected. The man had been dead for weeks, his body just hadn't realised it. Had the old bastard taken any longer about it, Sanquain might have been tempted to help him along.

The captain took a piece of paper from his bureau and began to write. "What's your name?"

"Me?" The boy stammered, "Lucas Harby, sir."

The lad was green, that much was clear. Fifteen or so by the looks of him - barely out of boyhood. His training would have drilled into him that he should speak only when spoken to and even then, it was best to limit any answers to 'yes' or 'no'.

"How long have you worked for us, Harby?"

"Three weeks, sir."

"This is your first position?"

Lucas nodded.

Sanquain saw the boy's chest swell with pride. It was little wonder. Here he was, less than a month into service and in conversation with the most powerful man in the city.

"You have family?"

Harby squared his shoulders, clearly buoyed by the captain's interest. Perhaps he was hoping for a promotion, something to allow his family to live a little better. "Yes, sir; my mother and two younger brothers, six and seven, plus another coming."

It was more information than Sanquain needed or wanted. He sealed his message carefully. "Where do they live?"

"Marion Square - in the Pits, just past the old slaughterhouse," Lucas caught himself on the last word. The boy flushed. Sanquain could not blame

him. It was hardly the sort of place one ought to celebrate living in.

The captain held out the letter. "You are to deliver this message to my house in Heixlin. You will put it directly into the hands of the head of the household. The officers outside will give you instructions on how to get there. It must go immediately and under no circumstances be delayed. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, thank you," Lucas spoke with the energy of a young man who had just been handed a great opportunity to prove his worth. He placed the letter into his bag with utmost care. The captain waved one hand, dismissing him. He was confident Lucas was a good lad, one that would do his job without hesitation or question.

Meanwhile Sanquain had matters of his own to attend to. It would not be long before news of Le Faye's death would seep into the cracks of the city. "Mrs Lomax?" The housekeeper materialised instantly. "I need the carriage. Have someone instruct Durbin to meet me at the chambers," Sanquain flicked a finger towards the door. "There is work to do."

She curtsied, hurrying to convey the orders. Sanquain took another sip of coffee. If Le Faye was finally dead, the time had come to put plans in motion. He would need to consider carefully. As always, where others would see a cause for panic and reckless action, Sanquain would choose his movements wisely.

Despite the hour, the household staff assumed their duties as if powered by clockwork. By the time he finished his cup, a carriage had been made ready for departure.

From his seat, Sanquain watched the scenery passing by as they travelled the empty roads - the wide, cobbled streets of the Golden Quarter, the well-kept buildings and ornate architecture bursting with history yet showing none of the scars of it. Layers of paint and stone rebuilt and resurfaced like a woman perpetually filling the wrinkles in her face. Behind them, smoke billowed from the unseen yonder, another world living and breathing beyond the pleasant foreground.

On arrival, the captain approached the main doors of the tower, each opening the moment he drew close. Sanquain entered his private elevator, and stood hands clasped as he ascended each floor to the top level. The clerk manning the desk outside his offices bid him a good morning, eyes still red from sleep, and Sanquain entered the chambers that dominated the higher floor.

Durbin sat in a chair, looking like he'd spent the morning sucking nettles. He said nothing, merely clearing his throat on the off-chance Sanquain had failed to notice him. It wouldn't have been difficult. Sanquain found Durbin so bland the man barely seemed to exist.

The captain strode to the window, hands folded behind his back. "What's the report?"

"Christian Le Faye is confirmed dead. The doctor attended him just before midnight last night. Shortly after his arrival, Le Faye was found collapsed," Durbin took the physician's account from his pocket and laid it on the table. "Le Faye was moved to his bed and passed away some two hours later. The initial report suggests an apoplexy. Word is already on its way to the other council members."

Durbin spoke with a grim face. Sanquain had never seen him look any other way. Twice as efficient as his predecessor, he had done well since his promotion in shaping the Red Badges into something more efficacious.

"How go the patrols?"

"Three arrests last night. We've received reports of trouble in Briage and Lycroix, several gatherings and another blockade. They're becoming more frequent."

"I'm aware," Sanquain spoke over his shoulder. "I assume we are too late to delay the convening of the general council in Briage?"

"Le Faye's death came too late; they will have already met by the time the news gets to them. Do you want me to send a request to call a second meeting?" Durbin had the sort of voice that would make a man despise his tongue.

Sanquain shook his head. "Not yet."

"What about the Le Faye business?"

That, Sanquain mused as he surveyed his city, was quite the question. From high above the market place, he saw the first glowing lights hanging from the carts of early traders starting to set up their stalls. They pierced like pinpricks through the blackness below. D'Orsee was waking to uncertain times. "Send patrols to Le Faye's yards; see there are men stationed on each gate. Get word to the foreman that operations are to cease until further notice. Anything else would be disrespectful. We will announce today as a day of mourning."

Durbin seemed hesitant. "Closing the dock won't go over well. Any trouble in the Black Zone and the Cousins will like as not use it to cause

unrest.”

Sanquain frowned. “What do we know?”

“Not much yet. Only that a name has been mentioned by several prisoners in the hole - a man going by Monroe. They won’t tell us more than that.”

“In which case, it is your duty to ensure we are sufficiently prepared for such events.” Sanquain turned, making sure Durbin was able to see an expression denoting a lack of patience for any failings. “May I remind you that our city representative on the general council is dead? What message does it send if we continue to allow his business to trade as normal? Close the yards, ensure they are secured and take any troublemakers in hand.”

With a sharp bow, Durbin confirmed it would be done. The captain dismissed him and took his seat, glad of the chance to finally be alone.

Sanquain sat quietly, mind wandering over all the possibilities something as small and insignificant as an old man dying could bring.

People often assumed Sanquain’s authority was absolute. That was because their world was small and with it, their perspective. The captain had limits thrust upon him, as did any man. His dominion extended only as far as the borders of D’Orsee and the surrounding towns, boroughs and villages that it claimed as vassal territories. Beyond that, Sanquain had no more jurisdiction than any other city leader.

The country, Soussan, was as fractured as the city, operating as a collective of small kingdoms without kings, each almost an individual in their own right. The only power was that of the general council; one delegate from each of the six great cities, created to act as a united assembly to represent the greater good.

For years, Christian Le Faye had served as D’Orsee’s proxy at the table of councilmen. Now he was dead, there was an empty seat. Soon the matter of Le Faye’s successor would be broached.

Sanquain would need to ensure it was a puppet of his making - a channel through which the captain could steer the council to make the right decisions for everyone. He called for his clerk, the door opening no sooner than he had spoken. “Have flowers sent with a message to Lady Le Faye. I should like to call on her to pay my respects. When she is ready to receive visitors.”

The clerk nodded and went about his business. Sanquain leant back in his chair, considering his lot as the morning sun rose. Now it became a

game of patience. Plans had been set in motion and it was time to call upon particular resources. Death was coming to the city and when it did, Sanquain would see they were prepared to welcome him home.

Lucas Harby arrived at Sanquain's house in Heixlin, a small suburb no more than thirteen miles outside the city, shortly before ten in the morning. A stout, middle-aged woman answered the door and introduced herself as Mrs Brown, the head of the household.

She read the letter as Lucas stood in the hall. There was a curious noise coming from behind one of the doors. It sounded like an animal, scratching at the wood with blunted claws. A sudden moan, low and frightful caused the boy to startle as he realised it was a person. Steadying his composure, Lucas tried to dismiss any troubling thoughts and shifted from foot to foot. Some things were none of his business.

Mrs Brown thanked the boy for bringing the message. She declined his offer to take a return letter back to Sanquain. She did, however, make it clear Lucas had done an exemplary job of executing his duties and gave him a glass of water to quench his dry throat before he began the long journey back to D'Orsee.

Lucas left the house, confident things had gone well and that this would put him in good stead for any future tasks of importance Captain Sanquain might see fit to entrust him with. It never hurt to have friends in high places.

A few miles down the road back towards the city; Lucas felt a tightening in the throat.

It was followed by a creeping paralysis that took first his legs and then the rest of him, forcing the boy to fall at the side of the road as he jerked and gasped, pulling in any small breath his failing lungs would allow until the very last moment came and choking, frothing at the mouth, his head rolled to one side.

Later that day a Red Badge arrived at the front door of a shared dwelling, just past the old slaughter house on Marion Square. The envelope he held relayed to Mrs Harby the news of her eldest son's demise. It also contained his wages, and a note from Captain Felix Sanquain expressing his

heartfelt regret that Lucas Harby should tragically succumb to the weakness in his lungs at such a tender age.

Dead but Not Done

Everything was cold and sterile. There was a silver tray on the table and Tarryn could smell the carbolic soap resting in its dish. White walls, smooth floors and tiled splash backs. An array of scalpels, knives, and other instruments equally as horrifying were laid out ready for their next unfortunate victim.

Others might not have been able to detect it, but no matter how much they cleaned them, Tarryn could still smell the dried blood between the floorboards. He might as well have been in a butcher's workshop.

"Follow my finger," the doctor let one hand hover between Tarryn's eyes. He moved it from side to side. Tarryn could not help but notice there was still dirt beneath his fingernails, even though the skin was scrubbed raw. He imagined all the various diseases that might be festering beneath them. Lowering the hand, the doctor nodded and scribbled something on a pad of paper. "Any residual pain?"

"No," Tarryn shook his head.

He was lying.

The doctor furrowed his brow. He turned away for a moment and took up one of the instruments. "Look to the left."

Tarryn did as bid. The doctor pushed something cold and hard into his ear. They both sat for a moment as the doctor listened to what was inside his head and Tarryn wondered if he could hear all of the dark thoughts. "What about headaches?"

"Not recently."

That was another lie. They were getting worse.

After Tarryn was lifted from the debris beneath Herveaux's club, he had spent much time drifting in and out of consciousness. In those weeks he did not know a moment's peace or a single second of silence. He dreamt of dark, violent places. He saw images of the dead – Paulette, the old barkeeper, the balding doorman with the quivering stomach whose name he

did not know. When Tarryn's health returned and the scars faded, the nightmares did not. It had taken a month to learn how to shut them out. Doing so came at a price. He often suffered from such agonizing pains in his head as to make him want to tear his own skin off.

"Excellent," the doctor leaned back. Disposing of any soiled tools, he dropped the notepad into his desk drawer and shut it. A report would no doubt be making its way back to Sanquain before Tarryn left the building. "You should count yourself lucky. Most men would have died following an accident such as yours."

Tarryn could scarce keep from laughing. There was nothing accidental about what had happened to him. An accident was tripping over your own doorstep or getting careless with your razorblade.

Accidents rarely left you with smoke in your lungs and thick, black poison in your veins. It was still there now. He could feel it, slowly suffocating him from the inside out.

"Medically speaking, there isn't anything more we can do for you that time won't naturally do of its own accord," the doctor was speaking again, "so I see no reason not to discharge you from our care at this point. Unless you have any questions?"

Tarryn stood, catching a glimpse of his reflection in the window of a cabinet. The surgeons had done a remarkable job. When Tarryn first saw his face after the Splinters, he had been convinced the scars left across his temple and jaw would be there forever.

A few months later and you could hardly tell they had been there at all. All that remained was a criss-crossing trail of almost iridescent lines, like a spider's web stroking the side of his cheek.

The doctors told him it was a miracle. Tarryn didn't bother to correct them. He knew the truth. That whatever was inside him had simply pulled the scars back below, assimilating them into his being so they could stay where they belonged, inside, unseen.

Tarryn buttoned his shirt. He didn't feel the need to pay much attention to anything else the doctor had to say. Their dealings with each other were complete. Before he left, the doctor handed Tarryn a prescription, along with directions for where to procure the medicines and how he was to take them. Tarryn did not listen. He had seen enough of what pills and potions did to a person.

A driver was waiting outside. So small was the scale of the world in which Tarryn was sequestered, within mere minutes they were in open countryside. He suspected the charming village in which he had been receiving treatment was in fact, not a village at all but rather an extension of the estate owned by Felix Sanquain. The people who walked the streets might as well have branded his name on their foreheads.

Arriving back to the country house in which he had spent his convalescence, a member of staff opened the door and took Tarryn's hat and coat. The place was eerily silent. Tarryn was informed he would find his mother on the terrace.

The time spent in the countryside had done Madeline the world of good. It had almost been enough to give Tarryn hope that perhaps his mother was not entirely lost. Being away from D'Orsee brought the old woman a kind of peace. He saw now how the city choked her, holding her in its grip and toying with her memories.

Far from the smog and chaos, Lady Leersac thrived. She relished standing barefoot on the grass, taking walks through the gardens and eating scones on the patio without a care in the world. She had even taken up painting. Bright, colourful daubs of colour smeared across canvas. They made no sense. But her world was nonsense and she was happy for once.

Tarryn was not. Part of him wished his mother's contentment could have been enough to make him so. Perhaps it would, had any of it been directed at him. The truth was, Madeline's good fortune had been paid for by her son's suffering. It irked Tarryn that she no longer looked him in the eye, even to spew bile and insults. The violent, volatile nature of their relationship had been replaced with cold dispassion.

Tarryn found the women on the terrace, taking tea. Lady Leersac was smiling at the housekeeper, chattering animatedly to her companion. "You know, Brown, you'll never guess what I saw?"

Tarryn took his mother's hand and kissed it to announce his arrival. "What did you see?"

Lady Leersac did not react to the new presence in their midst. Instead, she continued to regale Mrs Brown, who seemed largely disinterested. "A squirrel, all fluffy and red just running about the lawn, lively as you like and then, *poof*, off it went up into the tree and away," her arms swept through the air to mimic the action. "What do you think to that, Brown?"

The housekeeper was unmoved. "I think squirrels are a nuisance to the lawn."

Tarryn did not imagine Mrs Brown to be a great fan of wildlife. She had the look of someone who drowned kittens by the sack.

Yet, somehow his mother had developed a strange fondness for the woman.

The housekeeper glanced up. "You're back."

"I am," Tarryn took the seat overlooking the steps leading down to the lawn. "The doctor has discharged me from care."

The housekeeper nodded towards the house, "A message arrived for you."

During the conversation Lady Leersac became enamoured by the sugar cubes. Grabbing a teaspoon, the old woman gleefully thrust it into the bowl like she was digging for buried treasure. Mrs Brown reached forward and took it from her, lest it be used as a projectile. Tarryn waited as the housekeeper rearranged the cutlery so it was out of arms reach. As she did, he felt the slow beating of his heart on the roof of his mouth. Perhaps his purgatory was coming to an end.

"The Captain has sent word. You are to leave tomorrow."

Leaning back, Tarryn tried to quiet his mind. Ever since they arrived in Heixlin, he had been preparing for the day he would be called back to D'Orsee. Now the day had arrived, he found it left him uncertain.

Sanquain had maintained little contact following their departure. Tarryn assumed the exile was a tactic meant to punish him, a reminder that the captain could call and dismiss him as mood and need dictated. Tarryn was a disobedient dog brought to heel by its master.

"Must we go?" Lady Leersac lamented. "It's perfectly marvellous here."

"It's time for me to go back," Tarryn's voice was thick with a longing he had not realised ran so deep. Despite all it had done to him, he needed the city. Tarryn craved the shadows. It was the only place he could feel peace. "I have work to do."

He waited for the inevitable barrage of insults. Lady Leersac pressed her lips together. Nothing came – no sulking, no screeching. Only a few months ago such a conversation would have ended in her screaming bloody murder at him for ruining their afternoon. While once that had been a burden, Tarryn would have welcomed it now - anything but this absolute indifference.

Turning slightly, Madeline addressed Mrs Brown. "I don't have to go alone, do I?"

The housekeeper shook her head. "We'll all go."

Tarryn's mother thought for a moment and then brightened. "Wonderful! I can call on my friend Suzette and tell her all about the squirrel." She seemed pleased with the plan.

Mrs Brown picked a wasp from a plate, "Who is Suzette?"

Taking up a piece of shortcake, Tarryn pressed his fingers into it, causing it to disintegrate. "She's dead," he said, flicking away the crumbs.

"Oh, I see."

For Lady Leersac, the dead did not stay dead. These days Tarryn found he could relate to that more than ever. Had he been able to tell her that, perhaps they might have once more found a way to connect. Reaching over and placing a hand atop hers, Tarryn tried to offer some comfort. Lady Leersac shivered, snapping her hand away as though touched by something made of ice.

It was a shame. If things had been different, he would have liked to allow her to stay as long as she wanted, smiling and dancing and enjoying all manner of dainty sweets and sugared things.

However, as much as staying would bring Lady Leersac relief from her pain, going back was the only way to release Tarryn from his. She would suffer, but he would take care of them both.

Madeline dropped her cup abruptly, drops of tea spilling over the sides and onto the saucer. "Brown," she spoke quietly, "Brown, I want to go inside; I don't like it here any more."

The housekeeper stood, helping the old woman to her feet. The delicate necklace around Lady Leersac's throat drooped listlessly towards the ground, her posture having worsened as the months went on. Old age had begun to twist and warp her body as much as it had her mind. Tarryn watched them walk together back into the house.

Alone, he looked out over the landscape. It was startlingly green. The grass, well tended and lush, extended back to a border of trees so uniform in their growth it was impossible to believe they were natural. The boughs stretched out over a winding path that led through an orchard laden with fruit. There were squirrels, and rabbits, and birds. Unlike D'Orsee, this part of the country was alive. It seethed and teemed and burst with it. This world

was alien to him, and Tarryn was ready to see the back of it. Yet there was something amongst the trees that would not be ignored.

Tarryn watched from the airy, sun soaked terrace. Eyes narrowed, he waited for it to come again. For a while there was nothing - only the dappled light trying to squeeze through the leaves.

Then it was there. A face, visible only for a moment, wide-eyed and without a tongue, blue and bloated and dead as anything, it passed between the branches before disappearing.

There was little Tarryn Leersac feared. Yet one thing lingered like a shadow over him. Something more terrifying than death and now he felt, just as inevitable.

He had been younger than any man ought to have been when he first saw his mother begin to lose her mind. First had come the headaches, and then the ghosts. Tarryn would need to tread carefully if he was to retain control. Theirs was a precarious situation. He needed to buy himself time before the madness began to consume him. Fortunately, Tarryn was something of an expert in the field. He had seen enough of it to know what it looked like, how it smelt and tasted.

There was a flickering pain above his right eye, a stabbing that bore into his brain like an ice pick. No matter what the doctors said, he would not take the medicine. It was important he should weather the pain. There was too much at stake and too much to lose. The ghosts had told him so. The dead were not done with him, and Tarryn was most certainly not done with death.

Two Down, Four to Go

The surest route to a contented existence was to have low expectations. Vanguard had learnt over the years it was the best way. Never ask for too much; never imagine more than you had. Those sorts of dreams grew teeth that bit you back. In his experience, he found that whatever you wanted from the world, the world would find a way to give you the exact opposite. It had a sense of humour like that.

Choosing to stay in D'Orsee following Cooke's escape had seemed, at the time, to be the right decision. Hell, even a good decision. As Cooke prepared to bring about the battle for power, so Vanguard would scour the streets. For the first time in his life, John Vanguard was choosing his own path. Perhaps, though, his expectations had been too high.

Vanguard had done little of merit in the months that passed. He wasn't a better man for his efforts. Nor was the Black Zone any safer a place. He knew nothing of Henriette, or Carmen, or Kasic. He did not know where Sanderson or Henriette's girls had been buried. Sometimes it felt as though it was all a wild, frenzied dream.

The hitch in his shoulder and intermittent ringing in his ear served to remind him that it had been very real. As it transpired, the sorts of injuries Vanguard suffered at the Splinters were not the kind you could just walk off.

Vanguard had done what he could while he healed. Several weeks were given over to combing the city in a bid to find out what became of Tarryn, though the search turned up no trace of the boy. In hindsight, it was probably a blessing.

Vanguard was having trouble tying his boots in the morning, much less doing anything else. Chances were he would not have come out of any reunion between them in an improved condition.

When it became apparent the boy was either dead or outside the walls, and having heard nothing of Cooke or the Cousins, Vanguard turned his

attentions to the rest of the Black Zone.

D'Orsee appeared to recover quickly from the violence at the Splinters. The morning following the supposed riot, Captain Sanquain dispatched patrols to sift through the wreckage and make their reports on the events of that night. They arrived before the fires had cooled, and news began to permeate through the streets of the terrible incident that had occurred.

Dozens of witnesses reported that a small brawl, led by a handful of anarchist upstarts, had escalated beyond control as a fire tore through the poorly constructed buildings of the Splinters. They spoke of the horror and confusion. The Red Badges bravely fighting to keep control as the flames and panic spread. People lamented their lost loved ones, as gossips condemned the shoddy workmanship that led to the collapse of the building. Anyone who recalled events differently quickly changed their stories.

Such was the way in D'Orsee. People forgot. Or at least, they remembered things the way they were told to remember them. They did not dare speak the truth.

And they did not dare speak of John Vanguard. He did not blame them. In their shoes, Vanguard would have done the same thing. There was nothing to gain by being bitter about it. He was hardly in a position to judge a man for doing what it took to survive.

Sanquain put a price on his head. Not an impressive one, but enough to tempt a man down on his fortunes. Vanguard found to their credit - and his surprise - nobody made any attempt to claim it. That was as far as their charity could reasonably stretch.

As hard as it was being a wanted man, being an unwanted one was worse. Given the choice between hailing Vanguard as a hero and handing him over to the Reds, the people of the Black Zone did the only thing they could. They did nothing.

Soon every door that might have been open to him closed. Vanguard became a phantom. Without money or connections, he gradually fell back into the shadows and it was there he found Francis and Sebastian Tennet.

Vanguard had been asleep, cradled in the soft embrace of a dirt mound next to an open grave, when voices rung out over the tombstones. It hadn't taken long to work out what sort of operation they were running. So it was that, after months of waiting, Vanguard found his purpose reignited. Now he had returned to the graveyard to see it fulfilled. Two down, four to go.

“Bloody wheel’s bust,” a slender man kicked at the side of the wagon. It was indeed broken, the wood splintered and cracked. It had been in ill repair long before Vanguard helped it along. “Eddie’s going to be pissed.”

Vanguard watched, church tower providing a blanket of cover from which he could observe the men at work. The slender man spat at the ground. “Everything’s gone to shit since Francis got done. You heard about Seb?”

A boy who couldn’t have been more than thirteen nodded. “Eddie told me. Ain’t right, is it? Some bastard slitting your gizzards while you’re having a shit. Who’d you think did it? My money’s on Sambray’s boys, right dirty feckers they are.”

Vanguard bristled. It wasn’t like he was expecting any sort of recognition for his work in the Hook, but they could at least attribute it to someone more credible than one of George Sambray’s thugs.

“Looks like Eddie ain’t coming,” the slender man looked up, “bloody typical leaving us to do all the work. We’ll have to get someone to bring a new wagon.”

“Well, I’m not telling Eleanor,” the boy started. A quick backhand soon put paid to any further protest. He whimpered, rubbing his cheek.

“You’ll do what I tell you, you little shit.”

Vanguard could understand his reluctance. Eleanor Shreve was a woman whose business catered to a particularly niche market and hinged entirely on the procurement of fresh product on a regular basis. With the Tennet men no longer in play production had slowed, and it was down to the others to remove the cadavers that had become too soiled. It was unlikely she would react with good humour to having to foot the cost of a new wagon.

When he first realised what was going on, Vanguard had almost been inclined to dismiss the whole affair. After all, it wasn’t as though grave robbing was uncommon. Besides, the dead were dead and unlikely to complain about anything that happened to them after. But Eleanor liked her product fresh, and Vanguard knew with absolute certainty that the bodies the slender man and his companions put into the earth had not come from there originally. So he made it his business to interfere with theirs.

The slender man pulled something from the back of the wagon. It hit the ground with a thud. He glanced up to see if the noise had attracted any attention. Whistling towards the other end of the bundle, the slender man

bid the boy take it up. Together they manhandled it across the cemetery before rolling it into an open hole. No doubt to await some poor soul who would be buried the next day and spend the rest of eternity unwittingly spooning a stranger.

“Go back to Eleanor’s and get some of the boys,” the slender man took up his shovel from the wagon, “and if you see that bastard Eddie tell him he can bury the next one by himself.”

The boy scowled, twisting on his heels and disappearing. Vanguard watched as the slender man turned back to the hole.

Silent and unseen Vanguard crept forward, grateful that this time his intended target had the common decency to be conveniently positioned. It would be the work of a single stroke. Blade in hand, he moved until he was only a few inches from striking distance. Vanguard looked down and realised his fingers were shaking.

In a fraction of a second, everything fell apart.

Vanguard didn’t know how it could have happened. Perhaps his shadow betrayed him. Maybe the noise of a branch snapping alerted his quarry to the dangers approaching. Whatever it had been, the mark turned and saw the knife.

Vanguard stumbled back, feet tripping over the crumbled remnants of headstones beneath him. Hissing, the slender man jumped forward with surprising agility. Vanguard saw the shovel flash, the glint of metal bearing down on him. Pain tore through his leg. It came again, swinging in an arc and caught the side of a tombstone with a clang that could have rattled the bones beneath. The slender man retracted it, spitting out curses.

One hand grappling at the loose soil, Vanguard lifted the other out in front. He could see the long white hairs on his attacker’s head in the moonlight, the scowling features of the slender man meeting his eye.

The inherent skills that had always come so naturally were failing him. The shovel came down once more. If he could not escape, Vanguard would be next to end the night in a shallow grave. He made a grab for the handle, writhing like a snake to avoid the cut of its blade and managing to take a loose hold. The slender man kicked out, boot landing central to Vanguard’s chest.

The impact sent Vanguard sprawling, elbow smacking against the rubble and sending waves of rolling nausea to his stomach. Every nerve ending was shocked into life. Sensing his disorientation, the slender man

went for a final swing, intending to stave in Vanguard's head. Strength ebbing Vanguard moved, scrambling to his feet as the spade slammed into the ground.

Adrenaline surging he ran, chest heaving, feet skimming over the loose shale path that led to the streets. At first he feared the slender man might catch up. His muscles tensed, bracing for the shovel to slam down between his shoulders.

Some time passed before he realised nobody was following. Tired and aching, Vanguard limped across the Pits until reaching the familiar blackness of the tunnels leading to the Tanners.

Back pressed to the wall, he slid down, clutching his leg and taking all manner of moss and sticky substance with him as he went. Bearing the pain through gritted teeth, he lifted the ripped material of his trouser leg. A vicious bloody gash in his outer right thigh, flesh gouged away.

Vanguard closed his eyes.

He needed somewhere safe and quiet to rest.

It took Vanguard the remainder of the night to make his way to the Bells, an area beyond the Tanners that acted as sort of no man's land between the city and the walls that surrounded it. Nobody lived there, save for a family of foxes and a few drifters who would constantly fight over whose home it ought to have been. In their defence, the foxes had been there first.

Vanguard found a bush that offered some cover and, having depleted the last of his energy, spent the next day drifting in and out of consciousness.

When he woke, his shoes had gone.

He supposed he should be grateful he'd had the presence of mind to hide the bag before passing out. But he wasn't sure he cared any more.

An optimist might hope perhaps that was enough for one man to endure and subsequently the universe might show a little mercy.

The world was not that kind. Vanguard peeled back the material around his thigh and checked the wound. He winced as the cloth tore from the raw meat. It was hot to the touch, an eruption of infected flesh.

As it stood, there were two options open to him. Either, he could lie in the dirt and slowly concede to death by infection or exposure, likely ending his days as fox shit. Or he could do something really stupid.

It was not an easy journey. By the time he got where he was going, another day had passed. As his destination hove into view, Vanguard could

no longer walk without aid. Desperate, dirty and half-dead, Vanguard fell to his knees and crawled forward to do the unthinkable. Seventeen weeks exactly after John Vanguard vowed never to play puppet to another man again; he crossed over the barricades into the Butchers and cried for mercy.

Welcome Home

Any hopes Tarryn harboured for a simple transition back into life in the city lasted precisely six minutes. Falling to his mattress, exhausted by the constant wailing of Lady Leersac in the limited confines of their carriage, he was disturbed by the sounds of destruction being wrought upon the house.

He went downstairs to find Madeline standing in the hall, knees bent, brandishing an umbrella.

“Give that to me,” Mrs Brown went to take it before any further damage could be inflicted on the furniture. “I won’t ask again.”

“*Somebody* changed the clocks,” the old woman glared at the grandfather clock whose face she had just reduced to shards. “This is one is looking at me funny. I don’t like its attitude.”

Tarryn sighed. “It’s a clock, it doesn’t have an attitude. Come away before you hurt yourself.”

Lady Leersac did not like change. Tarryn should have anticipated this. It was hard enough for her to accept a new quilt, much less an entirely new house. But he had rather hoped she would get at least as far as the parlour before wreaking havoc.

At the very minimum he would have liked to have taken his coat off. He descended the last few steps and tried to place a hand on her arm. Lady Leersac growled. Mrs Brown went to fetch the vials from the medicine cabinet.

“Why must you be like this?” Tarryn felt the words echoing off the walls. They bounced around, unable to penetrate anything. It was like throwing pebbles into a ravine. “Why can’t you see what I’ve had to do to give you all of this?”

Tentatively he took a step forwards. Lady Leersac lifted the umbrella like a weapon. Tarryn leaned in, and spoke as softly as he could. “Can you even hear me any more?”

Lady Leersac looked at him blankly. With a firm grip, Tarryn took the umbrella and prised it from her hands. She blinked, before stepping back, seemingly unaffected.

Looking at the carpet, she noticed the mess. “Oh just look at that, it’s shattered, shattered, shattered,” Lady Leersac nodded. “Shattered absolutely.”

Mrs Brown returned and brought with her a tonic. Tarryn watched as the housekeeper attempted to settle his mother into an armchair in the sitting room. The old woman was chattering again, reminiscing about events from days past that never happened. The clock would need repairing. If Sanquain couldn’t send someone, Tarryn would have a go at doing it himself. It would feel nice to fix something. It would give his hands something to do.

He stopped for a second and pressed his head against the wall, trying to alleviate some of the pressure he felt. Pushing it just the right way eased the pain. It allowed him to clear his mind, regain focus.

Interruption came in the form of a curt rap on the front door. Tarryn frowned, rubbing the sides of his temple. Looking back into the sitting room, he saw Mrs Brown otherwise engaged in trying to persuade a resistant Lady Leersac to consume her tonic. Another knock came, this time louder. Tarryn’s shoulders tensed. They became no less so upon opening the door.

Captain Sanquain stepped inside, taking off his hat. “I’ve come to welcome you home.” Pausing; the captain surveyed the broken clock and shattered glass. “I trust the journey was not too taxing?”

Tarryn hoped their guest did not intend on staying long. Sanquain knew of their situation, but knowing it and seeing it were two different things. Behind closed doors, Tarryn could keep them safe from the outside world. Other people’s opinions of them did not matter. But whenever anyone drew close enough to realise the truth, Tarryn felt himself invaded, violated. Already he recognised the hot sting of shame on his cheeks.

Not waiting for an invitation, the captain made his way into the sitting room and lifted his arms in greeting. Tarryn watched a wide smile spread across his mother’s face and it cut deep.

A model of charm and politeness, the captain took Lady Leersac by the hand. “Madeline, my dear, how have you been?”

Leading the old woman back to the chair, the captain sat her down. Tarryn watched his mother drop onto the cushions like an infatuated child,

clamouring for attention.

“Drink this.” Sanquain took the tonic from Mrs Brown and held it out. Lady Leersac gripped it with eager hands, draining the cup. “Very good.”

She blushed. “I’ve been on holiday.”

“Yes, so I was told.”

Madeline threw her head back and laughed. The tonic took affect quickly; already she slurred.

Nauseated at seeing his mother behaving like an insipid girl, Tarryn stepped forward. “Mrs Brown, please offer Captain Sanquain something to drink.”

He would not stand by and allow his mother to become a spectacle. Lady Leersac was not a toy to play with any more than Tarryn was a dog to give commands. If Sanquain was there to conduct business, they would do it in private. “The study is empty. Shall we talk alone?”

Sanquain stood. “No need; I shan’t be staying long. I just wanted to see that all was well. Besides,” he clapped his hands together, “I’ve brought a gift.”

Madeline shuffled forward. “What sort of gift?”

Producing a package, Sanquain knelt as he presented it. Tarryn bridled. Lady Leersac leaned forward almost quivering with excitement. She took it with trembling fingers. “Can I open it now?”

“Certainly you can.”

The paper was torn away, ripped into thin strips like confetti. Inside was a tiny red porcelain squirrel. Tarryn watched his mother squeal, pressing the ornament close to her chest and professing her love for it. There was a gnawing in the pit of his stomach. Not that she be shown such favour but that his gifts, which had been borne out of blood and sweat, remained unsung, unappreciated.

“To remind you of the months you spent in the country,” Sanquain advised, taking a step back. “A souvenir of happy times.”

“It’s wonderful.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Sanquain turned to meet Tarryn’s gaze. Tarryn nodded mutely.

The confidence that he could regain control of the situation had wavered. The message that came with the gift was clear. All the time they had been away, Sanquain had been watching. Tarryn stood on dangerously thin ice. It felt now as though he could see the dark swirling waters beneath

it. He followed Sanquain through the hall and back to the front door where they stopped.

“You’re aware of the *delicate* nature of our situation?” Sanquain scanned him top to toe.

“I know Christian Le Faye is dead.”

“There are decisions that must be made in the coming weeks. I may have need of you soon,” the captain stopped. “Until then you should report to me only when called. It is important your return to the city be discreet. I have great plans for us. I trust we understand each other?”

“We do.” Tarryn kept his voice even.

There was a flicker to Sanquain’s lips. Tarryn noted an air of something to the captain’s expression. It was as though Sanquain looked at him through a microscope, studying the minute details of his face. There was the slightest shift to the captain’s stance. Tarryn felt the gap between them had just grown wider.

Reason for being there concluded, the captain bowed. He once more offered Tarryn’s mother pleasant well wishes. She pouted, disappointed there were no further gifts to receive.

Standing at the front door, Sanquain turned to the street, crooking his fingers to let the driver know to bring the carriage forward. He nodded his goodbye, before descending the steps. From inside the sitting room, there was a great bemoaning over the captain’s hasty exit.

Durbin sat inside the carriage as Sanquain entered the vehicle. The captain did not often invite others to share space in such close proximity, but some conversations were best had while on the move. Besides, he had errands to run.

“Are we to go ahead?” Durbin asked.

Sanquain did not answer for a while. He had wanted a little more time to assess Tarryn, but things were progressing faster than anticipated and the situation grew more volatile by the day. The captain wove many strings. If he were not careful, they would begin to tangle.

“Yes,” he replied, “we move forward with the project.”

“And if I do this, you’ll make my position official?”

Again, Sanquain made Durbin wait for his answer. The carriage rounded a corner, causing them both to sway sideways. The captain balanced himself with one hand. “I will consider the promotion once we have made progress.”

It seemed that was enough for Durbin. The truth was, he really didn’t want much out of life as far as Sanquain could tell. Some men would only ever aspire to a taste of power. They could never stomach the whole cupful.

Tarryn Leersac aspired to greatness.

Unfortunately that was no longer something Sanquain was willing to grant him. He did have a plan in mind for the boy, but it was not the one either of them had first thought.

In the meantime, the odd kill here and there ought to keep Tarryn sufficiently occupied. After all, it was what he had come to Sanquain for originally, was it not? Sanquain was sure he could find enough lowlife scum to keep him busy.

“You must make sure he does not suspect anything,” he warned. “If the beast needs to hunt, we will give him little mice to pounce on.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Tarryn melted back into the house and shut the door. Lady Leersac was still gushing over their unexpected visitor and the kind gift bestowed upon her.

“I’ll take her to bed. She’s had quite enough excitement for one day,” Mrs Brown bustled about, collecting up shredded paper. A moment later she took Lady Leersac by the hand and led the old woman to the stairs.

Tarryn rolled his head back, stretching out his spine and listening to the pleasant sound of cracking bone. It was almost quiet once again. He longed for silence. Not the kind that came with the peace and tranquillity of the countryside. The sort of silence you only found in D’Orsee - the deathly quiet of the city at night.

He made his way into the kitchen and turned the taps on, watching the water circle around the drain. Letting his head hang for a moment, Tarryn

pressed both palms to the counter and drew in a slow breath. Something flickered in the corner of his eye and for a second he thought Mrs Brown had returned. He lifted his head and the world shrank down.

It was as though the walls pulled inwards, drawn into a single point that only he could see. Tarryn felt his chest tighten and his lungs constrict. He saw nothing else - only a ghostly visage grinning at him.

Sam Wick the boatman stood there, face bruised and twisted. He looked just as Tarryn remembered him, the marks of the knife still on his skin. The room went cold. Tarryn tried to make words but his lips were frozen. Stuck in a moment in which he could not move, could not speak, Tarryn willed himself to strike out. His hands would not do as commanded. They hung, limp and helpless at his side. The boatman's smile widened, splitting his face as the skin peeled back to reveal writhing, livid purple flesh beneath it.

With that, the face exploded into a cloud of fog - retched, poisonous, like the smoke from the fires, spreading across the room and dissipating into the air. Tarryn bent double and retched, the taste of it on his tongue - ashes and rot. Spitting into the sink, he tried to expel the foulness from his mouth. He lurched back, whole body tensing.

The doctors said there might be side effects to his injuries. For weeks, Tarryn had hoped they were right. That the faces of the dead that haunted him now were exactly that, symptoms of a jarred brain that would eventually heal. He had never believed it though. Tarryn knew they were a part of whatever made him what he was, they had just been lying dormant until the time came they would be silent no longer.

There could be no relief. He would rather face a hundred ghosts than be sedated and diminished. It was far better to weather the storm. No amount of dead men could tell him otherwise.

No Ally More Useful or Enemy More Devious

The tower overlooking the square had undergone a vast and rapid transformation in recent months. Now it stood as a bustling hive of activity. Red Badges stood guard at each door and along the length of every corridor. Clerks manned the desks, overseeing proceedings to the rhythmic pounding of rubber stamps against paper stacks.

Even the chambers themselves had a new air to them. Matching banners hung from the walls at either end of the room, deep colours against the pale wall for exaggerated effect. Above the fireplace was mounted a newly made coat of arms on a cherry wood plaque. The look was part military headquarters and part administrative hub, with just a hint of vampirism about it that was either a brilliant deliberate move or the result of a fanciful designer who read too many books.

Tarryn sat staring into the marble hearth. The clock chimed. A creeping, burning itch he longed to scratch wound around his wrist like a snake. He resisted the urge to claw at it. Lifting both hands, the captain spoke. "What do you think?"

Tarryn shifted slightly. Sanquain had not summoned him there to discuss the finer points of interior design. The captain indicated the closest banner. "A unified city must have a unified identity, wouldn't you agree?"

"I would," Tarryn kept his answers short.

"As for the rest of it," Sanquain heaved a sigh, "gaudy trinkets to create an illusion. But we all have our roles to play. Things must seem as people expect them to seem, and so I put up with it for the sake of appearances."

"Of course."

"The country will change soon," the captain squared his jaw, "As you can see, the Red Badges have expanded, improved. Much has been done to ensure our city stands as an example of efficiency and progress to others."

Now you are returned, I should like to be clear about some conditions with regards your position.”

Sanquain leaned back in his chair. “From now on you will report to Durbin, and follow the instructions you are given. You will conduct your work discreetly. You will also take these,” he brought forth a small bottle. Tarryn did not need to ask what it contained. “The doctor’s assessment was more than clear and I require you to be in peak condition.”

Tarryn nodded. “If that’s what you want.”

Sanquain lifted a finger, displeased at the interruption. “Let me make myself understood. You work for me. Everything you own – the house you live in, the food you eat, the clothes on your mother’s back – are there by my hand. They remain so as long as you abide by these terms.”

This time, Tarryn did not trust himself to speak. Instead, he nodded. There was no mistaking Sanquain’s meaning – Tarryn was back in the city, but the city was not his to roam. His fingers curled against the arm rest. “May I go?”

Sanquain looked up. “You may leave. I have things to prepare. Lady Le Faye is expecting me shortly – her son is on his way back to the city as we speak. I expect you two know each other?”

Something about the way the captain held his gaze upon imparting said news, told Tarryn he had done so deliberately.

“Simon Le Faye is coming back to D’Orsee?”

“Naturally. His father is dead. There is business to see to,” Sanquain nodded towards the door. “I’ll call for you when I have need.”

Tarryn stood, hesitating for a moment. There was a matter which as yet remained unspoken.

Since their last meeting, Tarryn had given long thought to what he might do if he were to meet John Vanguard again. The strange thing was, even after all this time, he still felt uncertain.

It was Vanguard who led him down this path and abandoned Tarryn to fate and deserved to suffer for it. Yet somehow, he could not fathom the possibility of a world without him in it. To learn the man was alive would raise many questions but, to his surprise, Tarryn found it would be preferable to learning he was already dead. One way or another, he had to know for certain. “Is he alive?”

Sanquain placed a letter opener down on the desk, “I won’t insult you by asking who you are speaking of, suffice to say the matter is no longer

your concern.”

“If Vanguard is alive, I’m the only one who can...”

The captain halted him. “In time, perhaps it will become necessary to discuss this further. For now I will not extend my resources into hunting down a man who has no power, no friends, no money and who - to all intents and purposes – is little more than a vagrant. You will *not* make a martyr of him.” Sanquain narrowed his eyes. “Am I understood?”

With nothing left to say, Tarryn stood, bowed and left the chambers. A short walk along the roads around the market led to one of the ornate stone bridges that skimmed the narrower, cleaner sections of the canals. He lingered there, watching the ducks poking about in the tangled reeds.

So, Simon Le Faye was to come back to D’Orsee after a youth filled with pleasure. The city would welcome him with open arms. Tarryn knew he ought to feel bitter about it, and was surprised to find he didn’t. He didn’t feel much about it at all.

Nobody had seen the youngest of Le Faye’s surviving offspring in years. The last anyone heard, he was flitting his way about the coast, frequenting clubs, bars and any sort of ill-reputed establishment to which his father’s name could gain him entry.

Tarryn remembered Simon well. During one July, before his mother lost her mind, Lord Leersac had gone away on business, leaving the two of them to live for a short time without fear or worry. Tarryn and his mother enjoyed the peace of that summer. Together, they attended Cynthia Le Faye’s birthday party.

Tarryn had been six years old, Simon twelve. The two boys sat under a chestnut tree, eating stolen cake like conspirators, jam and cream smeared across their faces until their mothers pitched fits at the state of them. They were normal children, doing the sorts of things normal children did. Tarryn thought he might have been happy that day.

Of course, things changed. As they grew older, Simon no longer saw fit to speak with him. Like so many others, he grew to find Tarryn strange and unpleasant. Now the boy was a man and, like Tarryn, without a father.

The difference was Simon's father had done what fathers were supposed to do. He had left Simon with a legacy. Tarryn stared down into the water, ripples and circles occurring where whatever was beneath pulled and sucked at the surface. The world passed him by and he stood unmoving. Things were different now - *he* was different.

When Tarryn felt the floor open up beneath him in the Splinters, it had never occurred to him it might be the end. Having spent so long in the company and study of death, it never crossed his mind to think it might come for him. Not really. But it had, and for a few brief moments as the darkness closed in, Tarryn Leersac had seen what awaited him.

Cynthia Le Faye had never been what anyone would consider an attractive woman. A mainstay of the Golden Quarter elite since fourteen, she debuted at Lord Alyson's September gala some fifty years ago to mediocre fanfare whereupon she met Lord Christian Le Faye and subsequently became engaged. Their wedding followed a long and cordial betrothal in which neither party spent any more time in the company of the other than necessary. It was a well received match, and proof a successful union could be dependent on nothing more than the ability to make small talk once or twice a month at mutual engagements.

Like most women of her breeding and status, her identity extended no further beyond that of dutiful wife and distant mother. That did not stop her maintaining her own estates and houses.

By the time of her husband's investiture on the general council, Cynthia was a veteran of high society. So much so that on his death, she reportedly draped herself across his corpse and wept openly for several hours, despite them having lived in separate houses for a good six months beforehand. It wasn't for show or for attention. She did it because it was what was done. Cynthia had been living as a widow since long before Lord Le Faye was cold, but for people of their ilk, even death had etiquette.

Sanquain sat in a conservatory surrounded by lavishly attended potted plants. Across from him, a long, black, lace veil made conversation more difficult than it needed to be. There was a loud sniff from beneath it.

"I'm so grateful you would pay us a visit in our time of grief," another sniff. One hand went beneath the net to dab each eye a single time with a silk handkerchief. "It means so much."

The captain pitched forward and took her free hand. "Naturally, your husband was an important and respected man."

He felt the shudder in her arm. Sanquain knew it would bring the old woman comfort to remember her husband had indeed been powerful and admired. Such things were more important to Cynthia than any other trait the man might have possessed.

“Thank you.”

A small, sandy-coloured dog ran around the furniture, growling intermittently and winding between the chair legs. Cynthia considered her companion with a listless sigh. “Poor Hank. He’s been quite desolate these past few days.”

The dog pressed its nose hard to the floor, making a beeline across the room before stopping to cock its leg against an unfortunate ficus. As he did, he eyed Sanquain with a cool self-confidence.

Sanquain pressed his lips together. “So I see. When do you expect your children home? I trust they will be in time for the funeral?”

The black velvet bonnet bobbed up and down. “We expect Simon by Wednesday. I’m afraid Sophia won’t be able to attend in her condition.”

“Of course,” Sanquain reached forward. Two glasses filled with lemonade had been set on the table. The captain took his and sipped. He didn’t have much of a sweet tooth, but it didn’t do to be impolite. Lady Le Faye had an important role to play in the days to come, as did her son. Some relationships required careful cultivation.

There was no ally more useful or enemy more devious than a socialite in the twilight of her years whose fortune was at stake.

“I hope having the Red Badges secure your husband’s yards has brought you some level of security,” Sanquain sat back and tried to catch a glimpse of Lady Le Faye’s expression beneath the veil. “Crime is a growing problem. We cannot be too careful.”

“Oh, the *business*,” she sighed with perfect ennui, “Christian took care of all that. I wouldn’t know what to do about any of it.”

So it began. The dance danced by rich old widows. Cynthia might never have had a hand in the workings of her husband’s business, but Sanquain would bet his life on the fact she knew everything there was to know about it, particularly when it came to the money.

“It must be a relief to know your son is coming home,” Sanquain replaced his lemonade glass. “At your age the last thing you ought to be worrying about is money, particularly with another grandchild on the way.”

There was a shift to Lady Le Faye's posture, the hunch to her back miraculously straightening. She turned to the man standing at the door. "Claude, you may leave."

The young man, who was far too good looking to be there on account of his outstanding skills in service bowed, and backed out of the room.

With great care, Cynthia Le Faye turned back to Sanquain and lifted the veil. Two remarkably dry eyes narrowed almost to the point of disappearing. "Ah," She said. "So, I understand now why you are here."

There was no point in pretending any longer. Captain Sanquain met her gaze with an equally emotionless countenance. "Your husband's debts are quite extensive."

"Debts incurred in the service of your city."

"For which we are grateful. But now we must discuss repayment. The debt being so large, it may mean the dissolution of the business and all its assets. The funeral costs alone will be vast. Unless you plan on forgoing the formal ceremony?"

If the thought of living in destitution was not enough to get Cynthia's teeth grinding, the idea of her dear departed husband receiving anything less than a full processional certainly would be. The old woman glowered, fingers troubling the black lace of her mourning dress.

"Councilmen have always received a service at City Hall. Christian was on the council for a long time. I doubt they would take the insult of a commoner's service lightly," Lady Le Faye knew that was true. She also knew it would not be enough to dissuade Sanquain from having her husband buried in a pauper's grave. He could tell by the way her voice was hard but her eyes revealed fear.

"Rest assured," Sanquain relaxed into the chair. "I have no intention of allowing any such thing to happen. We can, I'm sure, come to some arrangement over the repayment of the debts and allow Lord Le Faye to be laid to rest in a manner befitting his status."

Cynthia clasped her hands together on her lap. Her wedding ring gleamed as if only put on yesterday. The skin, though mottled and greying, was still remarkably smooth. The woman had never done a days work in her life. "So, you've come here looking to strike a deal?"

The captain had the upper hand when it came to youth and political prowess, but Cynthia was a part of the old elite – the aristocracy embedded in the city long before anyone ever heard of Felix Sanquain. She held her

own sort of power. There were many social climbers that would give their right eye for the chance of being close to the old woman. Cynthia knew this, and for that reason, was a shrewd negotiator.

Sanquain smiled. "The way I see it, we can be friends or we can be enemies."

Cynthia sniffed. "You want me to scratch your back on the promise you'll scratch mine."

"In a manner of speaking - I want the council to choose Simon as his father's successor."

The dullness behind Cynthia's eyes brightened for a moment. "Is that so? I find that hard to believe. My son has never shown the slightest inclination towards politics. Simon's only interest lies in the family purse - or at least how far his arm can reach inside before I snap it shut. What makes you think the council will choose him?"

"Because," Sanquain said. "You and I shall persuade them it is the best choice, for everyone concerned."

Lady Le Faye considered carefully. "And if the council should have a replacement in mind? I understand Franklin Orrell is favoured."

Sanquain had heard rumours to that effect. From the outset, it seemed a good choice. With the future of Le Faye's business and the matter of his estate to be settled, Orrell was, for the time being, the biggest employer and thus strongest economic power in the city. He was also a pragmatic, intelligent man. Fortunately for Cynthia, Orrell could not help him and therefore the captain had no use for a man like that.

In times of peace, each city would look to their own affairs. When the last war had washed across the country, this had caused problems. None of them had been able to agree on the best way to retaliate against the growing mob.

In the end, the captain's predecessor, Jules Piven, had proposed a solution on the advice of his newest and most highly acclaimed military advisor - a scenario in which one city would act as authority in matters of conflict.

Thus, the Renard Accords were born.

They allowed one man to act as war general, investing him with a position that carried as much power in one city as the rest. It was a good plan, but ultimately led to Piven's downfall. The scope of such a position

far outweighed the limits of his abilities. So was sparked the end of Piven's career and the beginning of Felix Sanquain's rise.

"At any other time I might agree. But war is looming, and Orrell makes no secret of his being opposed to such a thing. I need someone upon whom I can trust to speak in our best interests."

"You need a puppet," Lady Le Faye interjected, "And what of *our* interests?"

Sanquain smiled. "War brings opportunities. I have a number of highly lucrative contracts in negotiation at the moment; upon completion I will find myself needing ships to oversee the transport of a great deal of cargo."

Cynthia folded her hands against her lap. "I see. How do you propose we ensure my idiot son does not alienate the council?"

"Simon has been away from the city a long time. Men change." The captain dipped his chin. "I'm sure when he returns you will make clear how important it is he behave appropriately."

"Why should he listen to me? I'm only his mother."

Sanquain felt the deal nearing completion. "I'm sure you will find a way to provide suitable incentive. For now the Red Badges should remain at the yards to oversee proper administration – with of course, your cooperation."

Lady Le Faye's bottom lip twitched. Despite being a woman with a quick mind, keen senses and a practical nature, the general council would never allow Cynthia a seat at their table. The only authority she would ever wield would be quiet and unnoticed. She would exist in the shadow of her son, just as she had her husband. It was a shame really, as Sanquain suspected she might be much better at it than either of them.

"About the funeral," Cynthia squared her shoulders, "I'll require a full guard escort. The service will be at City Hall, with memorials to be held around the Golden Quarter – I expect there will be many people in attendance."

Sanquain nodded. "Of course."

"And white roses, there must be roses."

"That can be arranged."

The old woman leant over and took an ornate silver bell from the table. She rang it lightly once. "Will you stay for dinner, Captain Sanquain?"

Claude reappeared, bowing smartly.

Sanquain shook his head. "I have business to attend to, but I'm grateful you took the time to talk with me. I'm sure that in the weeks to come, we

will all find much to take comfort in.”

“I’m sure we will.” With that, Cynthia shrouded her face once more in black lace.

Furnished once more with his hat and coat, the captain left Lady Le Faye to her mourning. Outside, he paused for a moment. The meeting had gone exactly as planned.

It was quite a wonder, Sanquain mused as he began his journey back through the quiet and pleasant neighbourhood, that given their propensity for manipulation and deceit; the world was not more aware of the value found in an avaricious old woman.

Spectacular

It must have been a quiet night in the Butchers. At least, Mandego assumed as much, since several of his sentries had seen fit to leave their posts in order to loiter about the paths.

Picking his way through the wreckage, he came across them kicking their heels and passing about a bottle of something. One of them noted his arrival, the colour draining from his face. "Look lively lads," he called, in a way that suggested they had been anticipating Mandego's imminent arrival, and had congregated as some sort of welcoming party.

Mandego strolled up. "Evening boys," he held out one hand. "Room for a little one? Got a right thirst on me, I have."

A wink put the men at their ease. The bottle was offered up. Mandego took a deep slug before looking at the label in admiration. "That's not bad," he cast an eye over the man in front of him. "New boy?"

The sentry nodded. Before he could elaborate, Mandego struck him across the head with the bottle. Yelping, the man pressed one hand to his scalp. Without word, the crime lord took him by the neck. Forced to his knees, the youth discovered pleas for mercy had little effect on Hector.

"You stink, new boy." Staring at the wounded sentry, Hector grimaced. "Party's over. All of you get back to work," Mandego let the man drop to the floor "And sort your face out. I don't want to be looking at that mess; unsightly is what it is."

The new recruit nodded before scrambling away. His companions skulked back to their posts. Mandego spat at the floor. They were getting cocky, taking liberties. It was the heat, he figured, making their brains soft. Another incident like that and he might have to consider more serious action. Maybe a limb or something – no, that was overkill. A couple of fingers or an ear ought to do it. No point having a bunch of one-legged sentries hopping about the place.

Turning from the barricades, Hector began the climb up the incline to the sprawling house at the top of the hill.

It had been a grand place once, back in the time before the Butchers came to be what it was. These days Mandego only used two or three of the rooms himself. The rest were reserved for entertaining, in whatever manner he saw fit. Hector liked to run an open door policy which meant he invariably always had guests.

Sometimes he had guests he didn't even know about, lingering in rooms he'd long forgotten were there. The only exceptions to the policy were his personal lodgings, for which you required an invitation.

Inside, women lounged about cluttering the corridors, leaning against walls and twisted up together. They languished, eyes wide and sleeves draped idly across their shoulders. A few of them shared drinks or cigarettes. Others tried pawing at his legs as he brushed by.

"Piss off the lot of you; I'm not in the mood for it tonight."

On command, they all moved out, some on less steady feet than others. The house cleared of unwanted lodgers, Mandego entered into his room. He walked across to the window and pulled open the shutters.

The view from the house overlooked the gentle slope, buildings on either side creating two sweeping lines directing the gaze down a black road that, slick and smooth in the night, appeared more like a river than stone. At the bottom of the incline, beyond the line of vision, was the barricade. Like many places in the city, the Butchers never really slept. There were times when it was quiet, but it was always alive, only ever resting with one eye open.

They would be alert now. This was good. Mandego needed them on edge. The men were spoiling for a fight and the time would soon come to give them one.

"Royce?"

The door opened and his second-in-command appeared, stepping over a limp arm that fell into the room, owner unconscious on the other side.

"Yes, boss?"

"I need some boys up at the Hook, day and night, no questions. Anyone that comes and goes I want to know about, anything unusual. Tell them to keep their noses clean, no fucking about, understand?"

"Yes, boss."

"You heard about Le Faye?"

“Everyone’s heard about it, boss.”

“Anybody else made a move?”

“Nothing yet.”

Mandego kept his eyes fixed on the street. There was trouble brewing. Usually the thought of such a thing would make Mandego happier than a pig in shit. But something about it set his bones on edge and Hector was a man who always listened to his bones.

“Keep an eye on things. If Yanis Ypres so much as squeaks out a fart, I want to know about it,” He nodded towards the door. “Go on, off you go.”

Moving to the large dining table in the centre of the room, Mandego brushed aside the charcoal pencils and scraps of paper until he revealed a portrait of a woman’s face rendered in soft shades of grey. He plucked it from the pile and held it to the light. It was a little fanciful. Mandego’s memory of Catherine Crass was more generous than anyone else’s would have been. Walking across to a large closet, he opened it up and sighed. “What do you think to this one, love?”

A collection of sketches hung inside the door. The brass rail heaved with frock coats, capes and shirts. Above it was a thin wooden shelf and upon that, a large glass jar. Placing the picture amongst the others, Mandego turned and lifted the container from the shelf. Cath’s head knocked against the glass, twisted into a permanent vacant grimace.

“Alright, old girl?” Mandego rubbed one finger along the side of the jar. Bringing it to his face he pressed a kiss against the lid, before carrying it carefully across the room and setting it down.

Hector slumped into his chair. “There’s something foul in the air, Cath, I can smell it,” He cracked his knuckles. “Now Le Faye’s dead, and those bastards in the Hook are up to their ears in shit. Sanquain’s too quiet. That turd is up to something.”

Ever since Mandego’s involvement in the liberation of John Vanguard some months ago, the lack of reprisals from the Red Badges had been troubling. There had been the odd raid, a few showy efforts at punishing some of the more enthusiastic looters, but otherwise it seemed the Butchers were yet to reap the consequences of their actions. Events left Hector more than a little cautious about the current state of affairs.

Meanwhile, Le Faye’s death left the shipping yards weak. Sambray wouldn’t be happy. The crime lord of the Hook was a boneless coward at the best of times, and now he was vulnerable. To the other crime lords,

George had always been something of a joke. But he was a joke with a territory and the business, profit and men that went with it. Without Le Faye's money and power to protect him, it was only a matter of time before somebody challenged Sambray for authority.

That was the thing. They all knew Sambray would never hold on to his neighbourhood and, as much as none of the crime lords really wanted it, none of them wanted the other to have it either.

Which begged the question, why was Sambray still there, strutting about like he was cock of the walk? The obvious answer was he had someone else watching his back. Somehow Sambray had already managed to cut a deal with another player. Hector needed to find out which one.

"They think they can get one over on us, but I see 'em. I see them all. I'm going to find out what they're up to and when the time comes," he snatched at the air with one hand, "well, the fuckers will never see us coming."

Catherine was starting to look a little leathered. Mandego patted the top of the jar and told her not to worry; he wasn't expecting an answer from a head – that would be mad.

Revolution was coming. It was as sure as anything now. Before the last war, the Butchers had been little more than a few streets and a couple of cut-throats, knee deep in dog shit. Mandego changed that, made it into something. The Butchers had been good to him, but he had outgrown the territory. It was time to start thinking about the future of his empire and how Hector Mandego might have an impact on the days to come. "We've waited long enough for this. I'm not about to let any of those bastards ruin our plans now,"

There was a hint of sadness to his voice. It might have come as a surprise to many that Mandego was capable of true grief. "It should have been you and me, Cath. You would have loved it all."

People said a lot of things about the lord of the Butchers, most of which were true. But if there was one thing every man knew about Hector, it was that you never, *ever* took what was his.

The world was about to shift, breaking down and rearranging itself. The strong would rise to the top and the weak would falter and fall. It wasn't about good or bad. It was about power.

Mandego reached over and plucked a bottle from the table. He pulled the cork out with his teeth; spitting it out and watching it bounce along the

floor. “You see, the only thing that really matters is who comes out on top. You just watch, Cath. This city is going to burn and when it does, it’s going to be fucking *spectacular*.”

There was a knock on the door.

“What is it?”

Royce was back, cheeks ruddy from the night wind.

“Well?” Mandego looked at him, patience for suspense dangerously thin. Royce took a breath and relayed exactly what they had just found, lying unconscious in the debris of the barricades on the other side of Hector’s kingdom.

Mandego stood up, reaching for his coat. He advised that he would be along shortly and absolutely nobody was to do anything stupid. Glancing over at the head, a small smile spread across his lips. “How’s about that, my love? Isn’t today the gift that keeps on giving?”

“You’re still alive, then?”

Vanguard opened one eye to find Hector’s face far too close for comfort. His hand automatically reached for the bag. Panic rose in his chest when he could not find it. More so when he realised he wasn’t wearing any clothes.

Mandego leaned back on a chair. “Oh calm down, it’s over there. Besides, if I was going to kill you I wouldn’t have wasted all that time having you dragged up here, now, would I?”

Lifting both legs and letting them land on the bed with little regard for where any of Vanguard’s body parts might be, Hector picked a piece of dirt from beneath his nails.

Vanguard allowed his vision to grow accustomed to the weak light. There were planks secured across the windows. The floorboards smelt like piss and blood. The sparse decor and overwhelming sense of death in the room suggested that Mandego’s guests were not often there of their own volition. Prising apart dry lips, Vanguard croaked. “Where am I? How long have I been asleep?”

“A day and a half. You know, you’re about as exciting as a nun in a brothel.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s alright, I forgive you,” Mandego scratched his chin. “Been watching you while you slept I have, like a nurse over a baby. I know, I know - martyr to my own bloody generosity, me. Took three of the boys to drag you up here. You want to lose some bloody weight. By the way, we had to burn your clothes. We threw them on the street but even the dogs wouldn’t sleep on them.” He smirked. “I’ve seen you naked.”

“Was it everything you hoped it would be?”

“Let’s just say, when I do eventually kill you it won’t be out of jealousy.”

They both glanced down. Vanguard thought carefully about which parts of his body he ought to be defending. “It’s cold.”

“Of course it is.” Mandego rummaged around in his jacket. “Here.” Digging into a pocket, he retrieved a paper bag and threw it onto the bed.

Vanguard sat up, leaning against the cold iron railings of the frame. There was a thin blanket which he rearranged in an effort to recover some dignity, though the horse had rather bolted at that point. Unbundling the bag, he discovered a handful of tablets.

“Are these going to kill me or cure me?” Vanguard wasn’t sure which would be preferable given his current circumstances.

Mandego shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Vanguard tossed a few back. Without liquid they lodged in his throat, the acrid chemical taste lingering on the roof of his mouth. Twisting slightly, Vanguard looked down at his thigh, the wound freshly bandaged.

Mandego was right, if he wanted Vanguard dead it would have been done already. It wasn’t as if each of them hadn’t tried to kill the other on the odd occasion over the years though, at that moment, Vanguard was finding it harder to despise the man than usual. It turned out it was difficult to hate someone who brought you a pie.

Mandego watched him eating, “It’s like watching a baby bird.”

“Can’t eat too fast, tears the gut open,” Vanguard knew this from experience. He licked his fingers thinking how it was probably the best damn pie he ever tasted. “Does anyone else know I’m here?”

“What? At the risk of my reputation?” Mandego pressed a hand to his chest in mock horror. “Any fucker finds out it’s been me keeping your sorry

arse alive it'd never recover."

The two men sat in silence while Vanguard finished the food and gave great consideration as to whether or not it was worth trying to escape in his current state. Making it out of the room was a possibility, making it out of the house was unlikely. He definitely didn't fancy his chances further than that.

Mandego continued to pick at the scab below his lip, the size and shape of a woman's finger nail, until a little blood oozed from under it. "So I heard somebody offed Sebastian Tennet not one week after his poor old dad got his throat sliced. Butchered by a mad man while he was sat on the shitter. Was that you by any chance?"

You could always trust Hector to tell a story in the most colourful manner, regardless of any inaccuracy in the details. Vanguard sucked on his fingers, speaking around them. "Sounds like something you'd do."

"That's what they thought at first, Yanis accused me outright."

Yanis Ypres ruled the Pits, which meant he'd been taking a slice of the profits that Eleanor's enterprise was yielding. Unsurprising, someone had to be. There was no way they could have operated so confidently without protection.

"And what was your response?" Vanguard already knew the answer. There was a delicate system in place when it came to the crime lords, unchanging and remarkably clever in its simplicity. It helped hold the fraught peace between them in the event of such an occurrence. Namely, they each blamed the other.

"I said it was Pincer. Pincer will say it was Sambray. You know the rules." Mandego slammed one hand onto the mattress. "John Vanguard, mad man, ha! Saving the city one degenerate whoremonger at a time."

"Something like that," Vanguard felt the tension in his muscles begin to unknot. A melting feeling dampened the pain and soothed his frayed nerves. He was no fool. There was a cost he would pay. Mandego did not give his food and pharmaceuticals away for free.

"Funny how out of all the people in this city you could have come crawling to you choose me. I'm touched," Mandego rolled his eyes toward the ceiling as if the emotions were getting the better of him. Then he grinned, black toothed and vicious. "Do I look like a charity to you?"

"Just tell me how much I owe you."

Mandego laughed. "Nice try but we both know I don't want money and even if I did, you don't have a pot to piss in. Seems to me," he went on, "you're a man in need of a friend." He stuck a finger in his mouth, rummaging around for some offending sinew of meat between his teeth. "Of course you could just lurch out of here and die in some gutter, wouldn't be any skin off my nose."

Vanguard leaned back. "What do you want?"

Lifting one hand, Mandego shook a finger. "See, this is why I like you, Vanguard, you just get it. I hate it when I have to spell things out for people."

Images of the slender man flashed in Vanguard's mind. If Mandego learned, or even suspected for a moment that Vanguard's skills were in question, any chances of living through the next few hours would greatly diminish. Fishing around in his other pocket, Mandego produced a small brass key. He handed it to Vanguard. "What's this for?"

"The Blessed Iris, you know it?"

Vanguard did. He also knew it lay close to the boundaries of both the Pits and the Hook, leading him to assume Mandego had procured it purely on the basis of its advantageous location. He certainly wasn't much of a church-goer.

"You burrow down there nice and cosy for a few days. I need someone to keep an eye on things. I'm sure even you can manage that. The sentries will give you something to wear when you're ready to go." Mandego stood, concluding the conversation. He gave a mock salute. "Feel free to spend as long as you like, but not too long. I've told the boys they're not to kill you but quite frankly you're not very popular round here."

Vanguard felt himself slide back down the bed. He was in no state to go anywhere yet. He grabbed his bag, checked for the knife. It was still there. Mandego obviously didn't consider him enough of a threat to take it. "You're not going to stop and watch me sleeping this time then?"

Mandego snorted. "No thanks, I've got things to do. Besides," He stopped and looked around the room, face contorting with disgust. "It's fucking horrible in here."

When Vanguard left the room several hours later, no one stopped him. Mandego was true to his word, and he was allowed to pass unmolested through the Butchers.

Before making for the Blessed Iris, he returned briefly to the burnt out shed behind the Ring O' Bastards. Sure enough after a few minutes of calling, the ginger cat appeared and yawned, stretching out its front paws.

It turned in a circle and presented its back end in what was either a gesture of welcome or an insult. Vanguard stopped, bending down to give the creature a scratch between the ears. The fur had started to grow back, a rough velvety pelt that wrinkled when the cat sat on its backside. It purred, seeming quite irritated it had no control over doing so. Vanguard picked the creature up and tucked it inside his coat. The cat hissed at him. Vanguard didn't take it personally.

He presumed he too might be a little upset, if left to his own devices for more than a week without so much as a passing visit.

They found the church, which, like most places, had fallen into disrepair. Vanguard fumbled at a side door. It was stiff and took a little coercing to open. Once inside, he slipped the bag from his shoulder and let it fall to the floor.

At the back of the building was a small room. It had a few shelves, a bed and other oddments of furniture. The cat hopped up on the mattress.

"Make yourself at home."

The cat answered with a deep, contented rumbling. At least one of them was happy.

Kicking his boots off, Vanguard sat on the edge of the bed. Reaching into the bag, he took out Mandego's pills and a short length of ribbon, twisting it around one finger. It made him think of Henriette. It wasn't hers, but it was purple and she wore that colour a lot. Vanguard had found it, caught on a tree branch. He felt stupid for keeping it, but relished the feeling of having it close.

There was a mural across the length of the wall, partially obscured by an empty altar. A bearded man, solemn in pose and pious in expression stared back from the stone. Vanguard didn't know who he was - perhaps a saint, imagined by an artist who intended for him to be looked upon by righteous men.

The cat jumped onto his lap, catching the bandaged wound with one claw. Vanguard made a noise that sent the tiny beast leaping from the bed. It stood, back arched and mewling from a safe distance. By way of apology Vanguard screwed a little paper up and tossed it to the floor. The cat pounced, rage forgotten.

Vanguard lay down and looked at the ceiling. Satisfied the paper ball was well and truly dead, the cat climbed back up and curled into a tight ball on his chest. They rested together for a while, and the gentle vibrations of the animal's snoring made Vanguard feel a little less desolate.

He did not sleep, not for a long while. Without the steep curved edges of the bathtub to hold him in, Vanguard felt unanchored in the world. To him, sleeping in a bed was akin to being adrift on a raft in the middle of a cold, black sea. Alone. Exposed. Most nights he felt as though he were just waiting for the wave, for it to swell up beneath him and toss him into the water – a deep, dark void where he would flounder and choke. There for the sharks to come.

Cruel and Unusual Punishment

There were two windows on the south wall, both with enough of a drop beneath them to make jumping out of the question. One door shut and bolted. Carmen stood in the middle of the room, brow lowered as she considered every potential exit. Unarmed and outnumbered - two against one. Those were odds she was willing to take if it meant evading such vicious captors. She steadied her position and made ready for battle.

"There's no point trying to escape, you're not going anywhere." The shorter and decidedly crueller of her jailers taunted her. "Not until you answer the question."

"You can't keep me here against my will," Carmen growled. The exit was so close. If she ran now she could make it, slide open the bolt and be out before anyone could stop her.

"Kosic, get the door," Demetrio instructed.

Unfurling from the sofa, Kosic walked across the room and stood blocking the way out. He shot Carmen a look that suggested he at least felt a little bit guilty about what they were doing. "Sorry, tiny girl, but you do not make this easy for yourself. Just tell him what he wants to know."

"Traitor," Carmen hissed between her teeth. She turned to glare at Demetrio. "You know this is effectively torture? Cruel and unusual punishment is what it is."

Demetrio pushed his glasses up his nose and sniffed. "I've already told you, we're not keeping you here against your will. You are perfectly free to leave." He shot Kosic a conspiratorial glance. "Once your lesson is over."

Throwing both hands up in defeat, Carmen fell back against a cot, arms lifted in a dramatic flourish. She heaved out a breath; exhausted from what felt like hours spent answering questions about maths and science and whatever other subjects Demetrio saw fit to torment her with.

"Fine."

Glancing at the book, Demetrio resumed his test. "Who is the current councillor of Briage, and who was his predecessor?"

Carmen tried to think. Demetrio had told her many things about the world, its history and important people. So much so the whole thing was like one great blur of names and places. History was not her forte. She didn't know where she came from, never mind anyone else. Demetrio was tapping his pen against the paper.

"Leopold Carrot?"

The tapping stopped abruptly. "*Couret*, not Carrot, and no; Couret serves on the General Council but he is not their city leader."

"Oh I don't know then. Is it the one that looks like a goat?"

"Ha! He does!" Kasic piped up and for a moment, Carmen smiled, until she remembered he was on Demetrio's side.

Looking very much like he would have been happy to make a break for freedom himself, Demetrio shook his head. "Andreas Triple was the previous councillor of Briage before Richard Sauvin succeeded him. We've been through this a dozen times. Now think, who is the current representative for Mahan on the general council?"

Propping herself up on her elbows, Carmen furrowed her brow. "Now there, you see, that's another thing that doesn't even make any sense," The more Carmen learnt about the cities and politics of Soussan, the more she found that none of it seemed to make any sense. "How is Sauvin the councillor of Briage but he's not even on the general council?"

"That's not how it works. Councillor is a title, in the same way Sanquain goes by Captain. They are all essentially the same thing; they just gave themselves different names. Members of the general council all go by 'councilman'."

"Seems unnecessarily complicated to me."

This time it was Demetrio's turn to smile. "You have no idea. Now tell me the six cities that are represented on said general council."

Finally, one she could answer. Counting them off on her fingers, she reeled through each one triumphantly. "D'Orsee, Lycroix, Briage, Mahan, Mayeaux, and Vaan, ha!"

"At least you got that right," Demetrio was not as impressed as she would have liked.

Admittedly, she was not the most patient of students. Demetrio had spent a lot of time on her education since their departure from D'Orsee.

Carmen wanted to know more about the world, but it transpired that knowing it and understanding it were two very different things. Sometimes she could sense his frustration and that made it worse. Other times Carmen felt something stirring inside, writhing and bursting to get out and it made her itch all over, like somehow she was outgrowing her skin.

Still Demetrio soldiered on with his books. He was determined she know all of the things it was important to know. Numbers, letters, pictures; they all poured out of the pages and into her head.

Unfortunately that was where they seemed to stay. They had nowhere else to go. It made her head ache until it was all she could do to keep it from bursting.

Lessons aside, there were definite advantages to living with Demetrio and Kotic. Demetrio had plenty of story books which he was more than willing to share. She liked those. Particularly the ones where there was some sort of hilarious miscommunication invariably resulting in the hero finding himself in the most absurd situations. Kotic was easy company and loved to play games, despite being incredibly bad at them. Carmen wasn't sure he quite understood the rules, but was more than happy to take his money every evening. There was something exhilarating about taking coins from a man by wit rather than wiles.

The apartment had two rooms, a small living area with a cot and sofa in the first room, and a bed, basin and table in the second, separated by a thin wall. That was where Carmen was supposed to sleep, for the sake of maintaining a sense of decency. They had given up enforcing that rule after a few days when it became apparent Carmen didn't care much for personal space, not having had any before.

Now they all slept where they fell. She wouldn't have admitted it, but the truth was Carmen didn't really like to sleep alone. After being used to constant company for years, she found being alone in a dark room with nothing but her own thoughts for hours on end to be something she absolutely did not care for.

Shutting the book, Demetrio placed it on the dresser next to him. "That's enough for now," removing his glasses, he wiped them with a scrap of cloth. "We'll learn more tomorrow."

Released from duties as a human blockade, Kotic strode across the room and resumed his position on the sofa. There was the gentle patter of

rain against the windows, a grey unbroken sky casting a pall over the whole neighbourhood.

Carmen chewed on a fingernail that had splintered. "When will Cooke be back?"

Demetrio glanced up. "Depending on the state of the roads, I should say he'll be back by six, certainly in time for the dinner tonight."

"Do you think it went well – the meeting?"

"We won't know until we see him."

Despite her attempts to focus, Carmen couldn't help but worry. Demetrio had told her several times over the past week they would all need to be patient. Unfortunately, that particular trait did not come naturally to her. Carmen spat a bit of nail out from between her teeth.

"I still think we should have all gone," She reiterated her feelings on the matter for what was probably the hundredth time. "I don't see why we had to split up."

"We have things to do here and you have things to learn. How do you expect to contribute to the outcome of such meetings in the future if you don't know who is speaking or why?"

Throwing her head back, Carmen let out a short laugh. The thought of anyone from the Pits being privy to such talks was hilarious, especially a girl. She hadn't realised Demetrio had such a good sense of humour. "Nobody wants someone like me at a council meeting."

"I disagree. Is that not the point of why we are here? I don't tell you these things because it amuses me. I do it because one day you may find yourself needing to know the places and people you come from. The world is changing and if you want to be a part of that, you need to understand what is being said and what it means for you."

For a moment Carmen felt her face flush. She felt bad for her teacher. It was tiresome enough having to put up with such a difficult student. Sometimes she forgot this was not his country. Everything he knew about it he had learned, through hard experience and out of need to understand how they might survive. Something she herself had never felt inclined to do.

While Cooke had spent the last few months going about the business of politics, Demetrio spent his time with Carmen, sharing his knowledge, not only of the inner workings of Soussan as a whole, but of each individually governed city and territory.

She made a promise then and there to try harder. “Do you think he’s alright?”

Demetrio replaced his glasses. “Don’t worry about Cooke; nobody will touch him while he’s at the council meeting. It’s neutral ground.”

“But they could make him go back to D’Orsee? They could force him couldn’t they? What would happen then?”

Demetrio and Kotic swapped looks that did nothing to bring her any comfort. It had been a risk, attending the public forum to speak with the general council, but one Cooke insisted was worth taking. Carmen wished she felt as confident. Or better yet, that they had all gone and remained together.

She had no doubt Cooke would speak well. But there was a vast difference between persuading someone from the Black Zone to support his cause, and persuading the council to seriously consider usurping the authority of Felix Sanquain.

Even if Cooke could get them to listen, the meeting was only the first step. The councilmen would need to take his proposal back to their own cities and persuade those in charge to agree. It was a million to one shot, but if successful, would negate the need for war. Cooke was exploring every option - no matter how slim the chances.

Picking at a loose thread, Carmen twisted it around her fingers. “Why doesn’t Cooke have any money?”

Demetrio half-smiled. “Rich men rarely do. Argent’s wealth only exists in books and ledgers. Now he’s technically in exile all the money is controlled by Javier.”

A man with a reputation that preceded him, Javier Pollier was Cooke’s second cousin, and the man who would ultimately decide their fates should the council decline the proposal.

She tried to shake any concerns away. “You’re right, I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Carmen cocked her head. “If rich people don’t have any more money than we do, how do they know they’re rich?”

Obviously amused, Demetrio tapped the pen against the desk. “Good question, I suppose what matters is other people know you’re rich.”

Carmen fell back against the bed and looked at the ceiling. The more she learnt about it, the more she found the world needlessly complicated just for the sake of it. There was a knock at the door. The three of them

exchanged glances. Carmen called out, voice lilting through the wood to the person on the other side. "Yes?"

"I've got a letter for the girl."

There was a collective sigh of relief as they recognised the voice. Scrambling from the bed, Carmen walked across the room and opened the door. Abel, their perpetually indifferent landlord, stood looking as surly and unapproachable as ever. Reaching out, Carmen gave him a smile.

Holding the envelope between them, Abel clung to it for a moment before releasing his grip. "I'm not a bloody messenger service."

"I'll try to remember that." Shutting the door, Carmen turned back to her companions and tore the envelope open. She screwed up and unscrewed her face several times. "What does soluble mean?"

"Here, let me see," Demetrio offered.

Carmen pulled the letter tight to her chest, "I can read it. Henriette wants me to go to the pharmacy and get her some things before the dinner tonight. Do you suppose she's unwell?"

"Maybe, she seemed perfectly healthy when I saw her last night," Demetrio sounded sceptical. Henriette wasn't the sort of person who got sick.

"Can I go?" Carmen wasn't sure if she needed permission. Demetrio was not the boss of them, though he was the smartest person in the room and so, by default she often found herself instinctively seeking it.

"It's raining."

Carmen drew one foot casually across the rug. "Kosic could take me."

Brightening, Kosic looked over with interest. Carmen was not the only one to be feeling the effects of being cooped up. Kosic was not built to withstand remaining inside for long periods, and recently she had noticed him pacing the floor more often. "I can do that. The horse could do with a run out; I will take her to get what she needs."

"Fine, but don't be long and don't draw attention to yourselves."

Carmen grinned. "In what way could we possibly do that?"

Demetrio didn't bother to dignify that one with an answer.

Glad of an excuse to get out, Carmen and Kotic went together down into the dining hall on the ground floor. A waitress, face glowing with perspiration lugged barrels across the floor. Abel was behind the bar, dishing peanuts into small bowls. He scowled at them as they walked past. Carmen liked Abel. There was no pretence about the man, and it often seemed everyone in Lycroix wore fake smiles.

Minutes later they sat together as Kotic drove the one horse wagon along and talked of this and that. He told her about what a fortunate deal he had found in the grey mare and how you could tell a good horse by its gums. Carmen listened, enjoying the sound of his voice and the breeze on her face. "You could teach me to drive," she suggested hopefully.

"I don't know if Demetrio would like that."

Carmen shrugged. "Nobody put him in charge."

"I think first you must learn what he tells you," Kotic held the reins with a confident ease, "listen to what he says. Maybe one day you become even smarter than Cooke. Put more facts in that big head."

"I do listen; my brain just doesn't like remembering certain things. And I do not have a big head."

"You do have a big head," Kotic reached over and placed one large hand on the top of her scalp. "See? Like apple on a stick."

"Shut up." Carmen pointed down the next road, confident they were going the right direction. "It's this way."

They rounded a corner and she saw the shop front looming ahead. The pharmacy was a neatly presented store with a large window and all sorts of fancy items on display to tempt in buyers. Inside, it smelt like candle wax and lavender oil. Carmen stopped for a moment to look at the various oils and lotions.

An older woman greeted her with a nod. "Good afternoon, can I help you?"

Smiling politely, Carmen handed Henriette's list to the woman, who took it gingerly between one thumb and finger. She unfolded it and read the note, squinting at the words. The woman leaned forward and looked her up and down. "Are you quite certain?" It seemed a strange question.

Carmen nodded, "Yes, I believe so."

"Well, give me one moment," the woman turned and began rooting through a series of pots on the shelves behind the counter. "The ginger

ought to help with the sickness; I find taking it in a tea is usually best, first thing in the morning.”

The door creaked open and Kotic appeared, moving carefully so as not to disrupt any of the shelves. “Is everything alright?”

The shopkeeper turned back with the packages in one hand. There was an instant change to her demeanour. “I’m sorry,” she said quickly tucking the bags beneath the desk. “I don’t think I can help you after all.”

“What?” Carmen frowned, thinking perhaps she had misheard.

The woman tore her eyes from Kotic back to Carmen, face contorting. “I don’t have what you need. I’m sorry but I think you should leave.”

“Why?” Carmen did not appreciate the woman’s tone. “What did I do?”

“I said I think you should leave now.”

Had they been back in the Pits, Carmen would have been tempted to slap the woman about the face. Back home it was usually the best way to resolve such things.

Instead, she felt a gentle tug at her arm. Kotic spoke in a low voice. “Remember what Demetrio said. We should not draw attention. We can find what we need somewhere else.”

Carmen was defiant at first, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Then she glanced up and caught sight of Kotic’s face. There was something weary in his expression - something tired. Hesitant to budge, Carmen gave the shopkeeper one last look before turning and storming past the displays.

Outside she wiped her hands down her skirt and scowled, “I don’t see why she couldn’t just let me buy what I needed, as if that stuck up old bat has any right to judge me.”

There was an edge to Kotic’s voice. “It is not you she is judging.”

They arrived at the guest house where Henriette had taken residence a short while later, having procured the items from another proprietor. Kotic agreed to wait downstairs until Carmen was ready to leave. She got the distinct feeling Henriette would not be in the mood to receive guests. Her assessment was correct.

Carmen walked into Henriette’s room carrying the bags of tonics and balms. Henriette glanced up from where she was kneeling, hair pulled back and vomit on her lips.

Carmen moved to say something. Henriette raised one hand stopping her short. She leaned forward and opened her mouth, retching into the bowl

beneath her. When she was done, Henriette sat back and took in a deep breath. “Not a word,” She warned in a way that suggested she was a woman not trifled with, “Not. One. Word.”

Good Grace

Tiptoeing around the room, giving Henriette or anything that might project from out of her a wide berth, Carmen held the bag out. Henriette took it and rolled her eyes. "Oh for goodness sake, stop dancing around like a wild baby deer."

Keeping a careful distance, Carmen stopped moving. She had seen Henriette get a mild cold once and that was enough to learn it was best to keep away. Henriette did not bear illness with good grace, and getting too close was to take ones life into ones own hands. Carmen bit her bottom lip. "Are you alright?"

"I'll be fine in a moment."

Carmen reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "This might not be my business..."

"It isn't."

Tact and sensitivity were not attributes that came naturally to Carmen, but even she could see some conversations came loaded with dangers. "But you are, aren't you? I mean, you're sure?"

Sighing, Henriette dabbed her forehead. "It would seem so."

It took Carmen a moment to fully grasp the gravity of the situation at hand. Already a stream of questions flooded her mind, like who and when and where? "How did this happen?"

Henriette cast a withering look before leaning into the bowl and retching once again. Carmen walked across the room and opened a window because, quite frankly, someone needed to. "I don't mean how did it happen? I mean, I know how it happens, but, well, how *did* it happen?"

"I'm not a bloody nun," Henriette's voice echoed from inside the bowl.

"I didn't think you were. I just thought..." Carmen wrinkled her nose, "weren't you worried this might happen? Don't you know tricks for this sort of thing? To stop, you know..." She gestured with both hands; bringing

them into a wide curve around her belly so Henriette would know what she meant.

Henriette sat back and took a moment to catch her breath. "Well, to be honest I did rather think at my age I was a bit past worrying about this sort of thing."

"Whose is it? Is it Vanguard's?" Carmen's mouth twisted in horror. "Is it Cooke's?"

"I'm going to pretend you didn't just say that."

"I just meant... you have been spending a lot of time together and he's really not bad looking in a certain light."

Standing with shaking legs, Henriette smoothed down her skirt and walked towards the window with as much dignity as someone who'd just spent several minutes vomiting into a wash basin could muster. Reaching out, Carmen placed one hand on her back and gave it a gentle pat in what was meant to be a reassuring manner.

"Oh do stop it," Henriette scowled. "And pass me that bag; I only have an hour to get ready for the dinner tonight."

How she could think of food at that moment was beyond Carmen. If nothing else, she had to admire Henriette's unwavering commitment to social engagements. She had even laid her dress on the bed, ready to change into something more suited to a formal occasion. Carmen creased her face up, tipping her head to one side, "I'm not sure you're in any condition to be going to a dinner."

Henriette's lips flattened. She seemed hesitant for a moment. "I'll manage."

They both stood quietly for a few seconds, Carmen doing her utmost not to picture Henriette accidentally vomiting on the main course. Carefully, after having backed up several paces, Carmen suggested she maybe ought to go to bed instead.

"The arrangements have been made. I'm supposed to meet Cooke straight from the council meeting to go with him to Javier. There isn't time to change the plans now." Henriette fanned herself with one hand. Carmen watched her draw in a sharp breath. "*Bloody bastard.*"

Carmen wasn't sure which bloody bastard Henriette was referring to but felt like she could probably take an educated guess. For a moment, she allowed her brain to run through how such an incident might have transpired. But the images those sorts of thoughts conjured were ones she

didn't enjoy seeing and so shook them away with a shudder - the kind that made Henriette glare without even having to know what she'd been thinking.

Realising Henriette was in no state to make it to the door, much less anywhere else alone; Carmen wrapped an arm around her waist. No protest was given and together they managed to get Henriette onto the bed and off her feet.

"Is that better?" Carmen fluffed up a pillow like she'd seen other people do.

"I suppose."

The act of accepting help seemed to cause Henriette physical discomfort. She had no time for being vulnerable. It was unlikely Carmen would be able to persuade her to stay in bed for long. Henriette was correct though; with Argent's cousin having been unexpectedly away on business since before they arrived in the city; their meeting had been delayed long enough. Cooke would not want to wait any longer and would be expecting someone to join him in order to head to the merchant district.

"I'll go for you," she said in a way she hoped made her sound quite resolved about the matter. Henriette looked at her, one eyebrow lifting. Carmen nodded. "I can behave myself for one dinner."

Henriette snorted. After a moment, her face softened. She pointed in the direction of the dresser. "I doubt that. But I don't see as we have much of a choice. Bring me the hairbrush and pins, we don't have long and you look like you just crawled out from under a bush."

Doing as bid, Carmen fetched the items and sat for a while as Henriette tamed the errant hairs as best she could. There was a perpetual knot at the back of Carmen's skull that would not smooth, no matter what she did with it. "What on earth do you do to get it into this sort of state?"

Wincing, Carmen felt the tug of the brush. "I don't know it just happens. What do you suppose I'll be expected to do at dinner?"

"I would presume you'll be expected to eat it."

"But why I am going? Why were you going? Cooke doesn't need either of us there."

Henriette stopped brushing for a moment. "As far as Javier's staff will be concerned, he is meeting with members of the board of a charitable organisation. You will be expected to sit quietly, smile politely and nod every now and again."

"I don't think I look very much like the sort of person who would be on a board of anything."

"No, you don't, but they're hardly going to question him, are they?"

A few minutes later, Carmen looked almost ready to meet prestigious company.

"Well, it's better than it was," Henriette said somewhat doubtfully. Carmen turned to thank her. As she did, Henriette's grip tightened. Stopping in place, Carmen cast her eyes down. The tension in Henriette's fingers told her this was something Henriette needed to say without having to look anyone in the eye. Her voice drifted up. "Nobody must know – not yet. There are things I have to think about, decisions to be made. You must promise to keep this secret until I say otherwise."

"But, they're going to know at some point aren't they?" Carmen twisted her head back. "I mean, you are going to say something eventually?"

She had never known Henriette to voluntarily maintain physical contact for so long. This wasn't Henriette simply telling Carmen to keep her mouth shut. Knowing what she knew now, Carmen realised Henriette's entire world was about to change. For a woman so in control of everything she ever did, the prospect must have been terribly daunting.

"He does love you," Carmen chewed her lip, "you must know that."

Henriette puffed a breath. "You see it's just that sort of talk that gets you into this kind of trouble. Now, hold still," She slid the last pin into place and admired her handiwork. Carmen stood and studied herself in the mirror. She wondered if she was very different now.

"You'll do very well," Henriette said, as though she could read her thoughts. "You've been begging to be involved in all of this for months, well, now you are."

Carmen didn't feel entirely reassured. "Suppose they ask me questions?"

"What if they do?"

"You don't think I'll put my foot in my mouth?"

Henriette snorted, "Very probably, but why should that trouble you? Do you think I ever let such a thought stop me from speaking out about anything? I'd have stayed silent my whole life if I thought to never say a word wrong."

“I guess.”

Henriette wrinkled her face, eyes narrowing for a moment. There were little lines around them that creased; kissing the corners but not daring to deepen any further. Henriette gestured for her to come closer. “I am going to tell you something, and I want you to remember it,” she touched one hand to Carmen’s cheek. “From the day you were old enough to talk, and probably until the day you die, this world will try to convince you that you should let everyone else speak for you. You do yourself no justice in being afraid to be wrong. You’re not a fool, and they will not make one of you unless you allow it.”

Carmen nodded. Henriette was a hard woman to work out. At times Carmen thought her face might melt from all the times she chastised her. Other times, Carmen felt there might not be anyone else in the world that cared for her more.

“And you’re wrong,” Henriette dropped the box of pins onto her lap. “Argent does need us. One day you’ll realise why.”

“I better go then,” Carmen said reluctantly. “Will you be alright?”

Henriette smiled. “Oh, I should think so. I usually am.”

As ready as she could ever be, Carmen took her leave and stood outside the door a moment. She felt very small. She felt very unimportant. All confidence left her body, like the air was sucked from her lungs until she nearly choked on her own insignificance. No guns. No flames. Only words and wits. These were the weapons by which they would win or lose the day.

Carmen suddenly wondered if perhaps the bite she had taken of the world was a little too big. Somehow it stuck in her throat.

Kosic was waiting in the foyer, much to the chagrin of the woman behind the receptionist’s desk. He was wedged into a small, plush armchair and spilling over the sides. The woman looked like she was afraid for the integrity of the cushions.

Kosic turned his head, “You look nice.”

A flush crept over Carmen’s face. “Don’t be silly.”

“Is Henriette ready?”

Carmen shook her head, “She’s not feeling well. I’m going instead.”

Javier lived on the western edge of the city, not far from where Cooke would be taking the road back from Briage. It made no sense for him to double up his already long journey, so it was agreed they would meet closer to Javier's house. Kasic did not speak along the way, which suited Carmen just fine. She liked his sort of silence.

They stopped across the road from a small café. There were flower baskets hanging outside the doors, sets of iron chairs and tables arranged on the pavement. Argent Cooke sat next to a large window, gazing out over the streets as he nursed a cup of something. He looked entirely at ease in the world, as if it were made just for him. Which of course, it was.

Carmen steadied herself. This was a world of rich men, big promises and dangerous lies. It was time to go and swim in uncharted waters and hope they did not pull her under.

Javier

Cooke stared into his cup, though he might as well have been looking into a chasm. He kept his head down. As far as anyone passing was concerned, he was just another man taking in the sights of the city as the evening drew in.

He looked up and saw the wagon arrive. The horse slowed to a stop. Carmen squared her shoulders, lifted her chin as if she were going into battle, and disembarked before crossing the road. She came to a halt in front of the table.

“Well,” Cooke gestured to a chair, “You can sit down, you don’t have to ask permission.”

Taking one of the chairs, Carmen sat. “You don’t seem very surprised to see me.”

Cooke smiled, “I’m surprised, just not unpleasantly so.”

“How was the meeting?”

At times, Carmen’s direct manner was a comfort. Other times, it was a curse. Cooke dabbed his mouth with a napkin, to provide a barrier between him and the question. Telling Henriette the truth of what happened during his time with the council was one thing. Henriette was old enough and experienced enough to know how to weather disappointment. Carmen was not. He would have preferred to give her one more night of hope before snatching it away. “It did not go as well as we had hoped.”

There was a downward turn to her lips. “They didn’t all agree? How many did?”

Cooke sipped his coffee. The intensity in Carmen’s voice lifted a little. “Some of them?”

He placed the cup back down.

“Any of them?”

Cooke sighed. “We always knew it was an outside chance. People are resistant to change; we can’t expect for things to happen quickly. Give it

time. We will have other opportunities.”

As expected, the general council had gathered in Briage. Cooke went before them and spoke of the things he had witnessed in D’Orsee. The terrible hardships wrought upon decent people that echoed up and down the country. He walked the floor, artfully and eloquently detailing the changes needed. The councilmen had sat and listened with nodding heads.

They agreed when he told them of the dire circumstances in which the lower classes found themselves, making sympathetic murmurs when he described the dangers and horrors the everyday man might see upon a regular basis.

All of them rubbed their hands together and heartily approved of Cooke’s proposed plans to increase economy and trade. It had been everything he could have hoped for.

Until it came time to ask that they rally their cities to join his cause. At that point they fell quiet. Not one man spoke. None took up the mantle. Not for fear that Cooke was wrong, or that he did not have good ideas. But he had no power and no army by which to enact his vision.

Leopold Couret had stood, once the speeches were over. “We admire you, Mr Cooke, but we cannot condone acts of insurrection enacted against Captain Sanquain. As such, the council will not support your bid to call about a revocation.” The old man trembled as he spoke, wizened fingers wrapped atop a cane. “Sanquain has proven himself a stalwart leader. We will not usurp that authority. None of us have a taste for war, and we must protect our own citizens.”

Voice rising, Cooke slammed his hand against the podium on which he stood. “The current system offers no protection. You cannot be blind to the fact that Soussan thrives only for the few.”

It was a foolhardy move. Couret stood firm.

“*Mr Cooke*, we have listened to your arguments and they are well spoken. But we will not tolerate further outbursts. Our decision is made. We wish things were different. But this is the last we shall discuss of the matter.”

With that, the councilmen resolved that they should turn their attentions to other issues.

Cooke glanced back at Carmen. Tension emanated from every bone in her body so rigorously he could almost hear it. "We're not done yet, not by a long way."

Gazing out over the street, Carmen seemed very serious for a moment. "I suppose that means there is no other choice but to go to war?"

"We always knew that was likely."

The truth was Cooke had resigned himself to it long ago. Sanquain would never step back to allow the people of D'Orsee free choice to decide who would govern them. Carmen stood, the legs of the chair scraping along the pavement. "I suppose we better get on with it then."

It was nice to see that her familiar bluntness could still be relied upon when needed. Cooke followed suit and nodded, offering up his arm. Carmen studied him as they strode the paths together. "Why do you care so much about what happens to us?"

"Why should I not care?"

"Nobody else does."

They crossed the road, Carmen lifting the hem of her skirt to avoid a puddle. Cooke slowed their pace to allow for a carriage to pass in front of them. "I care, because in the end, we're none of us that different. Strip away the material, what's left? You, me, Kasic, Henriette, we're all just here for a short time. We each leave the world eventually and when we do all that will be left are our names and the things we did. I should like the world to remember my name fondly."

For a moment he saw her eyes flash, "Sounds a bit egocentric to me."

Demetrio was going to rue the day he had given Carmen a dictionary.

The mood lightened a little and Cooke was glad of it. "Well, I never claimed to be perfect."

They arrived at a house. Carmen glanced up at a set of stone steps leading between two columns to a front door, surrounded on both sides by

ornate panes of coloured glass. "I should have worn something nicer," she tugged at her dress. "More appropriate."

"Nonsense," A well-dressed gentleman in a thick woollen overcoat approached from behind. The man extended his hand in Carmen's direction. "It's a delight to have you here."

"It is?" Carmen wrinkled her nose in disbelief.

Cooke stepped forward. "Javier, good to see you. Are we early?"

Placing a hand on Argent's shoulder, Javier shook his head. "No not at all. It's me that's late. Problems disembarking the ship," he cast a rakish look towards his cousin. "Now, tell me, whatever sort of trouble have you been getting into? I leave on business for a few months and come back to find you've near gone and started a bloody war." He turned to Carmen, "I can't leave him alone for five minutes. How are you finding Lycroix? Is this your first time? Let's get inside then. I don't know about you, but I'm gasping for a brandy."

Cooke watched as she seemed to shrink back in the way most people did upon meeting Javier. The man was an experience all of his own. Some people would describe him as being larger than life. Others would describe him as annoying. The truth was Javier was simply a man whose entire life and career depended on being the loudest, most interesting person in any room.

Stepping aside, Cooke tried to steer the conversation. "I'm excited to hear about the trip. Allow me to introduce you - this is my..." Cooke thought fast. "Ward."

"Marvellous. I look forward to getting to know you."

Cooke wasn't sure what did it. Perhaps it was something about the way Javier spoke, his tone or mannerism. He watched as Carmen straightened to full height.

"My name is Carmen," she smiled a smile as sweet as anything. "I'm a clever prostitute from the Pits. What would you like to know?"

Cooke looked at them both.

A smile slowly curled over Javier's face, "Well, I bet you have lots of good stories to tell." There was a chill gathering in the wind. He reasserted that they should make their way into the house. Javier knocked the door. "Come, follow me. We'll eat, share tales of adventure and then talk business."

A butler escorted them into a library with a large, marble fireplace. Ornate, exotic statues stood in various places around the room. One held a lamp; another, a globe. Carmen pressed a finger to the globe which creaked as it moved very slightly. They were offered cocktails. Carmen glanced over at a tall alabaster figurine, a woman with arms outstretched to the heavens and breasts exposed. Sipping the cocktail, her brow creased. It tasted like bitter cherries.

“Darragh tells me the council meeting did not go as well as hoped,” Javier leant against the mantelpiece. It was impressive he had managed to gather such intelligence between stepping off the ship at the marina in Port Fenahm and reaching his home. He didn’t seem overly surprised at the news. Then again, Carmen mused, it was his business to know these sorts of things.

Cooke took a seat. “These things are to be expected, men like that need time to consider each course of action. They won’t be rushed into anything.”

Javier laughed, “The council are a bunch of old fools who wouldn’t know a good idea if it hit them in the face and left a mark. Don’t you agree, my dear?” He turned to Carmen who shrugged.

There was a rattling from the hallway. The door creaked open and the butler bowed curtly before informing them dinner was served.

“You must sit by me,” Javier took Carmen’s hand. “I so seldom receive interesting female company. Most of the dinners I attend are a complete bloody boys club.”

“Isn’t everywhere?” Carmen said dryly.

Javier laughed. “Quite right,” he waved towards the door. “Come on, I’ve spent months listening to the same boring stories and sitting next to women whose governesses taught them how to hold a fork but apparently not how to crack a smile. Leave the drinks; we’ll get new ones anyway.”

The wine flowed nicely, with no glass ever less than half empty. Carmen felt a light buzzing in her head begin just after the second course. They ate goose, which was something she never had before and afterwards, had no inclination to ever have again. By the time they got to dessert, the warmth

of the alcohol was spreading to her fingers and toes. Javier glanced in her direction and gave a gentle laugh. "It's nice to see my collection is being appreciated."

Carmen found that despite her reservations, Javier actually seemed a decent sort of person. His exuberance, which at first seemed overbearing, was a result of having spent far too long in the company of dull people. He did not seem to find Carmen any such thing.

In her experience, most men liked the sound of their own voice over anything else. Yet Javier drank up anecdotes with a fervent delight that was both earnest and insatiable. He was, in the truest sense of the word, the life and soul of the party. By the time the cheese course was served, Carmen had found her confidence.

"Surely they would have noticed the cat was missing?" Javier slapped the table and laughed, wiping a tear from his eye with the other hand.

Carmen shrugged. "You'd think so, but nobody even asked about it for five whole days."

Javier put down his spoon, laughter subsiding. "And what about your childhood? Growing up in the Pits must have been quite the experience. I bet there are more stories there."

Carmen thought. Her mind rattled, trying to pick out a particular incident or amusing story to entertain him. There was nothing. She leant back in her chair, "Not that I can remember."

"What about your family? What did they do?"

Again, she tried to think. The more she did, the more her mind swam. Suddenly the food sat heavy in her stomach. The floor seemed to be moving beneath her feet, like the rolling undulations of a boat at sea. Javier's wine, which had tasted nice before, began to feel sugary and thick. She'd had enough.

Carmen pushed her plate away and gave a fixed smile, "I don't really know, never thought to ask."

As the glasses were cleared, Argent suggested they retire to the drawing room for their coffee. They went from the dining room into yet another sitting room, and Carmen wondered how many of them Javier really needed. She perched on the edge of a chaise longue draped in dark red velvet. There was a lot of that too. Rich people seemed to love the stuff. She rubbed one hand along it, letting the material crush beneath her fingers.

The butler came in with a tray holding glasses. He filled two with brandy and passed one each to Cooke and Javier. He walked over to Carmen, before bending down and offering her what looked like a glass thimble.

She took it and sniffed the liquid inside.

“Sherry for the lady,” he informed her.

“I know why you’ve come here,” Javier twirled the brandy in his glass. A log fell from the fireplace, landing in the grate.

Carmen knew a little of the sorts of things that were said in these conversations, though she did not yet fully understand all of it. *Too many people believe battles are decided on the field, but that is a lie.* That was what Demetrio had told her, when she questioned the seemingly endless meetings and dinners. *More often than not, the results of war are decided not by blood and pistol fire, but over brandy and cigars.*

Carmen saw the top of Cooke’s ears flush red. They did that any time he was about to give a speech. She wondered if he knew. The rest of his body always seemed so composed, it made her feel a little better to know his ears betrayed him.

“I’m asking a lot, I know, but all I ask is that you hear me out,” Cooke began.

Javier sipped his drink. There was a quiet consideration to the way he looked at the glass before swallowing. “I wouldn’t have agreed to meet if I wasn’t willing to at least do that.”

Carmen sat and listened. Cooke was a man with a good reputation and an idea. What he did not have, was the funds with which to realise it. She was curious as to how he might present his plans and what Javier might have to say about them. It was like watching a show of sorts.

“The meeting was a set back,” Cooke sounded very formal all of a sudden. He used a different voice for this sort of conversation. Carmen wondered whether it was deliberate or not. “The issues I speak of are not in D’Orsee alone. I refuse to believe we are the only people interested in changing things. People are tired of living hand to mouth, beset with impossible choices. If the councils put pressure on those in power, the men who have the authority to change things will either fold or show their colours. D’Orsee is ready to fight, even if others aren’t.”

Javier let his head hang. “That’s the thing, Argent. You aren’t ready – not even close to it. You’ve no military force, no supporters in power.”

The words cut deep. It didn't matter how true they were. Carmen felt them crushing down on her, just as she suspected Cooke did.

"People *will* join us, if we take the capital."

"Which you cannot do without an army, which you will not get without supporters and so, on and on it goes. You see my dilemma?" Javier turned from the fireplace, voice taking a firmer tone. "I don't think you've thought this through. You're a gentleman Argent, not a general."

There was a tension in the room that Carmen did not like. Cooke placed his glass down, composure never wavering, "I don't need much. Enough to buy a force big enough to give others a legitimate reason to ally with us."

Javier snorted. "Not much? Come now, I've never taken you for a simple man. Sanquain has more than two thousand Red Badges and the moment you declare rebellion that number will swell. With Briage and Mayeaux alone he could double that. How many do you have? It would take our entire family fortune to get what you'd need to even stand a chance." Javier's shoulders heaved. "Argent, everyone saw what happened in D'Orsee – this uprising you believe to be imminent turns on the spin of a coin. You've seen how quickly the mob changes and bends." He placed his glass on the mantel and sighed. "I'm sorry, I know it isn't what you want to hear but my answer is no. I can't stake everything our family has achieved on a cause that has no hope."

Carmen looked over to Cooke. This was normally the moment when he said something clever nobody else had thought of.

He could explain that like minded people had sent hushed whispers of support. He could argue word was spreading of the small acts of rebellion taking place. They mattered. People died for them. Carmen had killed for them. She waited for them to come, words that would turn the tide. Something. Anything. Cooke said nothing. He slid his glance towards her and for the first time, Carmen saw defeat in his eyes.

"Look, if I thought you had any chance of winning I would give you the money today," to his credit, Javier sounded truly sincere. "But you're outnumbered ten to one and we both know any of the nobles that do back you will turn tail the moment D'Orsee rears up. You're asking me to sacrifice everything we ever built. You don't have enough, Argent. I'm sorry - but you don't."

It was an undeniable fact the world ran on coin, and nobody was willing to invest in Argent Cooke - save those who had nothing to give but blood.

Carmen sipped the sherry and it tasted like copper in her mouth.

“I’m not saying you’re wrong. The world you want to build is the one we all deserve,” Javier lifted his glass to his lips and paused. “But unfortunately this is the one we’ve got.”

Argent stood and held out one hand. “It’s getting late. We ought to be getting back. Thank you for dinner and the counsel, you’ve given me a lot to think about.”

Javier held his grip tightly. “Be careful, Argent. These people you want to liberate, build a world for – if it all goes wrong, they won’t rush to the platform to save you from the rope.”

Argent pulled away. “It was good to see you again.”

Outside, Kotic was waiting for them with Cooke’s carriage. Carmen walked towards it. As she did, Kotic climbed down from the driver’s seat and opened the door for her. She wasn’t sure why – it wasn’t his job to do so. Then she saw them. Javier’s staff gathered at the windows, eyes clamouring to catch a glimpse of the Amidian stranger and she understood.

They may have been prepared to accept Carmen as Cooke’s dinner companion, what with Lycroix being a more liberal place than many, but Kotic was another matter. As far as they were concerned, Kotic was there in servitude. It was the only reality they were capable of accepting. It was as Javier had said. This was not the world they deserved. But it was the one they had.

The carriage door shut with a soft click as Cooke took his seat. Months of waiting and they had walked away with nothing. She could not help but notice the way he looked a little lost, like the world was wearing thin around him.

“So,” he said, “What do we do now?”

Carmen wished Henriette was there. She always knew exactly what to say.

Only Flesh

Tarryn stood on the roof of an establishment that had gone out of business. In the dark folds of the Black Zone, he felt a cool familiarity to it all, observing the people in the streets beyond the alley locking up their shops for the night.

A shopkeeper was struggling with the shutters to his window. Tarryn watched the man growing increasingly more irate, whilst simultaneously keeping a wary eye out for robbers and pick pockets. The owner startled as a figure appeared at his side from out of nowhere.

Tarryn smiled like a wolf. "Let me help you with that." Reaching one hand up, he curled a finger around the hook of the shutter and brought it down with one swift movement. The metal shuddered against the ground.

Wiping his hands together, the man tipped a cap towards him. "Much obliged."

"Can't be too careful," Tarryn nodded to the window, "is this your place?"

The man's chest inflated, a smile crooking the corners of his mouth. He nodded, stuffing a set of keys into a dirt-covered jacket. "Aye, I'm Arthur Hamley. Best printers this side of the canals."

Tarryn did not let his contempt at such a boast show. The shop window was strung with pamphlets and notices, giving potential customers a good idea of the range of the man's capabilities. Tarryn wondered if when the printer died, his customers would remember him for all time as the purveyor of many texts. Would he be venerated as a master of leaflets?

That did amuse him, and Tarryn could not stop a small laugh escaping his lips. "How long does it take you to learn to do all this?"

The man, who clearly thought printing pamphlets was a lot more compelling a trade than it was seemed pleased to impart his story. "Twenty-six years I've been in this business. Got this shop off my father."

A bell rang in the distance. Sanquain had imposed a curfew recently, following several acts of unrest within the area. The man pulled the scarf around his neck tighter and shoved his hands into his pocket. "I best be off before the Reds come round, can't afford the prices they charge to keep myself out the Hole. I'll be open tomorrow if there's anything you need."

Tarryn gave him a nod. "I'll keep it in mind."

"Well," the man backed up a step before returning the gesture. "Have a good one."

Tarryn could have easily pulled his mark from the shop front and into the alley. There wouldn't have been any fight in it. But the man would not be difficult to track; besides, Tarryn knew where he was going. There might have been a curfew in place, but that only meant people had to be off the streets. It didn't mean they had to go home.

Chances were there was a tankard of bitter ale awaiting the printer in the pub a mere five minute walk from his shop. Sadly, he wouldn't get to enjoy it. Tarryn caught up with him one street short of safety, melting out of the shadows.

The printer stopped short. His voice wavered. "Ah, hello again."

Tarryn let the glint of his blade catch the gaslight. "Hello."

Lifting one finger, the man attempted to reason with him. "Now look, I'll just warn you the one time. I don't want to make any trouble."

Moving like a flash, Tarryn brought the knife up under his throat. "Don't worry, you won't." Pressing the blade closer, his voice dropped to a whisper, "Tell me about the Cousins."

"I don't know nothing about any of that."

"That's a lie."

"I swear, I don't want to get involved in anything, I keep myself to myself."

It was too late for that. The man had been involved the day he agreed to print for the wrong people. Unfortunately for him, some of his neighbours were less loyal in their allegiances. The Cousins had failed to provide much in the way of protection for the Black Zone since Cooke's disappearance and in some areas, patience for their cause was starting to wear thin. The Hole was full of starving men prepared to talk in exchange for a bit of bread.

Tarryn lifted the knife, wrapping one hand around the man's mouth so the sounds would muffle. He sliced the tip of it along his cheek. "Where do

they meet?”

Hamley’s legs buckled. Tears in his eyes, the printer croaked. “Please, I can’t say anything.”

Tarryn rubbed a thumb against the wound. “It’s very simple. Tell me where they are and how I can find them, and I’ll make this quick and painless.”

Despite his efforts, Tarryn did not get much out of the man. There probably wasn’t that much to tell. He wouldn’t have imagined the process was particularly painless, but it was quick. He dropped the body to the floor and slipped the blade back up into his sleeve. Tarryn stood for a moment, waiting. There was no noise, no rushing of blood in his ears or hammering pulse. Whatever peace or satisfaction he once found in his work, it had become empty and meaningless. In the end, Arthur did not care he was dead. The printer did not feel any admiration, or fear, or pain. His troubles were over meanwhile Tarryn’s remained immutable. It changed nothing. The only difference now was Tarryn felt cheapened.

He bent at the knees, taking the printer by the wrists and dragging him further out of sight. Sanquain would send someone to clear the body before morning. He stood considering the corpse. Sanquain was wasting his skills and Tarryn could not work out why – procuring information from Black Zone nobodies ought to have been the remit of the Red Badges. Slicing up insignificants in the dark – that was grunt work.

Glancing around, something about the street seemed familiar. Tarryn had been there before, though it took him a minute or so to work out why. Some months ago, he had passed by this place, on the way to visit an old friend. Perhaps a walk might do him some good. It might even help him find a little of the clarity he sought. If nothing else, maybe *she* would come to him.

In the early years of her disease, Tarryn’s mother had often seen ghosts that caused her not to feel fear, but peace. Tarryn should like that. Maybe if he stood amongst the wreckage of her home, Paulette would appear and Tarryn would feel something.

He left the evidence of his interrogation slumped against some railings and walked the short distance to where the now vacant house stood. The door was barred. Tarryn ran his finger across the wood blocking it, before tearing it away. Inside his footsteps echoed in the empty hall. The pictures hung askew on the walls, most of the furniture gone or broken by looters.

Tarryn craned his neck, eyes following the slope of the stairs to the next floor.

It was not as he imagined it. Tarryn had hoped it might feel like looking at a canvas, painted by an artist – something vivid and angry and, for want of a better word, alive. It wasn't.

The house was dead. Tarryn could not feel the fear in it any more, nor for that matter anything else. He reached the top of the stairs when Sam Wick's image appeared, moving through the walls like mist. *She's not here.*

"I know that," Tarryn snapped. It was the first time the spectre had spoken since he appeared. Tarryn did not care for what he had to say.

There is nothing for you here.

"You don't get to decide that for me," Tarryn growled. Wick was trying to provoke him. It wouldn't work. Tarryn would not allow it. He felt the anger flush in his veins. It was bad enough this ghost would not leave him alone, it insisted on pulling at exposed nerves.

Sam shook his head.

You're afraid.

"Afraid? You think someone like me is afraid of anything? Of anyone?" Tarryn let loose a laugh that echoed around the hall, bouncing and shaking off the walls, carrying up and down the stairs and filling up the emptiness. "I killed her, I killed all of them."

But it wasn't enough.

"I could kill everybody."

And it still wouldn't be enough.

At that, Tarryn swung around, drawing the blade out and driving it through Wick's skull. It sliced through him, jamming into the wall. Wick dissipated and Tarryn cursed. He was being drawn into an argument with his own madness.

Flying back down the stairs, feet barely skimming the floor, Tarryn swept out of the house and back into the night. He crossed the yard, finding a path to the rooftops where he could see the yellow moon. From there, Tarryn ran across the city – between the chimney stacks and over battered shop canopies, across the rusted metal structures of the bridges traversing the canal. He went up and over, down and across, sliding, twisting and turning until every muscle in his body screamed out.

When he could not run any further, Tarryn leaned heavily against the clay pipes.

He could not go on like this. Tarryn sensed the axe above his head, held in place by the most fragile of threads. This was not what he hoped his return to the city would be.

Every move monitored and reported, his life held to ransom. Sanquain throwing him cheap kills like they were scraps of meat to sate an animal. Tarryn felt the chains around him growing tighter.

Wick did not appear again. Whatever he had wanted to achieve, the ghost was satisfied the job was done. Tarryn felt himself slide down, legs bending until his head touched his knees and he crouched, small and foetal against the tiles.

A Face Only a Mother Could Love

Someone had gone to great length and expense to make the nave beyond the oak doors as unbearably ostentatious as possible. Vanguard had never liked churches when they were full of people. He liked them even less now he was the last left. As far as he could tell, the church existed for two reasons. To make people feel worse about themselves, or better than everyone else.

There had been rare occasions in the past when Vanguard considered the possibility of a God. Perhaps there was a part of him that would have liked to have faith in something. His experiences led him to believe it was unlikely, and more than that he remained wholly unconvinced by an all-powerful deity who only worked on Sunday.

Footsteps echoed on the bare floor. Vanguard laid the knife on the edge of the font. Beyond, a row of statues carved in stone stretched from floor to ceiling. Dipping his hands into the liquid, he splashed a little on his face.

Despite the discomforting nature of his surroundings, Vanguard found himself in an unusually good mood. The pain had subsided and his leg was beginning to heal. He could move reasonably freely, using both arms without it feeling like the skin on his back was tearing in two. On the whole, it was quite the improvement.

Mandego had visited the old church previously to drop off food and more pills. Vanguard was under no illusion this generosity would not come without further cost, but for the time being, put any thoughts of that to the back of his mind.

Hector had asked for a favour or two and Vanguard found it surprisingly easy to acquiesce. For one thing, Mandego had not made any requests of violence or murder, and seemed unlikely to do so. That was one of the benefits of their new arrangement. Unlike Sanquain, Hector preferred to do his own killing.

The cat balanced precariously on the edge of the font, noisily lapping up the dregs of water, puckered pink arsehole winking at the statues in a display of true feline defiance.

This was his house now.

You didn't live the sort of life Vanguard did without developing a healthy instinct for an approaching threat. A movement flickered to his left. He instinctively reached for the knife.

"What you going to do with that, poke me in the eye?" Mandego stood, hands stuffed into his trousers, fumbling around.

Lowering the blade, Vanguard shrugged, "Maybe."

Having rearranged himself, Mandego spat a cherry stone to the floor, "Well there's bloody gratitude for you," he peered closely at the flaking statue and let out a slow whistle. "Pretty fancy – do you think I could get someone to carve me one like this in the Butchers?"

"I don't think the saints would enjoy the Butchers," Vanguard wouldn't have been surprised if the next time he visited the house on the hill, he would find a new statue depicting the most pious and righteous of all the saints bearing the face of Mandego in place of its own. It was the sort of thing Hector would find funny.

"I don't know, these religious types get up to all sorts." There was a pause as Mandego prodded the stone before snorting and walking over to one of the pews. "I've got a job for you," he picked up a prayer book, turning it over and looking at the back. His brows furrowed before casting it over his shoulder. He must have noted Vanguard's expression because he made a face. "Don't worry I don't want you to *murder* anyone, I just want you to poke around in a bit of business."

"Whose business am I supposed to be poking in?"

Mandego's face curled into a sneer. "Something is going on in the Hook. Sanquain's got Reds going in and out of the place day and night and Sambray hasn't done a damned thing about it." He snapped his teeth together. "It's a bloody travesty is what it is, letting those bastards roam about the place. Not good for business. Le Faye will see the place run into the ground before the month's done."

"I thought Le Faye was dead?"

"Where the fuck have you been? Le Faye's son is on his way back to the city. Come to mourn his dear old dad. No good for us if that weasel burrows up into Sanquain's arse crack – which he will, I know his type."

“So?” Vanguard didn’t see the issue. The Hook was close to worthless. Nobody wanted it. Aside from access to the docks, which was more of a pain than the profits made it worth; Sambray’s territory was a dying tick on the leg of an animal. Everything that could be leached from it had been sucked dry.

“So, Yanis has already got his people on it and if he’s interested, I’m interested.”

“Send some of your boys up there then, he can’t stop you.”

Mandego scoffed, “I don’t want Yanis to *know* I’m interested.”

Vanguard wiped his face with a cloth. “Yanis wouldn’t let Sambray lick the piss off his boots.”

“Exactly,” Mandego jabbed the air, “Exactly.”

Mind racing, Vanguard reached across the pew and grabbed his shirt. Something was certainly amiss. There were rules and unspoken agreements aplenty between the crime lords, but the one overarching law was that they did not poke around in each other’s business. Not without declaring an act of open warfare.

Quite frankly the idea of Sanquain, Sambray, Yanis and Mandego all showing an interest in the same small patch of land was a recipe for disaster. Only Pincer remained quiet so far - and he was always the last to show his hand in such matters.

“You’ll let me know what you find out.” Mandego held up a paper bag in one hand.

Vanguard eyed it. Supplies were running low. Mandego had him and they both knew it. A few more days of healing and he’d be in a fit state to tell Hector where he could stick it. Until then, it was a case of being patient and practical.

“Naturally.”

“Good boy,” Mandego tossed the bag onto the floor. Vanguard scowled but didn’t say anything as he picked it up.

After Hector had gone, Vanguard finished washing and left a few scraps of food on the floor for the cat. He got dressed, checked the knife for tarnishes, and slung the bag over his shoulder. Heaving open the side door, Vanguard slipped out into an overgrown hawthorn bush.

“Fucking thorns.”

Picking the burrs out of his face, he took the long route, around the back of the neighbourhood and across the rough concrete scrubland. He needed

time to assess his strength, acclimatise to his injuries and test his limitations. He was relieved to find that now he was feeling better, he could slip in and out of sight without so much as having to think about what he was doing.

For all the times Vanguard wished he did not have the skills he did, having experienced now the one occasion in which he feared he might have lost them, he was unexpectedly pleased to find the ability restored.

The borders of the Hook were just past the southern edge of the Butchers, sharing a line with the Pits and overlooking the part of the canal where the conduit reached its widest point. There, it opened up into a vast, black maw. On one side stood the docking yards and warehouses of the Hook and on the other, what had once been the impressive marina at the Golden Quarter, Le Faye on one bank and Orrell on the other. Two rivals standing across a great divide, glaring at one another. Orrell fancied himself a cut above Le Faye purely because there were less turds floating in his side of the water.

Moving towards the shipping yards, Vanguard allowed himself to melt away. He walked past men carrying bundles and women gossiping on corners and yet no head turned. The narrow streets, lined with washing and barking dogs gradually turned to chain and iron. There was the constant grinding of metal on metal, the clanking and the smell of wet rust.

Almost the whole neighbourhood was constructed from salvage. Thick wooden beams taken from boats were used now as door frames, window ledges and frames for structures that bulged under their own weight.

Mandego was right. The Reds had certainly increased their presence in the Hook. Vanguard noted a few of them on the corner of the street that led onto the wider canal front road.

There was a wall between the road and the docks. It stretched a good few miles, connecting with the city wall where the canal joined the estuary and the water went from black, to murky brown to green. Aside from the main gates it provided the only other viable exit from the city and was under permanent watch.

Unlike trying to pass through the city gates without the correct documents which could result in a hefty fine, imprisonment or a quick appointment with a noose, trying to steer an unauthorised vessel through the canal mouth was a guaranteed death sentence. One bullet right between the eyes. Sometimes they didn't even let you get off the boat.

Vanguard walked towards the docks, only to find a small crowd gathered outside the gates to Le Faye's yard. On the other side, several Reds stood lined up like tin soldiers. Vanguard recognised Durbin, peering out at the dock workers prohibited from entering their place of work.

He had yet to get the measure of Sanderson's replacement. Vanguard didn't much like the cut of him. The fact the crowd did not bend to his will caused him visible agitation. Vanguard figured they'd likely be getting to know each other better over the course of the next several months.

Durbin turned, lifting his arms. "Go home, the yards are closed."

The crowd did not react favourably. Vanguard could sense tension in the air.

"You can't keep us out forever," a voice went up, met with agreement from those surrounding him. "I need to work. Who's in charge? Why are the Reds here? They not got their own jobs to do?"

Durbin scowled. Clearly he did not appreciate the challenge. "The yards will reopen in due course. Disperse or you will be arrested."

"We've not been paid in weeks," Another spoke out. "Le Faye owes us. We can't live off fresh air."

There was a muttering in the crowd. A few of the men exchanged glances. Vanguard could tell they were wondering if it was worth surging forward and taking down the gate. Their wages might have been forfeit, but they would take what they could in compensation.

Movement from behind the fence caught his eye. Someone slipped from one of the smaller buildings next to the warehouse in which Le Faye kept his cargo. The man turned, checking to see nobody had noticed. It appeared Durbin was not as canny as Sanderson had been. He was so preoccupied with Sanquain's orders to keep people out of the yard he had not thought to worry about those already inside.

"I will not tell you again! Back away from the gates or we will arrest you," Durbin continued his attempts to control the droves. Clearly displeased, he slicked his moustache flat with two fingers. As he did, the sleeve of his jacket rode a little high on the wrist. From where he stood, Vanguard saw traces of angry red blisters before Durbin hurriedly tugged the material down.

Vanguard moved as the crowd began to thin. He walked along the fence, watching from a distance. Jayson Tunnock, overseer of Le Faye's yard, stole away and began to move in the opposite direction of the guards. Once

he was a good distance away, Tunnock approached the fence, looked left then right, and whistled.

A second figure appeared, walking over. They exchanged a few words before the newcomer took whatever it was Tunnock had secreted into his pocket. Vanguard scratched the side of his face.

It appeared Mandego's suspicions were warranted. There were deals afoot in the Hook. The man who collected the package was one of Sambray's men. Whatever the item was, it was clearly important enough to take from right under Durbin's nose.

He ought to have followed, but the men moved quickly. Vanguard was aware he was not in top physical condition. Not only did he have injuries to contend with, but age was against him. Still, he ought to have been able to keep up with a mark. It was what he did. He usually moved quickly and with the sort of agility reserved for much younger men. It was in his nature, his entire physical presence built for the chase.

Leaning down and resting his hands on his knees, Vanguard felt the urge to vomit rising. He opened his mouth to retch but nothing came out. The muscles in his shoulders were twitching, popping spasms up and down both arms. Heart hammering, Vanguard glanced down at shaking fingers. He inhaled, focusing on the feeling of air filling his lungs. Eventually, it passed and his body began to calm. Standing straighter, he cracked his neck.

Sambray's man had gone and so had Tunnock. Vanguard cursed under his breath or what little of it he could find. Pulse slowing, he stood for a moment and let the sun shine down on his face, warming the skin. He felt a little better.

Everything was fine.

Walking the streets, Vanguard kept his eyes and ears open. He heard mention of Sambray and Le Faye in the muttered complaints passed between the workers who now had nothing to do but kick their heels. A few men hurried across the road in front of him, disappearing into the Lock and Bolt. Vanguard crossed the street and slipped inside.

A portly man wiped his hands on a cloth. "Is that everyone?"

Vanguard guessed he might be the proprietor of the venue. His cheeks were blistered with blood red veins that had burst open, leaving them peppered with crimson spots.

The barkeep gestured to a young lad with a nose that could have cracked the pavement if he fell down face first. "Toby, keep an eye outside

and bang the door if you see any Reds coming.”

“Will do, Fabian,” the boy nodded.

“I think this is it.”

One of the men reached back and shut the door with a soft click. Vanguard moved to the left side of the room, ducking between a stack of barrels darkened in the shadow of a wooden staircase. Several of the men went about closing shutters, pulling curtains across the doors and windows until the light was nothing more than the dim glow of a few lamps. Fabian rapped his knuckles against the bar. “You all know why we’re here?”

One of the men stepped forward. “Aye, things are getting worse. One of my lads found Arthur Hamley dead this morning.”

“Sambray’s gang must have got to him.” Another voice offered up the explanation.

“What the hell are we supposed to do about it? That’s the bloody question. Sambray’s got thugs taking cuts left and right. We’ve none of us been paid in a month. I can’t stand for much more of it. Time has come we do something.”

There was a ripple of shared anger at the poor situation they faced. Vanguard felt sorry for them. They weren’t bad men, but they were desperate. In his experience, desperate men often resorted to ill-advised measures.

A few of the others nodded their agreement. One of them, an acne-scarred docker with a face only a mother could love, turned and made his opinions plain. “We all know Le Faye’s son doesn’t know shit. If we’re waiting for him to come and set up shop we’ll have lost half our trade to Orrell before we get another shipment in. I say we demand they let us open the yard.”

An older man spoke. “Can we not go to Orrell? He might have work.”

The one with the unfortunate complexion scoffed. “Don’t be daft you old fool, Sambray don’t want none of us working that side of the canal. Can’t take his cut off us if we’re over there can he?” His eyes shifted slightly. “Besides, Orrell’s not taking on. I already checked.”

“So some rich bastard dies and we’re all out of work until they decide which other rich bastard is taking over from him. Sambray’s still banging our doors down asking for his money and now we’ve got a murderer on the loose?” The first man summed up the situation rather succinctly.

Fabian waved his hands. "We don't know what's happening. Until we learn more I suggest we don't do anything rash."

The scarred man scowled, "And what am I meant to do in the meantime? I've got a family to feed."

"Fabian is right, we should sit tight. No point starting something we can't win," The older man moved towards the bar, standing with the owner, who looked relieved to hear at least one other voice of reason. Vanguard guessed he had seen some of the last uprising and remembered not having liked it much.

Vanguard watched them discuss the news and understood their fears. Le Faye had been one of the last reliable employers left in the Black Zone. If Sanquain chose to liquidate the company in order to pay Le Faye's considerable debts, the men in Le Faye's employ would be left to fend for themselves. Fabian made another attempt to calm his customers. "If you go down there now Durbin will have you in the Hole faster than you can blink and where does that get any of us?"

The older man, grey haired and skin leathered from years of working on the ships, piped up with a new suggestion. "What about the Cousins? Where have they gone?"

"They ain't going to do nothing for us. Same for Cooke, where's that bastard while we're all here watching everything go to shit? I'm tired of waiting. We should take matters into our own hands." The scarred man eyed his counterpart, clearly taking some pleasure in the fact his peers were drinking up every word.

Fabian knocked on the bar, trying to restore order. "The Cousins are here, they are with us. You know full well Monroe is on our side. He won't see you done out of your jobs but we must have patience, we can't lose faith now."

There was some shifting, uncomfortable whisperings as the men broke off into groups and exchanged views between themselves.

Fabian nodded. "Let's put it to a vote."

Vanguard watched the crowd. One or two of them had already set their faces with stony resolution. Cooke or no Cooke, they wanted answers or they wanted blood. A few of them seemed uncertain. The rest gave nothing away.

"All those who want to go down to the yard and let Tunnock know we won't go quietly, raise your hand."

Vanguard saw one hand rise into the air, followed by another and another. A fourth slowly curled halfway up as though it weren't certain which way it was going and was waiting to see if anyone else followed suit. It was four to nine. It would seem the men of the Hook did not have the stomach for a riot quite yet.

A pounding on the door interrupted the meeting. Fabian glanced up. Before anyone could say anything, the banging of metal on metal followed. None of the men in the room needed an explanation. It was a sound that had become common place across the Black Zone in recent months and meant only one thing. Durbin's patience had run out. Someone was on their way to the Hole.

"Come on," the first speaker nodded towards the door, "let's see what's happening."

With that, he stormed out, followed by his companions. Fabian hurried from behind the bar, closing the door behind him and locking it. Shit. Vanguard didn't move quickly enough.

Damn that leg.

Not Marianne

Realising there was nothing he could do but wait until the owner returned; Vanguard slipped from under the stairs, leaned over the bar and helped himself to a bag of nuts.

Left alone, he found himself in a rare situation. Nobody knew he was there, nothing was hurting too badly and no one could stop him from letting his guard down. Vanguard reached into the bag and took out another nut, rolling it around and making sure to get plenty of salt between the edges of the fingernails and under the tips.

People tried to say you couldn't make a good thing last. Vanguard would be sucking the flavour off for hours yet.

He figured he would wait for the barkeep to return, slip out and make his way to one of the houses Sambray was known to frequent during the day. There he could linger about, gleaning what information he could. Until then, he would just sit and enjoy the solitude.

Any plans Vanguard had were firmly put paid to by the sudden presence of something pressing into the small of his back. Without looking he knew it was a blade, though from the feeling of the thing it couldn't have cut butter.

It held in place with a firm hand. "You turn round now, ever so slow like." The voice was young and female. Vanguard did as he was told and looked down at his assailant.

Young might have been an understatement. Someone with pigtails was holding John Vanguard - killer of killers and men so monstrous their names could scarce be mentioned - hostage.

The girl gripped the blade in one hand, wiping her nose with the other. She narrowed her eyes. Vanguard tilted his head to one side. "How old are you?"

"Nine," she said then, as if remembering she was the one who ought to be asking the questions, glared at him. "What are you doing here?" She

poked at Vanguard with a small switchblade. “You here to steal off my Grandpa? You should know what we do to thieves.”

“Poke them to death?”

“No,” The girl frowned. “We cut their hands off.”

“What with? That?”

The girl looked at the knife. Vanguard could have chosen that moment to move, to grab at her, but he didn’t. Instead he leaned back and put his elbows on the bar. After a few seconds of contemplating each other, he reached back for the bag and offered her a nut. She took one, put it in her mouth and chewed.

“We get a lot of thieves in here,” for one nut she was managing to get an awful lot of it between her teeth. “Grandpa says they ought to be strung up by their balls.”

“Sounds horrible,” Vanguard watched her carefully. “What’s your name then?”

“Marianne,” apparently abandoning her interrogation, the girl hopped onto the stool next to him. She kicked her feet against the bar. “What’s yours?”

“John Vanguard.”

“Is that your real name?”

He nodded. “It is as it happens.”

“Marianne’s not my real name, Grandpa says I shouldn’t tell men my real name because then they get familiar – whatever that means. He says a lot of things. Grandpa says this place is full of mis’crants and wrong ‘uns.”

Vanguard hitched the strap of his bag a little, making it more comfortable. “He’s not wrong there. So how come you’re in here on your own?”

“Can’t very well be out there on my own now, can I?” Not-Marianne stated simply.

He couldn’t argue with that. She asked for another nut. Vanguard gave her one. He considered telling her that technically, as he hadn’t paid for them she was now accomplice to his crimes, but he didn’t much fancy being poked with the knife again.

“You’ve got a funny face, John Vanguard.”

“So they tell me.”

They listened to the sounds of the street outside. The girl appeared happy enough with his company now she had decided he wasn’t a thief or a

wrong 'un. Vanguard wondered whether he ought to be worried she would put aside her distrust so easily. Then he noticed the way she kept grip on the knife throughout. Every time feet stamped past outside, her eyebrows would furrow into a scowl. This was a girl who knew the lay of the land.

"Where are your parents? Do you often get left on your own?" They might as well make some conversation. Vanguard seldom had chance for it these days.

"None of your business."

So much for that.

Vanguard threw one of the nuts up into the air, opening his mouth and frowning as it bounced off his bottom lip and onto the floor. Clearly his ineptitude was amusing to the girl. It also seemed to soften her defences. She took another one from the bag and passed it to him. "Here, try again."

Vanguard did as instructed, because you didn't argue with a small girl with a knife.

Not-Marianne rubbed her eyes. "Me Mam's been dead for years. My Dad's in the Hole. They took him two months back. You ever been there?"

Another nut missed its target. "Once. A long time ago."

There was a rawness to her voice. "Everyone says it's horrible. They say the guards do awful things to you and people go mad down there. You go in normal and you come out all wrong. Grandpa says they're just trying to scare me, and it ain't really that bad."

She looked up at him and Vanguard saw the fear in her eyes. Chances were she would not see her father again for a very long time, if at all. Even then, it was unlikely he would return to them the man she had known.

"No," he lied. "It's not that bad."

The fifth nut landed. Vanguard swallowed as Not-Marianne congratulated him on a job well done, her previous worries pushed once more aside.

"I don't suppose you spend a lot of time down here in the evenings, do you?" Vanguard figured even if she did, she probably wouldn't know much. But, like him, children had the distinct advantage of being largely unnoticed by the drunk and rowdy. It was worth asking, now they felt they could trust one another.

"I collect up the glasses when it gets busy," she scratched her nose.

"You ever heard of a man called George Sambray?"

She exhaled loudly. "Of course I have, everybody has. Last night he was in here and he gave me two pennies for taking his glass."

"What sort of things does he talk about?"

The girl's face flushed. She turned slightly and jabbed her blunt knife into the air before him. Vanguard made a show of edging back, something that clearly made her feel a lot better as the scarlet hue quickly faded. "That's private business; I can't be going round telling people what other people's secrets are."

Vanguard did think it amusing that a small girl in a bar like the Lock and Bolt felt so passionately about confidentiality. Then it occurred to him, perhaps it was not the words of Sambray or his boys she guarded with such fierceness. Grandpa had obviously instilled a sense of discretion in the girl, both for her safety and his own.

"I do know something though," she twisted one of the pigtails around her finger.

"What's that then?"

"George said something about he was going to see a Rezazzle. If you want to see him maybe you should go there?"

"Rezazzle?"

She nodded. "That's what he said."

Slipping off the stool, Vanguard screwed up the empty bag and tossed it over the side of the bar. As enjoyable as their interlude had been, he knew now where he had to go. He glanced towards the exit. "Don't suppose you can unlock the door?"

"Of course I can."

The girl dismounted her own seat, asking him to turn around. He did as bid and when he turned back, she had procured a key from somewhere.

Climbing up onto the cushioned seats that ran below the length of the window, she peered into the street. Satisfied the coast was clear, she turned the key in the door and opened it just enough for him to squeeze out.

"Goodbye, John Vanguard," she said formally. "Do come again."

"Goodbye, Not-Marianne," he slipped outside. "Don't chop too many hands off."

The door slammed shut.

Vanguard took in a breath, pausing for a moment as he looked down the street. It was busier now. A gang of disgruntled dock workers kicked at a few crates, lingering around and looking for some way to dispense their

anger. Another staggered backwards down a set of steps, pushed by a woman who was turning the air blue with insults. Vanguard couldn't see them but he could feel the Red Badge presence on the streets.

Looking back to the windows of the Lock and Bolt, Vanguard saw a small round nose pressed against the glass, watching for potential thieves and murderers.

There came a time in every man's life when he had to let go of that which he held onto. Vanguard wanted to be better, different. Yet he still clung to the past. He touched the strap of the bag, fingered the material and felt the fraying. Maybe it was time for a change. He turned back and knocked on the door of the bar. It opened a crack and a savage little face appeared in the gap.

"What is it?" Not-Marianne growled.

Holding the knife by the blade, Vanguard ran his fingers across the metal one last time. He held it out, despite the voice in his head screaming for him not to do it, that he still needed it. It had been his sole companion all these years. Without it, he was naked. A little hand reached out and grasped the handle. Vanguard heard the tremor in his own voice. "Don't poke yourself with it."

He saw the vaguest hint of a smile as Not-Marianne withdrew back into the bar and shut the door, taking the knife that had slit a hundred throats with her.

Debts

A book of hymns lay propped against the back of the pew. All throughout the church, the mourners dabbed at shining foreheads. They shuffled, murmured, impatient and suffocating but too polite to mention the smell.

Christian Le Faye had enjoyed a good turn out. The church was packed to the hilt, with yet more gathered outside. The procession of the coffin from his home to the centre of the Golden Quarter had been a spectacle grand enough to meet with even Cynthia Le Faye's exacting standards.

The widow and her son sat at the front of the congregation, heads bent low. Sobs and sniffles muted by handkerchiefs, the quiet was broken only by the subtle sound of the odd throat being discreetly cleared. After a while, the organ sounded a grim lament to announce the opening of the doors. Sanquain stood, as did the rest of the attendants. Several upstanding members of society flanked the wooden box, shuffling their way with appropriately stoic faces down the aisle. The coffin lowered onto the altar. The preacher preached. The mourners wept.

Le Faye's son cast his gaze across the room, searching for potential rivals to his inheritance that might have chosen this as the opportune moment to announce themselves.

Cynthia lifted her head, the deepened lines of her eyes red with tears. She held a handkerchief close to her face. Sanquain admired the way she was more subtle than her son. The widow had no doubt taken note of all those in attendance.

She would have known their motives, their allegiances and their loyalties before their arses had been in the seats.

The time came to pray. All heads bowed in solemn reverence. Sanquain followed suit, though his eyes remained fixed on Simon Le Faye.

Amidst the sea of recognisable faces, Le Faye stuck out like a sore thumb. Simon grasped his mother's hand as Cynthia made sure the city

knew of her heartache. The prayer came to an end. There was a shuffling amidst the congregation. Sanquain glanced to his left, a basket liberally stuffed with coins and tributes passed along the lines of the pews. He took it, adding a purse bearing his seal, the weight crushing down upon the less impressive donations.

The congregation rose as the pallbearers lifted Le Faye once more, readying to take him on his final journey from the altar to the dirt. Sanquain watched the widow, supported back up the aisle by her son. Members of the general council, the ones that had been able to attend, rose from their seats and joined in the slow march. Four of the five had made the journey, with only Briage yet to show their respects. Cynthia would not be pleased at that. Unfortunately the obstructions along the roads had proven difficult to overcome. The rumours of revolution were becoming more than just talk. Nobody could deny the whispers of war spilled beyond the city now.

Sanquain noted Durbin standing at the back of the church and felt his jaw tighten. Even on a day such as this, his work was never done. The captain straightened his jacket and cut a path to the door, taking Durbin aside. "What is it?"

"We raided the tenements in the Pits. Six arrests, but we've nowhere to put them. The Hole is over capacity and has been for weeks. We can keep stuffing them in, but it's four to a cell already."

Sanquain was unimpressed. "You thought it important enough to bring this to me now? Here? I hope you have something more paramount than this to report."

Demeanour stiffening, Durbin lowered his voice. "It would seem your suspicions about Yanis Ypres were correct. He's been dealing with Sambray."

"Your source is reliable?"

Durbin nodded. "I believe so. What do you want me to do?"

Sanquain looked up. Cynthia and her son stood on the steps of the church, the old woman's hand held tight by Franklin Orrell. He appeared to be passing on his deep sympathies as Cynthia feigned gratitude. All the while the pair clung onto each other, neither letting their grasps on the other's hand weaken. He turned to Durbin. "Nothing yet, as for the situation at the Hole, the solution is simple. We require a redistribution of resources. Offer up pardons to twenty men on the condition they commit themselves to our forces."

“And what of the prisoners left?” Durbin moved aside for the priest, who had left the pulpit and was shuffling his way outside on bent legs.

Sanquain stepped into the sunshine. “Many of them are due to be executed following sentencing. Ensure they know if they would rather forgo a lengthy trial, this is a mercy open to them. Criminality must be met with a firm hand.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Sanquain paused. “What about the boy?”

Durbin’s face twitched. “I do not believe he enjoys the new arrangement. With the council gathering soon, I would say he was becoming a liability – if you wanted my opinion.”

Sanquain forced back a frown. He did not particularly want Durbin’s opinion, but there was no denying he shared it. Sanquain had harboured high hopes for Tarryn, despite his knowledge of Leersac’s nature. It was a shame. “What of your other investigations? What have you found of that matter?”

This time Durbin was able to give more positive news. At least that was something. Sanquain requested he bring what information they had garnered to the chambers at the square, upon which Durbin offered a curt salute.

Simon Le Faye stood waiting for his mother at their carriage, his discomfort at the expectation he should mingle with their guests apparent.

It was funny, had things been different, Sanquain would have seen to it another took the seat on the council and Simon Le Faye would have been free to dally about as he saw fit. With his thirst for violence and desire for power, Tarryn Leersac would have made a great addition to Sanquain’s chorus of puppets.

It was almost tragic; Tarryn’s fate sealed by measures beyond his understanding.

Still, nobody could deny the doctor’s report. Tarryn Leersac was a ticking time bomb. Sooner or later the last remnants of his rational mind would waste away.

Drawing level with Le Faye’s son, Sanquain adopted a suitably stoic demeanour. In his experience, the transfer of power from father to son had very little to do with the wishes of the dead, and much more to do with the machinations of the living. Simon enjoyed money – but he did not care for the business of earning it.

Le Faye touched a hand to his chest and bowed. "Captain, you honour my family with your attendance. Your being here only serves to reaffirm the great influence and position my father carried within this city."

The words were obviously carefully scripted. Sanquain assumed Simon had relayed similar sentiments to every attendant that approached him. Cynthia no doubt had him reciting them as they travelled in their carriage to the church.

"Of course, I assume the standard of service was satisfactory?" Sanquain let the barb settle for a moment, seeing how it would land. "Your mother is pleased?"

Simon nodded. "She is very grateful."

Pleasantries concluded, Sanquain indicated that they should walk together. "You'll forgive me for being forward. As you can see, your father's death has caused some disruption."

They stopped beneath the branches of an oak tree. "The circumstances were less than ideal," Sanquain glanced around. "Your father had considerable influence. He also amassed extensive debt. Perhaps at a more appropriate time you and I should discuss the matter further." Sanquain placed one hand on Le Faye's shoulder. "But I have taken up enough of your time for now. Today is for your family,"

Simon nodded. Leaving him to his guests, the captain walked across the street to his waiting carriage. The driver straightened his back as Sanquain approached, readying the horses for the return journey to the chambers above the marketplace. There were preparations to make for the days ahead.

The Sweet Kiss of the Lash

Durbin had never given much credence to the rumours that Sanquain used shadow men to carry out secret assassinations. For one thing, the term was ridiculous. People liked to make things sound far more interesting than they were. The way they'd talk about it on street corners, you'd think they had nothing better to do with their time.

Durbin wasn't the sort of man to be taken in by ghost stories. Besides, he knew from experience people could choose to see and not see you well enough when they wanted. Half his life he'd been invisible to those who mattered, and much too visible to those he'd rather not see him at all.

The sorts of people who noticed if you had a silly name, or your trousers were too short, or your skin often broke out in a strange, unexplained rash. It still did, sometimes. His mother's assurances he would grow out of it had thus far proven false. Of course, now he was older he realised that in his case he was largely ignored because nobody liked him.

That was fine. Being liked was overrated. People undervalued the merit of other traits, such as being efficient, sober and well-turned out - fine qualities to have if you were a man with designs on ranks high above your birthright. Sanquain had shown him more favour recently, something that would only make more certain his rise in status. Durbin was on the right track.

Never again would he go back to living hand to mouth. Never again would he be beaten on the streets, arse stripped bare by yowling louts who thought it funny to whip his buttocks with broken branches. Those days were behind him.

Waiting in the designated spot, Durbin ran a finger over his moustache. When he looked down, there were black smudges on his hands. Damn, he knew he shouldn't have bought anything from that passing salesman. A con artist if ever there was one. Now he'd have to wash the stuff out before he

perspired too much. He wasn't a vain man. There was just something more distinguished about a jet black moustache.

"Grenley is dead."

Once Durbin might have scoffed at the idea of phantoms, but that was before he was charged with overseeing Tarryn Leersac.

The boy swept into the alley like he was fluid, no noise or disruption from his movement. It was the third time he had reported to Durbin, and he appeared no less icy than the first.

Taking a small notepad from his pocket, Durbin licked the tip of a pencil and scanned down the pages. "Grenley? Grenley?"

"The courier," Tarryn confirmed.

"Ah yes. Any trouble?"

Tarryn narrowed his eyes. There was arrogance seeping out of his every pore. Durbin knew his like too well. Pretty rich boys born with silver spoons in their mouths, they thought the world should cower at their feet. They had no idea what it was to crawl and strive for a place. Durbin had a job to do and he would see it done right; regardless of how much Tarryn Leersac might hate that now he was being made to pay his dues. Durbin had *earned* his position.

"I shall inform the Captain," he snapped the notepad shut and placed it safely away. Tarryn remained frozen in place, his stare fixed. The boy did not move. For a moment, Durbin wondered what he might be thinking about.

A little moisture beaded on Durbin's top lip. There was more on the nape of his neck. Suddenly he was sweating like a whore in July. Still the boy did not move.

"I heard you were looking for a traitor named Monroe," Tarryn's voice exuded superiority. So that was why he lingered. Leersac aspired to conduct his own investigation, no doubt in order to find Durbin's quarry and take the credit for himself.

"Monroe is my concern," Durbin replied. "Not yours."

The boy stepped forward and Durbin saw then what it was other people imagined when they told wild stories of vanishing men. Tarryn reappeared no more than a few inches away. Reaching into the sleeve of his jacket, he made a quick movement. A handkerchief dabbed at the skin above Durbin's lip. As Tarryn pulled his hand back, he revealed a black stain on the silk.

"Your moustache has run."

With that, the alley was empty once more.

Durbin steadied himself. He would need to slip back to a place where he could clean his face before anyone noticed anything amiss. Then, he would emerge every inch the dutiful soldier, buttons buffed and everything as it should be. Nobody could ever suspect him of being a Black Zone gutter rat. He had worked too hard to gain his place in the captain's good graces.

They did not know it yet, but those who had once laughed at and mocked Heracles Durbin would come to regret their part in his shame. Never again would he go back to that life – and never again would his poor buttocks feel the sweet kiss of the lash.

Monroe was a ghost. Tarryn had never had any trouble pursuing a mark. This, however, was new. Sanquain had brought him to the hunting ground, but given him no man to hunt. Without new orders, he was bereft of purpose - which was why he had determined to find his own. Sanquain wished to find Monroe, and so far everyone else had failed. Tarryn would not fail. After all, how hard could it be to find one man? Vanguard did it and he barely ever grunted more than three syllables in a row.

Tarryn could concede perhaps his investigatory skills could use a little honing. For one thing, most of the people he interrogated ended up dead long before they could give any pertinent information. Tarryn lacked the social skills to procure secrets through any method other than the knife. His knowledge of the Black Zone, whilst far more acute than others of his standing, was forged only from his brief visits there.

He did not know the people, never had the desire to. He didn't understand how they worked. More so, he did not understand their commitment to protecting a man who might not even exist.

Monroe was not flesh and blood, alive only in rumour. Something he could not pursue into a dark corner. Durbin's reports told of mentions of Monroe stretching from one end of the Black Zone to another, and often in several places at once. It was as if he were everywhere and nowhere.

Sam Wick's image trailed a short way behind. Ignoring Wick took a lot of energy. Tarryn was already exhausted, what with the headaches and the

burden of his lot. Stopping for a moment, he closed his eyes and tried to focus on keeping his mind in the present. When he opened them, Wick was gone. It was getting harder every time. Once again, Tarryn wondered how long he had left before the hallucinations would take control completely.

Walking along the road that curved around the outer limits of the Pits, Tarryn observed the movements of the people around him. Shops and buildings once open for business had started to close, a side effect of their owners having been subject to raids, arrested and subsequently taken by Durbin to the Hole for interrogation. It was a wonder there was anything left still to shut down.

It did not take long to find the prison. There, Tarryn studied the comings and goings of the guards. Emerging from the depths of the earth, a tall, emaciated man stopped at the jamb of the aperture that provided exit from the Hole and led into the large fenced yard stretching out towards a set of iron gates. He paused for a moment, gathering his breath and blinking to allow his eyes to adjust to the glare of daylight.

Tarryn watched through the railings, walking up and down the length of the bars. Red Badges patrolled the fence, both inside and out, marching in pairs. Another two stood on the front gate. Tarryn had not been inside, but he knew enough about the place to understand that anyone coming out of it would move a little slower. He didn't mind so much. He was up for a gentle pursuit. It was a nice day after all.

The prisoner limped forward. Tarryn observed the hitch to his step, the weight of his body not quite fully realised on the left leg. There was a sallow emptiness to his face, cheeks shrunk inward. As he approached the guards they handed him a document, most likely a letter of release. Clutching his piece of paper, the former prisoner re-entered the world to no fanfare. Instead, he began the long journey home.

Tarryn knew little of the man he followed, aside that he was a suspected Cousin. He probably wasn't. Still, Durbin's interrogations during his incarceration had left their mark on him. Now Tarryn was able to get closer he saw the bruises and strap lines on the bare patches of skin visible through his quarry's tattered clothes.

Progress was slow and as Tarryn lingered in the darkened corners and edges of the streets, the man stopped several times. He glanced back over his shoulder more than once. It was not Tarryn he was worried about. He

was checking for Reds, following him to see where he went and who he might go to for aid. Tarryn ignored the creeping tension around his skull.

Close to the borders of the Pits, the mark stopped briefly in a narrow side alley. Tarryn watched as he dropped to his knees and pawed through the refuse like a stray. Digging out an old tin can, the remnants of whatever food it once contained still clinging to the bottom, the man scraped the inside with his fingers and retrieved what he could. He licked his fingers urgently and then, as though he could not stop himself, drove his tongue into the can. The jagged, rough metal edges sliced into his lips. Frustrated, the man cast the empty container against the brick wall. He sat for a moment, face bloody and wasted.

Tarryn could kill him. It would be a moment's work to cross the street, bring the blade across his throat and put the man out of his misery. He thought about it. It would be like putting an end to an animal's suffering - noble perhaps even merciful. After all, what was a hero if not just another killer whose exploits were more favourably recounted?

A bitter grimace played on Tarryn's lips.

Dragging himself to his feet, the ex-prisoner glanced both ways up the road and continued his painful trek. It took almost four hours to get from the Hole to the Hook, and by the time they passed over the boundaries, Tarryn had begun to lose patience. If he could set aside his pain, others could at least have the decency to do the same.

At long last, the man staggered into a building. Tarryn looked up at the swinging sign hanging outside the Lock and Bolt. Through the dirty windows he could make out the silhouettes of several customers inside.

"Shit, Corbin, is that you?" A barkeeper appeared, instantly placing the tray of glasses on the counter. Tarryn saw as he lurched forward, reaching out. "What the hell happened to you? I thought you were still in the Hole. Where are the others? Is Cyrus with you? Someone bring me a glass of water."

Drawing back, Tarryn tempered his impatience. As much as he wanted to pry what information he could from the men inside, there would be a time and place for killing. He would return to the Lock and Bolt when the shadows stretched across the night sky. For now he had taken the first step to finding Monroe and certain redemption in Sanquain's eyes.

There was a shout from across the road. Tarryn glanced up to see a small gang approaching. They did not see him, entirely focused on their

destination. The men walked into the pub searching for the solace so many seemed to find at the bottom of a glass.

A few moments later the same men emerged, faces contorted in anger. Outside, another patron leaning against a wall perked up at the intensity of their exit. Following their march, Tarryn saw as more and more joined them until the gang became a small crowd. Tarryn had always found the mob a curious thing – he wondered if half of them even knew what they were angry about.

The rabble surged around Le Faye's gate as the murmurs grew louder. Tunnock and Durbin stood with the guards, ready for any disorder. "That's far enough," the foreman warned, "whatever this is about; you don't need to get any closer."

"I'll tell you what it's about," the red faced man's voice echoed across the throng of people. "They've near enough killed Corbin. Took him down that bastard hole, and beat the life out of him."

Tarryn circled the perimeter of the crowd, noting several of the men had pistols hidden beneath their shirts. Half of them were likely not loaded and even if they were, it was probably with bullets made of shit and sawdust.

More appeared, spilling out from between the stacked pallets and crates. A few scrambled up the metal rungs of the cranes in order to get a better look. Tarryn moved amongst them, unnoticed. They shuffled aside, milling about like sheep in a pen, stepping out of the way of the unseen wolf.

"We said get back!" One of the guards pointed a rifle through the gaps in the gate.

"Come on now, we'll have no trouble today," Tunnock tried again, desperately trying to give the impression of a man who hadn't just pissed his pants. "Everyone stay calm."

Someone ran forward, several feet to the right of the gate. Throwing his whole body at the fence, he rattled it like a man possessed, as if he could bend the metal to his whim. "Let us in you murderin' fucking bastards!"

There were a few clicks.

"Hold your fire," Durbin steadied the Red Badges. "Do nothing without my order."

The crowd moved, flickering and buzzing like a ball of wasps. Tarryn felt it - the hatred, the bitterness. He drank it up like a parched animal at a watering hole.

Tunnock implored his colleagues. "Come on, you know you don't want this," the words were cut short as a sharp stone caught the side of his face below the eyebrow.

Durbin blew a whistle. Three sharp blasts. Moments later, a cart rumbled into the yard. Reinforcements disembarked before the horses had come to a halt. They ran, boots stamping across the concrete to form a line between the gate and the restless gathering. It was as though the situation was growing, unfurling, taking on a life of its own.

Tarryn looked back and saw a man running towards the crowd. It was the barkeeper from the Lock and Bolt. He shouldered his way through the men until he reached the front. Fabian took up position between the Reds and his neighbours. Tarryn felt his fingers twitch. A brave man, no doubt. Not a fighter, but a peace keeper. Those were a rare breed.

"Please, Harrow, I'm begging you not to do this," Fabian addressed the man who instigated the rabble. "Please, think of your family! There are children here!"

Tarryn hadn't noticed. To think that violence and death was something that only happened to adults was foolish. Children died all the time.

Fabian lifted his hands, "Not now, not like this,"

Durbin looked down the bridge of his nose. The Reds adjusted their footing. The energy in the street hung on a razor's edge. Fabian urged the crowd to step back. "I am begging you not to start a fight we can't win!"

Tarryn could have moved. He could have flicked out his wrist, punctured the liver of the man standing to his left. The streets would run red. Nobody would know what had happened; only that they had come for blood and blood was what they found. He didn't. He watched. See? He could temper himself.

Harrow spat at the ground. "This isn't over Durbin," his entire body bristled with rage. "Your time is coming."

Fabian stepped forward, breathing a heavy sigh as the crowd shuffled back as one. Tarryn saw a lot to admire in the scene before him. The barkeeper was a decent man. Tarryn could tell one when he saw one. And Harrow had a good argument. If Tarryn had been inclined to sympathy, he would have felt it a shame they'd both be dead soon.

Durbin would have Harrow's house raided and his family under lock and key before the end of the day. Another fate awaited Fabian.

Like Monroe, he was too important to waste on Durbin. A man like that deserved better than a clumsy interrogation and a bullet in the head.

Quietly and carefully, a lone man made his way around the edge of the ship yard, picking his way between the people until he was close enough to observe the proceedings without being spotted.

He looked up from under his cap and saw the Red Badges filter through and take up positions by the gate. The dock workers began to spread out, the crowd breaking and filtering through the streets.

The man in the cap stood for a moment, until the crowds became too thin to conceal him any longer. Dropping the cigarette he had been holding, smoked down to the butt, he crushed it beneath his boot and turned away.

Definition of Legitimate

“Remind me again why I agreed to this?” Kasic stood, sleeves rolled up to the elbows. The courtyard was a suntrap. With so many bodies crammed into one space, there were damp patches beginning to accumulate under his armpits.

“You know why,” Carmen had taken up the role of group leader for the day – something neither Kasic nor Demetrio seemingly had the energy or will to object to. Several days had passed since the dinner with Javier, and they had not seen either Cooke or Henriette in all that time. They were all on edge and some time away from the apartment would do them good.

Cooke would be fine, Carmen told herself, he just needed to regroup. She was quite confident there wasn’t any problem the man couldn’t solve eventually. Sooner or later, he would come up with something brilliant.

In the meantime, she had decreed with utmost authority that they should take matters into their own hands. Kasic had agreed, most likely out of curiosity as to what that might entail. Demetrio had agreed, quite vocally, on the basis that – going by some of Carmen’s previous ideas - if he didn’t, there was no telling what might happen.

“We’re scoping the terrain, investigating the political landscape.” Carmen couldn’t quite tell if the look on Demetrio’s face was one of pride or concern. She waved an arm. “Conducting social reconnaissance.”

“Reconnaissance,” Demetrio corrected.

Her face fell. “Yes, that too,” she turned back to watch as a new figure climbed onto the podium on the other side of the courtyard.

The speaker had the sort of face that reminded Carmen of the knots and gnarls on an old tree. It was sort of bulbous and soft yet somehow hard and cracked at the same time. It didn’t help that he had the broad, drawling accent that was common in and around Lycroix. Everyone spoke like they had a mouthful of treacle.

“He’s not very inspiring, is he?” She leaned in and spoke beneath her breath. Kasic snorted.

Demetrio, who stood a little way in front, turned and frowned. “You were the one who wanted to come. Now we’re here we’re going to listen to what he has to say.”

Carmen kicked at the gravel. Kasic grinned. “I think Demetrio wants us to take it more seriously.”

Given that he appeared to be suffering from a chronic bout of summer allergies, and kept sneezing with the strength and volume of a foghorn every three or four words, it was hard to take anything about the speaker seriously.

“You wanted this, tiny girl,” Kasic reminded her. “We could have gone to nice place, see the sights, but no, you chose to bring us here to shit hole.”

She tried to stifle a laugh at the way Kasic said the word *shit hole*, the words so unnatural and stilted. He’d realised how much it amused her and thus taken to saying it more often. The first time she felt guilty about finding it funny - but then he’d done it again and Carmen soon came to realise it was alright to laugh, when it was his joke to make. Since then it had become a secret entertainment just for the two of them.

Carmen glanced around. There were thirty or so people crammed into the courtyard. She peered at a wooden sign, creaking as a light breeze caused it to sway back and forth. *Walker, Rogers and Smithy*. She wondered what sort of place it might be. “You know, if this kind of thing were happening back home, there’d be three fist fights and a fire before the Reds even arrived.”

“Will you quiet down for a minute?” Demetrio frowned. “I can’t hear anything.”

“...The strikes in Leumond and Briage should serve as a catalyst for us to take action in our own city,” the speaker slammed one fist down into his open palm. Carmen noted that a lot of them seemed to do that. “The growth of support for new acts to alleviate the pressures on the common man must continue.”

Furrowing her brow, Carmen looked up at Kasic. “What is he talking about?”

There was a roar from the crowd.

Kasic frowned, waiting until the noise dulled. “It is a petition, from men like this to Councillor Renard to say they must stop tariff on roads. The city

officials are against it. It is part of why they will not call the vote.”

The answer was surprisingly detailed for Kasic. Not that Carmen ever presumed him to be stupid, but because it was complicated enough understanding the politics of your own land, let alone the individual politics of each city that made up Soussan. Demetrio flashed an approving look to which Kasic shrugged. “What? I listen.”

Some of the men in the crowd were restless. The women, few though they were, periodically glanced around, wary of any trouble that might erupt. You could never quite tell which way these things were going to end and invariably, it was the women left with the mess to clear up afterwards. The speaker paused; the flow of his speech interrupted by another sneeze.

Demetrio turned from the podium, a concerned expression on his face. “I don’t like this, the mood has soured. See those men over there?” He nodded towards three men with caps pulled down over their faces. They had appeared half way through the meeting, sidling their way through the crowd to stand near the stage. “If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say they were enforcers. I can’t see them holding much love for any act that would diminish their chances of a take.”

Kasic sighed. “We should leave.”

They turned to make for the gate.

Demetrio’s face fell. More people were arriving, several of them in one wagon. “Take Carmen away – get as far back as you can and keep out of sight.”

Kasic did as bid, taking Carmen by the arm and trying to find a quiet corner where they would be less noticeable.

“You don’t need to push me, I’ve been in fights before,” she frowned. The prospect of seeing a few fists swung about was hardly earth shattering. You didn’t grow up in the Pits without learning how to duck and dodge in a confined space. It was practically mandatory training. “I can take care of myself.”

“That maybe so, but you were left in our care,” Demetrio countered.

“Yes,” Kasic agreed, fists forming like two great hammers. “Plus, Henriette knows where I live and she is very aggressive woman.”

There was no denying that. Henriette had been quite against Carmen leaving her care to venture out into the world with, as she had put it, ‘a hulking great bear’ and ‘that bloody know it all’ - though deep down

Carmen could see she had quite an affection for both men. It was the ones she was honey-sweet with that ought to be worried.

Still, if Carmen were to show up with a black eye or two it would do nothing to curry Henriette's favour.

Tensions were starting to simmer in the courtyard. It was like watching a pot boiling, the bubbles beginning to rise to the top. There was a shout, a retort, a snide comment and just like that, the pot flowed over. Fists flew, the less fervent supporters of the new act ducking out of the way as those more violently against it clashed with the speaker and his companions.

The brawl spread, pushing and shoving. Kasic lowered his stance. There was a startled yell as one of the women was pushed to the ground. Kasic lurched forward but Demetrio blocked his path. "Stay out of it, she'll be fine."

Sure enough a moment later two men darted between the crowds and dragged her to her feet. There was a loud crack, bone breaking as someone's jaw met a blow. Several people came, locked in a flurry of fists towards them, unaware of whatever might be in their path.

Demetrio reached out and grabbed Carmen, pulling her aside as they slammed into the fence and sank to the ground. There was a pounding of feet as several officers wearing the navy uniform of the Lycroix city guard barrelled in. Carmen tried to find her bearings as the blue mingled with the grey and browns - a frenzy of people who had become caught in a wave of violence.

Demetrio looked around. "Kasic," he roared over the din, "Kasic, don't hit *anything*."

With that Demetrio disappeared, carried into the fray. Carmen scrambled about, trying to find either of them, or a way out. Diving forward, she ducked beneath a swinging arm and scrambled across the ground on her hands and knees. She made it to the other side, getting to her feet only to come face to face with a man in uniform who looked like he had neither the patience nor inclination for this sort of thing.

"Come on," he said without hesitation, "You can come with me." Taking her by the arm, the guard pulled her through the gate and came to a stop a little way outside, next to a wagon.

There were already two or three others lined up looking worse for wear. Demetrio appeared a moment later, spectacles slightly dented.

Kasic walked behind him, head down and eyes averted from the guards.

“Can I ask what you intend to do with these people?” Demetrio enquired of the guard manning the cart.

The officer sighed, as though this was all below his pay grade. “They can all leave soon, but we’ll need to see some documents first. Can’t be too careful who you let wander about these days. I assume you have paperwork?”

Demetrio nodded.

Getting in and out of Lycroix was a walk in the park compared to getting in or out of D’Orsee, but there were still rules. He handed them to the guard who looked them over. “What sort of business are you in?”

“Deliveries. We picked up a haul from Marclaude last week and we’re bound for Briage in a few days time. You can check with our sponsor, Javier Pollier.”

The guard glanced sideways at Carmen, seeming unconvinced. “And she is?”

“My niece,” Demetrio confirmed.

Carmen remained quiet, something she had been practising and was getting better at. She slipped her eyes over to Kotic. He was sliding further into the background as Demetrio commanded the officer’s full attention.

“Hold on,” the guard’s eyes shot up. “Who are you?”

Kotic kept his tone even. “I drive the cart.”

“I didn’t ask what you did, I asked who you were.”

“Victor, it says there on papers.”

“You Yisjcan, *Victor*?”

“Amidian,” Kotic sounded as though he already knew where the conversation was going.

Craning his head up to the front of the wagon, where one of his colleagues sat holding the reins, the officer muttered below his breath. “Whole place is being overrun with the bloody bastards.”

Carmen’s face twisted. Since coming to Lycroix she could scarce have counted more than four people who looked even vaguely like they might have been from elsewhere. It was hardly the beginnings of an invasion.

The officer shuffled the papers, looking through them until he came to the one citing a driver as being amongst their party.

You could travel through Lycroix without a document, but if you intended on staying you had to have a sponsor – an insurance policy of sorts to reassure the local guards you were there for legitimate purposes. The

definition of legitimate wavered depending on the sponsor and the clerk stamping the documents.

“Can we go now?” She asked.

The guard handed back the papers. “You can go,” he nodded towards Demetrio, “These two are coming with us until we can confirm a few things with Mr Pollier.”

Carmen felt her cheeks reddening. “That’s not fair, we didn’t do anything wrong.”

A large hand came to rest on her shoulder. She looked up as Kotic smiled wearily. “Don’t make trouble, tiny girl, we will be alright.” With that he turned and hauled himself up into the wagon, found a seat and settled in as though he had done it a thousand times before. Kotic nodded to the space beside him. “Come now.”

Carmen was about to say something when a pair of rough hands shoved her forward. “Move it, I haven’t got all day.”

“Come on,” Kotic repeated, patting the seat. Realising she didn’t have a choice in the matter; Carmen climbed up and sat down with a huff.

The vehicle lurched forward with its occupants dejectedly clinging to the seats. Carmen glanced back over her shoulder. Demetrio was standing on the side of the road, a look of concern on his face. Kotic sat calm and quiet. After a second, he leant his head back and proceeded to whistle a tune.

Fight or Flight

It had been a good plan. Carmen felt quite certain were it not for the interruption of the Lycian guards; she would have learnt a lot from the rally. Her mouth was sore. The guards were a little rough when removing the arrested parties from the wagon. Kasic had rather stupidly said something about that. The guards took offence at his opinions and now Kasic was elsewhere, separated from the others. She ran a tongue over her bottom lip. It tasted salty, a little blood welted along the inside.

She had never been in a holding cell before. From her seat, Carmen observed the criminals of Lycroix awaiting their fates. Whores, pick-pockets and degenerates sat lined up along the benches and crammed into corners.

Beyond the bars, the guards sat, ignoring people who were very much innocent of whatever they were accused of loudly making claims to that effect. A man with crumbs in his whiskers leaned in and gave her a long, lingering look. "Thievin' or whorin'?"

"Why do you suppose it must be one or another?" Carmen gathered from the look on his face that he lacked the imagination to think of any other reason she might be there.

A wrinkled hand found its way onto her knee. She stared at it. The old man's breath stank of sour milk. "You ought to be friends with me, girl."

Carmen smiled sweetly. "I'd take those fingers away if I were you, before I break them."

"Who the fuck do you think you are?"

She didn't answer the question. She did, however, remove the hand and warn the man in more graphic terms what might happen if it wandered that way again. He snarled and turned away, presumably in pursuit of easier pickings.

Carmen leant her head back. She was getting hungry. She had no idea how long Kasic would be gone, or whether anyone would be coming for

them. She supposed Henriette might. Carmen wasn't sure if she liked the thought of that. Henriette would have an opinion about the matter.

A young girl stood across the cell. She was looking at Carmen with a great deal of curiosity. Wild, errant red hair stuck out from her head at angles that ought to have been impossible. The girl's head tipped to one side. Her lips moved but made no words.

A sick, unwelcome churning in her stomach caused Carmen to shift in her seat. The girl appeared to be trying to work out who Carmen was, where they had seen each other before. Pushing through the crowd, she stopped a foot or two in front of the bench. Her eyes seemed to swim about unnaturally, focusing neither on one thing or another. Carmen moved a fraction, hoping she only approached in the hope of finding somewhere to sit.

Without warning, the girl reached out and took hold of Carmen's wrist. Leaning in close, she spoke as if dispensing a frantic secret. "I know who you are. They're looking at you, Ruthie. You don't see 'em do you? See them looking?"

Carmen pulled away. "Leave me alone. I don't know what you're talking about. You're confused."

The girl shook her head. "Not confused. They're waiting. Don't you know?" She jerked her head upwards, eyes darting back and forth across the cell. "There's so many of them, hundreds and hundreds. All packed in like fish in a barrel."

"I told you, you're getting mixed up." Carmen arched her back, shoulders tensing. Feeling an overwhelming urge to move away, she stood and walked to the other side of the lock up.

There were a few guards lingering about. One sat with his feet up on a desk. The front door opened and closed, people coming and going with matters of great importance to report. The occupants in the cell shifted and twitched, in the way people did when they were pretending to have no interest in a conversation.

Carmen pressed her face to the bars, as if she could somehow magically squeeze through them. She willed Kasic to appear, to come and save her.

There was a tapping at her shoulder. "They want to talk to you, Ruthie, but you won't let them. Why won't you let them?"

Every person has a threshold at which point, when confronted with things they do not want to face, must choose between fight and flight.

Carmen did not know this girl or what her problem was, but apparently the girl did not care much about that. Flight was not an option; there was nowhere to go and very little space in which to create a distance between them. Unfortunately that left only one choice.

“That’s *not* my name.”

It wasn’t a dignified attack. Prison brawls rarely were. The girl was taken aback as her face was suddenly and aggressively forced towards the bars. There was a cheer from the inmates as her nose crunched. Waving her hands behind her back, the girl wailed. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

It was too late. The sickness Carmen felt in her stomach was now bile in her mouth. A floodgate had opened, one she hadn’t even realised she had been keeping shut. Taking the girl by the hair, Carmen pulled her into the centre of the cell. “That’s *not my name*.”

“Go on, push ‘er again!” The old man with the wandering hands was eager, almost gleeful, about seeing the fight continue.

Carmen wanted to stop. She had made her point. But then again, the girl could have kept her mouth shut. Nobody invited her to come over and start talking. Whoever she thought she knew, Carmen was not that person and felt urgently compelled to ensure the girl understood that, without any shadow of doubt.

One of the guards fumbled at the cell door with a set of keys. Finding the right one, he pushed his way through the group to the sounds of rousing cheers. “Pack it in!”

Grabbing Carmen by the neck, he pulled her back. The younger girl lay, clutching her stomach on the stone floor. He offered little sympathy. “Stop rolling around and making a bleedin’ racket. Soddin’ loon.” Turning, he glared at Carmen, “and you - what are you playing at?”

In the chaos, the door opened once again. Kasic locked eyes with Carmen, walked into the cell and took a seat on the bench. The guard who brought him back looked at Carmen, still in his colleague’s grasp. “Put her down, Ramone. What do we care if they want to rip bloody chunks out of each other? Let ‘em have at it.”

The one holding Carmen’s neck released his grip. Carmen wiped the hair from her face. She sat down on the bench next to Kasic, bringing her hands up to his face. He winced as she found matted sticky blood below his ear. “What happened?”

Kasic flinched. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Did they do this to you because of me?”

“No,” he reassured her. “Not because of you.” Kasic nodded towards the girl. “What were you fighting about?”

Carmen’s victim had returned to the other bench, one eye swelling and a large red mark on her forehead. She was being comforted by an old woman with one tooth. Carmen felt bad for what she had done, but not so much she would say so. After all, you didn’t get anywhere in that sort of place by being sorry for things. “I’m not sure, I didn’t like the way she was talking to me.”

“I have never seen you like that.”

Carmen felt a flush of shame. Kasic had seen her angry before. She’d yelled at him enough times for taking the last of the soap, or leaving his boots on the blankets. But this was different.

She looked at her feet. “I’m not proud of myself - it happened before I knew what I was about.”

“I see,” he sighed. “Did I miss anything else?”

Carmen looked over at the man with sour milk breath, who was lying on the floor and snoring. She shook her head. “One man did rather fancy the look of me, but I made it plain he ought to think carefully before making any inappropriate offers.”

“Good for you.”

“Kasic?”

“Yes, tiny girl?”

“Do you think Cooke has given up?”

“Why would you think such a thing?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know - he seems different.”

“Even he cannot have the answers all the time.”

“Do you think he might be mad about having to pay the bribe to get us out?” Carmen rubbed her fingers down the material of her shirt, frowning when they left behind a smudge. For a moment or two, Kasic did not say anything, and Carmen worried that secretly, he might be angry with her for getting them into such a mess.

“Fourteen.” He eventually whispered.

“What?” Carmen didn’t understand.

“I have worked with Cooke for three years, and in that time he has paid fourteen bribes to release me from places like this,” Kasic patted her knee. “We wait, you see.”

“Gosh,” Carmen bit her lip. “Well I hope he’s got his money’s worth.”
Kosic grinned.

She sat back and chewed on a strand of hair. The more Carmen thought about it, the more she came to believe that perhaps Cooke did need them. He needed Kosic for his strength and amiable nature. Demetrio was good with numbers and understood the mechanisms of politics. Henriette could give wise counsel or harsh judgement, depending on what they needed and, often what sort of mood she was in.

As she sat with her back against the wall, Carmen couldn’t help but wonder what she had to offer in the grand scheme of it all.

One of the guards returned, keys dangling between his fingers. He gestured for her to stand. “You, come with me.” Kosic stirred. The guard halted him. “Not you.” Carmen was led out of the cells and sat at a desk. The guard pointed to a document sitting on the table. “Sign here if you know how, cross if you don’t.”

Carmen signed her signature with a flourish. It was new. She wasn’t sure if she liked it yet. The guard didn’t seem to care one way or another. There was a creaking behind her. Carmen glimpsed over her shoulder. “Fuck.”

Henriette stood looming over the chair like an omen of bad tidings. “I thought you’d say that.” She looked at the guard. “We’ll take the Amidian as well.”

“Which one’s that?”

“The one taking up all the room.”

“Amidian costs extra.”

Narrowing her eyes, Henriette reached in to take something from between her cleavage. She frowned for a moment, fishing around. Then she swore, thrusting a hand between her breasts like she was trying to catch a rabbit diving back into a burrow. The guard licked his lips in a way that made Carmen’s stomach churn.

With a triumphant flourish, Henriette got hold of a roll of notes and slapped them down onto the desk. A moment later, Kosic appeared, escorted by one of the guards. The officer removed the restraints. “Don’t go causing any bother,”

“Thank you for your assistance,” Henriette smiled. The guard barely glanced up. Taking a step, Henriette stopped short. Pressing a hand to her stomach, she drew in a sharp gasp.

The guard rolled his eyes up, "What's going on, what is this?"

Henriette groaned. She opened her mouth to say something, instead doubling over and bringing both arms about her front. She cried out, twisting back towards the desk and grasping at anything she could as she fell to her knees. "Oh, oh I feel faint..."

The guard leapt to his feet. "No, no, *no*! I'm not having no fainting or vomiting in here," he hurried around the desk, ignoring the scattered papers and documents.

With Kasic taking her arm, Henriette wheezed and gasped her way to the front desk. The guard ushered them towards the exit.

"You could help," Carmen scowled.

"Do we look like a bunch of nurses to you?" the guard slammed the top of a counter down, "now get out of here before you infect us all."

Henriette was swaying ominously. With only a few more steps to the door, she and Kasic made it, Carmen dancing around them, not sure what she ought to do to be helpful. Finally outside, Henriette leant against the wall and gulped back several deep breaths. Then, straightening to normal height, she adjusted her bust and wiped a lock of hair from her eyes.

"Well," she said casually, "shall we?"

Without another word, Henriette began marching down the road. Carmen darted ahead, placing her hands on her hips. She wanted answers. Henriette came to an abrupt stop. "Yes?"

"What happened there?" Carmen was cold, hungry and confused, three things she did not like being at the best of times. Henriette might not care for the safety of her unborn child, but Carmen did. In fact, she was surprised to find the thought of Henriette being so *laissez-faire* after such a turn actually made her blood boil.

"You can take that look off your face," Henriette chided. "Cooke might be willing to fling his money about paying to get you out of your messes but there's one thing you may as well learn now. You can be in any place, any time and it doesn't matter what they say or how they treat you, you should never *ever* forget who you are, and I..." Henriette paused for a moment before fishing inside her corset and producing the large wad of notes that had previously been on the guard's desk, "...will always be a girl from the Pits. Now let's go before they realise it's gone."

On arrival at the apartment, Demetrio greeted Kasic and Carmen with bowls of soup, brought up by Abel, who had even gone so far as to butter some bread for them. The landlord harboured no love for the holding cells of the guard station, he himself having frequented them enough times.

They ate quietly and after a while, Kasic announced he was going to sleep. Demetrio had his own plans. In a surprising turn of events, it transpired Abel was quite the dab hand at a word game Demetrio particularly enjoyed.

He told Carmen not to wait up. In the end, she couldn't help herself. It didn't matter where she sat; the room was too hot, too sticky, too suffocating. The walls closed in and stretched out. Carmen moved from the chair, to the dresser, back to the chair, tip-toeing so as not to wake Kasic.

"Tiny girl, you walk like elephant," his voice murmured from beneath the covers. Carmen tucked her hair behind her ear and walked to the cot. She perched on the edge of it, as Kasic shifted his legs to make room. "What is wrong?"

"I'm not sure," she scratched her arm. "That is to say, I'm not sure about a lot of things."

Kasic moved in the darkness. "Like what?"

"About me, why I'm here or what happens next. Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Do you ever feel like there's a part of you that somehow got lost? Like you know you had it once, you can almost feel it, but it's not quite there any more?" Carmen couldn't see Kasic, but she imagined he was thinking.

"That is a big question." Sighing, he let his arm drop. The cot shuddered slightly with the weight of it. "But yes, sometimes I do."

"How do you find something that's lost, if you don't know what it is?"

"I don't think I am the person to be asking these things," Kasic punctuated his answer with a stifled yawn. "Demetrio has books you can look in, maybe they will help?"

"I'm not sure this is the sort of question that can be answered with a book."

Even in the darkness, she could sense his smile. “Perhaps not. Tiny girl, is this because of the things that woman said to you? You heard guards, she is crazy person.”

Carmen lifted her legs from the floor, resting the soles of her feet against the cot frame. “That’s just the thing – I *know* crazy. You have to be half-mad to get by in the Pits. This didn’t feel like that to me. It felt as if she *knew* me. She called me by my name – the other one. How could she do that? What if we did know each other once?”

Hugging her arms tight around her knees, she thought for a moment. “Sometimes, I’m not sure I’m a very nice person at all. There must be a reason why I don’t remember things. You know?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “The thing is – I’m starting to think maybe I *need* to remember. Otherwise, things will never really make any sense to me; does that make any sense to you?”

Reaching out, Kasic patted her arm. “If it is what makes sense to you that is all that matters.”

He made a movement, which could have been a nod, and withdrew his hand. “You should ask Demetrio. When we were in Splinters, he helped some of the younger people to remember what happened to their homes, their people. He will help you too, if that is what you want.”

Carmen wasn’t convinced it was what she wanted. But the older she got, and the more she learned about the world as it was now, the more she felt it was what she needed.

Carmen pulled in a deep breath, her chest aching a little. For some reason, she felt alone and afraid. Even with the very obvious presence of Kasic only a few feet away, Carmen did not want to go to sleep alone. In fact, the thought filled her with dread. “Kasic?”

“Yes?”

“Can I sleep here tonight?” She hastily lifted her hands as he shifted quickly, moving to increase the distance between them. “On top of the covers, I mean. Not like *that*. I just,” she paused. “Please?”

After a second of hesitation, Kasic rolled back to allow for what little room he could. “Do not blame me if I roll over and crush you in the night.”

Carmen twisted about, lying in the space he had created. “I’ll take the risk.”

She felt his breath on the back of her neck, and after a few minutes, heard the dulcet tones of a very large man snoring. She did not move. She

did not think. She focused on the rhythmic, reliable, predictable creaking of the tiny bed with each time Kasic inhaled and exhaled. Eventually, exhausted, she fell asleep.

A Connoisseur of Caramel

The boundaries between those of different social classes – wealth, education, opportunity – could often be bridged by one single unifying common interest. There were times when two people, who through circumstance of birth would otherwise never have cause to know one another, could find solidarity in a seemingly small and trifling thing. For Henriette and Argent, that thing was dessert.

Vanguard had always appreciated a good cake. Many of Henriette's happier memories of their time together revolved around iced buns and fruit tarts. But Vanguard was a man of simple tastes, and particularly odd when it came to food. Shortly after their arrival in Lycroix, she made the surprising but pleasant discovery that Argent Cooke not only appreciated dessert but was a fervently vocal and enthusiastic aficionado.

He was a connoisseur of caramel, a savant of steamed sponge and somehow, it served to help her feel less alone. They had grown closer because of it. The world for Henriette was upside down and inside out. Sometimes, it helped to have a person with whom she could share the comforts of a toffee pudding.

"You're staring at the custard," She took a seat at the table in his room, having let herself in without knocking. Cooke barely glanced up.

Henriette had her own room across the corridor, but most evenings they ate together. They both liked the companionship.

They were of an age to enjoy particular sorts of conversations younger people did not, and felt comfortable in the types of lingering silences that came in between.

Henriette took up one of the bowls and stirred the contents. She briefly relayed the successful liberation of their friends to little reaction.

"I saved you some." Argent nudged at the custard jug with one finger.

"You haven't listened to a word I've said, have you?"

Cooke toyed with his food. "I'm sorry; my mind is elsewhere," he lifted up a forkful of pudding. Cooke took a bite, eyes closing as the flavours rolled in his mouth. Henriette obligingly took a mouthful of her own in solidarity, making all the appropriate noises as she did. Argent looked up. "How fare our incarcerated companions?"

"Returned to Demetrio no worse for wear. I believe tomorrow he plans to give Carmen a lesson in trade policies between Briage and Lycroix."

Cooke half laughed. "An appropriate punishment," He was ever witty, ever charming, even lost in his own troubles. Cooke sat back, a twinge of guilt in his eyes. He ran a hand over his face, feeling the newly acquired beard he clearly hadn't quite grown accustomed to yet. Henriette thought it looked rather dashing. "Perhaps I should join them."

"You'll be no good to any of us if you don't get some sleep soon. When was the last time you rested?" Henriette furrowed her brow. The dark rings beneath his eyes told her it had been a while.

"I'm too busy to sleep. There's a lot of work to be done." Argent wiped one hand across his face, as if that could somehow erase the exhaustion.

"We've suffered a set back, and there will be a solution. You just haven't thought of it yet," Henriette savoured a little custard. "Give it time."

"You must think me quite the disappointment," Argent sighed, "to have dragged you all across the country for no reward."

Henriette placed her spoon down. "That's not important. I think we're past that sort of thing now. Shall I be honest with you? I'm told that's what I'm good at."

She saw the way that made him smile, even if it was wry. "I wish you would."

Henriette drew herself up so she sat straight. "You're a good man. You're educated. You're charming. There is no ego to you such as to speak of - "

"I sense a 'but' at the end of this."

"*But*," she lifted a finger. There came a time in every person's life when they needed to hear such things, "you've never known what it is to fail. Everything has always come to you. I'm not saying its come easily - I'm not fool enough to think that – but the point is, throughout your entire life, whenever *you* spoke, people listened."

Henriette was never cruel. At least, she tried not to be. She was honest. Argent was her social better, decreed so by the world around them. That did

not mean he was anything more than just a man, and a man could only carry so much. He might not have wanted to hear it, but if he didn't, his ambition would be their undoing. "You came here thinking Javier would just hand over the money because that's what he's always done. You went to the council thinking people would listen to you, because that's what *they've always done*. Now you have to face something you've never experienced before."

"And what is it that?" Cooke seemed to have already guessed the answer.

Henriette ran a finger down the side of the bowl. "People saying no."

The months in Lycroix had left a shadow across Cooke's face. It was not as any of them had hoped. People thought change was simple. It turned out; there was no guidebook to staging a revolution. "What do you suggest I do?"

Henriette exhaled heavily. "I suggest you pull yourself together. Put aside your pride before it is our undoing."

There was a little quiet. Argent's eyes grew distant as he thought. Henriette could wait. Cooke was a smart man and ambitious, but he had cast his net too far and too wide. Eventually his face lightened, and Henriette let out a sigh. She knew it would come eventually.

He nodded. "I've allowed my aspirations to get ahead of me and overreached myself. I thought I might run before I could walk. Perhaps it is time to reassess our purpose here in Lycroix, and whether this is the right place for us."

"That's the most sensible thing you've said all evening."

A little colour returning to his face, Cooke continued with a pace to his voice she found quite uplifting. "We should go to Dulrich on the borders of Leaumond. It's not much, but in the last rebellion it did have strategic importance. Since the war, D'Orsee has abandoned most of their trade in favour of richer pickings – and I suspect others have done the same. Dulrich will have no love for Felix Sanquain."

"Then we shall have something in common,"

Cooke lifted his glass and sipped. When he put it down, it seemed as though a weight was lifted from his shoulders. "We won't find much in the way of power there, but we may find friends."

"That's a start."

Seemingly bolstered by having made such a decision, Argent straightened. "I'll make arrangements to leave as soon as possible," he reached out and took Henriette by the hand. "Perhaps it is you rather than me who should be trying to mastermind our great scheme."

Cooke spoke as if he was joking, but Henriette could sense part of him was not, and it only served to make him all the more likeable. Argent Cooke was a man of good intentions. It made him no less worthy of respect to know sometimes even he felt a little lost.

"Well, as much as I'd like to believe that were true, I don't think I'd take much to the world of politics. That's your dominion – the speeches and bills and such. We're all cut out for different things." Henriette felt a fluttering within her belly. She still didn't know how she felt about the sensation or the person who put it there.

Cooke looked at her with more sympathy than she liked. "You know you should tell him. You could write a letter. I'd be happy to help you."

There was an awkward pause. Henriette stared at the bowl of rapidly cooling pudding. "Are you going to finish that?"

Cooke silently pushed the bowl across the table. Henriette noticed how despite his attempts to look at ease; there was still something troubling him. "What is it?"

Cooke turned the spoon in his hand. "Without Javier's funds, travel will become an issue. We cannot continue onward without supplies and our recent brush with the Lycian guard has left me a little short in pocket."

Henriette rolled her eyes. For all his strengths and skills, like many men of his status and position, Argent Cooke suffered from one single debilitating weakness.

He did not understand how money worked.

Rich people seldom did, she found. They knew accounts and numbers and figures but that wasn't money – it was the idea of money found on bits of paper and in books. Cooke had been accustomed to wealth all his life, but never learned the true nature of the coin. Now he was running out of it.

The money, intended to secure Carmen and Kotic's release, found its way onto the table between them. A second later, Cooke's mouth began to twitch. He lifted his head, thick and genuine mirth filling the room. Henriette was glad to hear it. It was the first time she had seen him laugh in weeks.

There's No Saving You Now

It did not take Tarryn long to find his place on the rooftops. He preferred it, relishing the distance it put between him and the world below. From up there you could see everything for what it was. Sometimes he needed that sort of scope.

Tarryn walked along the slopes, keeping balance as he dropped and twisted, over hanging shelf to flat roof to twisting, crumbling chimney stack. He paused, one hand pressing against the brickwork, slick with black soot and grime. All across the horizon, the city churned out putrid clouds of black smog.

Why are you doing this?

Tarryn did not flinch, not any more. He craned his head slightly to the left. They both stood, looking out at the twinkling lights dancing in the mire, the snaking stretch of the canals and ships calling out from the distance. The rational part of Tarryn's mind told him to keep on walking. Ignore the voices in his head.

It won't make any difference.

"You don't know anything," Tarryn scoffed. "You're not even real. You're a symptom, nothing but a sickness."

Wick threw his head back and laughed. It went on and on, filling up the night air around him. It made Tarryn's blood boil. Angrily he slashed a fist through the fog, cutting it in two. The dead didn't get to have opinions. He got enough of that from the living.

And you're a fool.

Tarryn felt his temper rise at the thought of someone like Sam Wick finding him so pathetic. So ripe for mocking. Death had made Wick brazen, spiteful. He could afford to be now.

Hauling himself up, he began to walk at a quick pace across the city. His feet slipped across the rooftops until he was darting through the night and crossing with graceful ease from one to the other. The dark spires and

looming factories of the Black Zone rose up out of the ground, calling him forth until he reached the Hook.

He slid down to the ground, slipping across the road to the Lock and Bolt. Looking through the window, he saw the bar by candlelight.

The lone patron threw back his head, taking up the last dregs from his glass and stood. Stumbling from the stool, he walked to the door and pushed it open. Standing there, the man turned, called goodnight and gave no indication he felt anything slip past him at all.

Fabian stood with his back to the door. He threw a rag over his shoulder and set about rearranging the glasses on the counter. There was a long mirror running the length of the back bar, below the shelves on which the top brand liquor bottles sat, filled with what were undoubtedly cheap alternatives. He stopped, muscles in his back tensing. His eyes met Tarryn's reflection in the mirror.

"Before we start," he said quietly, "you should know I'll tell you nothing."

Tarryn smiled, "We shall see," He touched the tip of the blade and felt a shudder ripple through him. "Who is Monroe?"

Fabian took the cloth from his shoulder and untied his apron. Tarryn could smell the fear on him. He stepped around, stalking the periphery of the room like a wolf surveying its quarry.

"Who is Monroe?" He asked again.

Whatever secrets Fabian was privy to Tarryn would bleed them out. The barkeep would give him everything he needed. This was what Tarryn was made for. A real kill, something the city would feel. Something that mattered. "Tell me where he is."

Folding his apron and placing it on the bar, Fabian took a look around the room. He was playing for time. Tarryn didn't mind. They had plenty of that.

Narrowing his eyes, Fabian slipped a hand behind the pumps. He spoke three words only. "They are coming."

Before Tarryn could stop him, Fabian brought out a knife. Lifting it to his throat, the bar keeper rolled his eyes upward and drew it across the delicate skin. It split, gurgling, bubbling blood surging forth. Tarryn's legs moved beneath him, carrying him to the bar and over it as Fabian's knees buckled. "No, no, *no!*"

Grasping Fabian in his arms, Tarryn tried to will the life back into him. He was death. Not this - this was cheating. The bar keeper's body jolted, fingers and legs twitching. Tarryn shook the man. He was gone. It was over.

"No, no, wake up," saliva spat from Tarryn's lips as he urged the corpse to open his eyes. "Wake up! Look at me, look at me!" Tarryn released his grip, falling back against the floor. The body lay prone. This was intolerable. It was too much. "I told you to look at me!"

He grasped Fabian's head with bloody fingers. Turning it with a force driven by pure unyielding rage, Tarryn drove the knife down into the soft jelly of his eye. "Look!"

The more he dug around in Fabian, the more Tarryn felt it. The fury came in waves, ebbing and flowing. Crashing and sucking him under until he was breathless. He did not stop until Fabian was no longer Fabian.

He was meat and gristle.

Tarryn sat back, pressing his hands to his ears. It would not stop. The pain – it was unbearable, tearing through him like claws trying to rip his skin open from the inside.

Wick filtered through the walls, observing the destruction around him. He looked at Tarryn and shook his head. *You understand, there's no saving you now.*

Tarryn faltered. His arms and legs were spent. Backing away from the wreckage, he turned and fled into the night.

Had Tarryn waited, if he had been patient enough and focused enough to take proper stock of his surroundings, he would have realised he was not alone in the Lock and Bolt.

A few minutes after he had taken his leave, a small figure crept down the stairs with a knife in her shaking hand. Not-Marianne crawled across the floor and draped herself over her Grandpa.

He did not move. She kept her eyes shut, weeping quietly until all the tears had gone. Then, she stood. Grandpa had always been very clear about what she ought to do. She would not let him down now.

Quickly and quietly she went about following the steps they had agreed upon. Firstly, she lifted the floorboards behind the bar and took out the little bag he packed for her, pulling the straps over her shoulder. Next, she went back to Grandpa and kissed him one last time.

Then, she walked to the barrel that sat on the shelf and with some effort, removed the stopper. Liquid began pouring out of the spout, down the bar and across the floor. Not-Marianne stepped back, took one last look at her home and retrieved the box of matches from the bag. She scratched one against the striking surface and tossed the small flame onto the bar. Then she left.

The Cousins could not return to the Lock and Bolt. They had been compromised. It was no longer a safe place for them. Not-Marianne knew that, and many other things a nine year-old girl had no business knowing.

She turned and began to walk down the cobbled road. After a while, she rounded a corner into a street, tiny box houses crammed together with long narrow yards. She hitched her bag over one of the fences and scrambled up the side. She dropped to the ground.

A woman stood in the yard, taking sheets from the line while singing. She stopped when she saw Not-Marianne and dropped her linens to the basket, sweeping the child into an embrace.

As Not-Marianne's tears wet her blouse, Mira stroked the girl's hair. After a while, she tipped the child's face upwards with her finger. She wiped away the last of them with her thumb and spoke in her soft Amidian accent, "Alright now my darling, let's take you to Monroe."

Reza Asil

All men had their talents. Even the crime lords each commanded their particular areas of interest. Mandego had pharmaceuticals. Pincer dealt in flesh and Yanis seemed to have a stake in a little of everything. He was what many would describe as a 'legitimate business man', which told you everything you needed to know about the sort of business he conducted. Pincer or Mandego were the men to see when you wanted something found. Yanis was the person you went to when you wanted something to go away.

Sambray was a gambling man. Several of the larger buildings around the Hook had been given over to Sambray's boys in order to set up fighting rings, blood sports, dice and whatever else it was men cared to stake their wages on.

Vanguard slipped in and out of the crowd taking in the old warehouse. Sambray was with his bookies, overseeing the exchange of slips as the crowd roared. The ring in the centre of the ground floor was thick with a mixture of blood, sawdust and feathers. Vanguard watched from the sidelines as a man scrambled to retrieve the mangled corpse of a fine reza asil before the next round could begin.

Lip curling, he ignored the baying and bustling of the crowds around him. Sambray was counting debt slips. The crime lord handed a bunch of them to the larger of the two flunkies beside him and flicked his hand towards the upper mezzanine.

Vanguard followed the direction of his finger, eyes coming to a stop on a Red Badge who stood leaning on the railings. Sambray went back to the fight as his boy climbed the stairs to the platform and handed over the stubs. The Red Badge turned and promptly left through a door leading out onto an iron staircase. Sanquain's cut was on its way back to the Golden Quarter.

"You're late," Sambray's voice pierced through the noise. Vanguard turned. He immediately recognised the man shoving his way through the crowd. Vanguard moved closer to get a better view. Sometimes he could

read lips, if the situation called for it. He wasn't particularly good at it, but he could pick out words – enough to know if a conversation was worth his time.

“I got held up,” Tunnock replied, voice faltering.

“Did you get it?” Sambray watched the ring.

“I got it.”

Vanguard observed a package slip between the two men.

“I want more money.” The foreman shifted from foot to foot. His eyes darted from one side of the room to another. “I’m taking too much risk here.”

“Don’t worry - you know I always take care of my friends.” Sambray nodded, before enthusiastically cheering as the two birds a few feet away broke free of their restraints. “Look at that great bastard, beautiful isn’t he?”

Tunnock didn’t look overly enthused at the thought of being one of Sambray’s friends. He looked more like a man into something over his head than someone eager to transition into a life of crime.

The combatants launched at each other, a tangled mass of beak and claws. It was a mad, frenzied, blur of orange and green, suddenly interspersed with slick glistening red. The smaller of the two lost his comb, blood and stray feathers marring its vision. The larger bird tore into its competitor, shrieks filling the air, the bloodlust from one eliciting cries of pain and unanswered squawks for mercy from the other. The winner was still slicing at the corpse of his enemy, gizzards hanging between his toes when the two men wrapped up their exchange.

Vanguard watched Tunnock leave, stopping at the exit to await the return of his overcoat from a coat check girl. After taking the returned items, he headed out into the night.

The girl left the confines of her little wooden cabin and made her way through the audience, who were eagerly awaiting the next fight.

One of the birds, not keen on the idea of imminent disembowelment, was trying to claw free from the keeper’s grip. It beat its wings against the man’s face as the audience roared and laughed. Vanguard hoped it would break free and claw his eyes out. It was a travesty keeping a creature like that in a pit.

The girl from the desk whispered something to Sambray who nodded. Vanguard wanted to know what manner of thing Sambray had in his

possession. He could chance it. Slip forward and try to run his hands through the crime lord's pockets. He would have, had it not been for the fact he was acutely aware of his right hand. It was shaking. Vanguard felt his heart rate elevate. Not again. Be unseen. Stay unseen. Running a tongue over his dry lips, Vanguard felt the hot swell of the air around him.

"So, George, is the deal on or off?" Sambray was no longer alone. A new figure had appeared at his side. Vanguard recognised the man as one of Ypre's employees. The sort of person you didn't send to negotiate a run of the mill deal. "Yanis is tired of waiting."

"You can tell Yanis I've got what he wants. We'll exchange at the east gate, Thursday night." Sambray spoke without looking at his guest. "Eleven o'clock. Don't be late."

Ypre's man stayed for a few minutes longer. As far as anyone was concerned they were just two men indulging in a bit of sport. Nothing to raise any alarm bells over.

Vanguard heard them so loud they were deafening. When the match was done, Sambray went one way, his guest the other.

Trailing through the streets, Vanguard kept back a little more than usual. He was still not entirely confident the issue he experienced with the slender man would not happen again. The thought of it struck something deep in his gut. Over the years Vanguard questioned his abilities many times, but he never doubted them before.

Vanguard was not a man comfortable making his own choices. It was what made him a good soldier and an even better killer. Other people made the decisions for you, and all you had to do was try to get through each day as best you could. Mandego was waiting for him to return to the Butchers with a full report of what he had seen transpire in the Hook. Even Vanguard, with his almost innate ability to choose the wrong path at every given opportunity, could see relaying such information to Hector would be tantamount to taking a match to tinder.

He needed time to consider what he might divulge and what he might keep to himself. A good night's sleep would be the best solution all round. Vanguard made for the Blessed Iris and by the time he reached the borders of the cemetery, had quite convinced himself that given a few hours, he could come up with a decent plan.

His shoulders slumped as he realised someone was waiting for him. A large figure leant against the door of the church. Royce stepped out of the

darkness, thick torso swathed in layers of clothing that made him look even more imposing than he already was.

He eyed Vanguard with a cool disdain. “Evening,” Royce nodded towards the road Vanguard had just walked down. “Boss wants a word with you.”

“What do you mean you fucking lost him?” Mandego was less than pacified by the intelligence Vanguard had gleaned. Picking up a candle stick and hurling it at the wall, he spat. “Is he made of moonbeams? Did the fairies pick him up and carry him off?” Another candlestick hit the floor.

Vanguard pointed at his thigh, as if that would offer up an excuse as to why he had allowed Yanis’s man to escape. “Not my fault, he’s got two good legs.”

“You watch your tone,” Mandego warned, wafting his cutlery, “or I’ll take this steak knife and carve the thing off myself, watch you bleed all over my nice rug.”

Vanguard clenched his jaw. Hector might have been the one providing him with a means to live, but Vanguard didn’t work for him. Hector was getting increasingly agitated. If the city had been full of secrets before, it was bulging at the seams now. From experience, Vanguard knew Mandego didn’t like not knowing things. It didn’t just make him mad. It made him murderous.

“I’d like to see you try.”

“What did you say to me?” Mandego’s impish demeanour faded, leaving behind nothing but blind fury. “You’d be dead if it wasn’t for me, so I’d watch what I was saying if I were you.” He waved a piece of bacon around on the end of a fork.

Somehow it didn’t do anything to lessen the menace of his presence. If anything, it enhanced it. Vanguard didn’t ask why Mandego happened to be having supper at nearly one in the morning. He supposed running a mob of blood thirsty bastards meant you kept odd hours.

“Calm down,” Vanguard rubbed his shoulder. “I’ll go back tomorrow and find out what I can.”

Something in Mandego's eyes flickered. He put the food in his mouth and chewed. Vanguard didn't know what had just occurred to him, but whatever it was, Mandego's mood flipped as quickly as a coin toss.

The crime lord patted his belly. "You see that you do. In the meantime I heard something that might be of interest to you." He nodded towards one of the chairs. "Don't just stand around, you make the place look untidy."

Vanguard crossed the room and pulled out a chair. A small pile of items fell from the seat as it moved. Mandego stabbed his knife into a tomato. Throwing caution to the wind, Vanguard reached out and made to swipe a morsel from one of the several plates in front of him. The flat of the blade smacked his hand. "Sausages are for winners."

"What do you know, Hector?" Vanguard ignored the gnawing in his stomach.

Placing his cutlery down, Mandego leaned back, clasping both hands behind his head. "You know I like to keep up to date with what's going on. Anyway, I've been told your friend Mr Cooke was seen up at a council meeting in Briage, putting his bleeding heart liberal policies to that bunch of ignorant piss stains." Mandego did not hold the general council in high esteem. "Walked right on up and asked them to give old Sanquain and the rest of them the boot, imagine. *Oh please, go on. They're horrible bastards, the lot of 'em.*" Hector snorted. "What is it with his type thinking you can get what you want by asking nicely?"

It was hardly encouraging news, but Vanguard couldn't deny the little flicker of comfort at hearing Cooke was at least not dead.

"There you go then; I thought you might want to know." Hector swiped a finger around the grease on his empty plate. "How about that?"

Arching one eyebrow, Vanguard looked at the table. "Why are you interested in what Cooke is doing?" Not being renowned for his liberal ideations, Mandego was the last person he would have thought to follow Cooke's progress.

Hector grinned. "Would it surprise you to hear that perhaps I wouldn't mind if Cooke did happen to do this thing you're all crying about? I reckon I could live without Felix bloody Sanquain quite well. Besides," he stuck a finger in his mouth, "I do love an underdog."

He shouted out, calling for someone to come and dispose of his plates. He looked at Vanguard, waited for a moment and then frowned. "I'll see you Thursday, shall I? Don't be late."

Della

Kosic had never felt uncomfortable in his own skin. It was always other people's discomfort that caused him troubles. He tried not to bear ill will to any person, but as the years went on it became harder. Kosic wasn't a political man, and he wasn't a soldier. He had no country. Any roots he grew were ripped from beneath his feet and thrown aside long before he was old enough to know them well. Kosic belonged to nowhere, and the world revelled in reminding him so.

Despite this, he managed to carve out a suitable role for himself in the grand scheme of Cooke's plans. He might have lacked the academic skills Demetrio possessed, and was far less experienced in the world of politics and business than either Cooke or Henriette, but Kosic was happy to spend his days fetching and carrying, doing whatever Cooke needed that didn't involve getting shot or punched in the face. It gave him a place and a reason to wake up each morning.

Being what he was and looking the way he did, Kosic had learnt over the years to accept that no matter how unobtrusively he tried to exist, he would always garner a certain level of attention.

How it manifested depended a lot on where he was. In D'Orsee it was confrontational. Their collective tolerance for anything out of the ordinary was significantly lower than in Lycroix which, despite Carmen's reservations and the occasional interlude with the guard, was a comparatively welcoming place.

At least it was in a sense.

In D'Orsee, Kosic was a threat, a dangerous stranger come to take what was not his. For the most part, Lycroix was different. There when people heard Kosic talk, they turned not to attack him, but to gush and laugh at the way he spoke and how the words sounded a little bit odd. Strangers would stop what they were doing and ask him to say words just for the

entertainment of hearing them in a strange cadence. When they saw him on the street, they would watch not with malice, but curiosity and amusement.

For all his skills seemed to bring him nothing but trouble, Kosic sometimes wondered if Vanguard realised how fortunate he was to be able to fade away, to not to be noticed by the world. How tiresome it was to only be seen as an obstruction, a threat or a novelty.

“Everything alright?” An unfamiliar voice pulled Kosic from his thoughts. Looking up, he saw the waitress, gentle crease in the corner of her mouth. “It’s just you’ve been looking at an empty cup for a half hour now, and Abel says if you’re not having any more I’m to tell you we need the room for other customers,” she winced, as though embarrassed to be the bearer of such news. “Not that you couldn’t have another if you wanted.”

Kosic picked up the mug and looked inside to find it was indeed empty. He hadn’t even noticed. Cooke would be meeting with his contacts until late afternoon, and the dining room seemed as good a place as any to pass the time. Demetrio had been pleased to have him out of the way for a few hours. Carmen was struggling to get to grips with the finer points of domestic policy and Kosic’s presence had proven a great distraction.

In honesty, Kosic was glad of the peace. Since their night on the cot, Kosic found it easier to put some distance between him and Carmen. It wasn’t that he hadn’t enjoyed it, for what it was. But he did not want to encourage complication.

Kosic was, above all other things, what he hoped was a fairly decent sort of person. It had taken a great deal of courage for Carmen to say the things she had, and he admired her for that. But that was as far as it could go and as much as he was willing to offer.

The waitress returned and brought a fresh drink. Kosic reached into his pocket and placed a few coins on the tray. He was a little surprised when she didn’t walk away and instead nervously asked if she could ask a question.

Kosic said she could and prepared himself for some ludicrous query about tribes or clans or whatever it was she thought he came from.

With her free hand, she pointed at the faded tattoos poking out from beneath his rolled sleeves. “You’re a Kassan,” she said, which was more of a statement than a question.

Kosic’s brain took a full ten seconds to react.

The majority of people couldn't tell the difference between Amidian and Yiscjan, despite them being two entirely different countries. Occasionally he would find someone who could correctly distinguish between the two, but would have no idea of the subtle differences and nuances between the various peoples living on the Amidian coast itself.

"Yes," he moved his hand back down to the table, "Not many people here can tell these things. Where did you learn this?"

She glanced back, checking to see if her employer was paying attention to the fact she was socialising instead of working.

Satisfied she could spare a few moments, the waitress smiled, "I'm married, and my husband is Urni, so I know a little bit. Though I suppose if we're to go back I'd have to learn about it all sooner or later," she rolled her eyes up as she spoke. "I've never been there myself but I should think I'll like it."

Kosic felt a twinge of regret in his heart; it was a beautiful dream, the idea of walking rocky beaches and red sand coves. He was certain she would have liked it; he couldn't imagine how it would be possible for anyone not to. The rich, vibrant expansion of the yellows and ambers of the coast, peeling back into the fresh, clean greenness of the valleys and mountains – something more akin to a story now.

He sighed, "Perhaps one day."

The waitress stopped abruptly. She twisted her head to one side and looked thoughtful. Then she clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh my, you haven't heard have you?"

Dropping the tray to the table, she sat on the chair next to him. Kosic lifted his mug out of the way. The waitress leaned in, without care for what draped in the dirty plates. "I'm sorry, I just assumed you knew. We heard a few weeks ago, when the last ship came in. I should have thought someone would tell you, I would have sought you out if I'd known."

She was driving towards something, and Kosic felt the breath catch in his throat.

"It's true," she said gently. "The occupation is over. You can go home now."

Kosic heard the words but did not absorb them. It was as if they bounced off him, some part of his brain that could not bear for it to be untrue deflecting them to save him the pain of having hope put before him and then snatched away.

“What do you mean?”

“The Yiscjan withdrew weeks ago, I mean, it’s not entirely perfect but we’ve been told it is possible to go back. We’ve got a passage on a ship booked for the end of this month. I’ve already told them I’m out of here,” she flicked her thumb towards Abel, who was arguing with a stubborn tap. It was more than Kasic could take at that moment. He did not know what to do. She looked at him. “I’ve seen that expression before.”

After decades of existing in a place he did not belong, Kasic had almost abandoned hope of ever returning to the land he grew up in. As a young boy when he left, it was not until years later he fully understood why they were driven out of their homes. It seemed there was some controversy over who owned the region. Rather than risk putting his family through the pain of occupation, Kasic’s father had taken them overseas to what he hoped would be a more peaceful land across the water.

She shook the loose hairs away from her face, “You should speak with my husband. He can tell you more than I can about it. If you wait here until I’ve finished, I could take you to meet with him, if you’d like?”

Kasic nodded. Taking the cup, he drank as much of the liquid as able, attempting to douse the adrenaline surging through his veins.

Now the opportunity lay before him, Kasic found rather than being overjoyed at the prospect of leaving Soussan to its own affairs, he felt conflicted. For as long as his home could remain a place only in his memories, it could not be tainted or ruined. He need only remember what it was and nothing else mattered.

The waitress stood. “You’d best take your time with that drink there. I’ll be done in an hour. My name is Della, by the way.”

“Kasic.”

The woman smiled, “Well Kasic, I’ll collect you when I’m done.” She used her free hand to scoop up the coins Kasic had deposited on the tray, placing them back on the table. “You can keep your money. This one’s on the house.”

Left alone with his thoughts, Kasic felt himself at a crossroads, not knowing which way to turn.

For as long as he could remember, he had committed himself to protecting what was left of his people. But things were different now.

Demetrio, Mira, what was left of the others, they had all taken their own paths. They did not need him the way they once had. He made a promise to

Cooke he would stand with him, but that would mean fighting for a country that was not his own - one that never loved or nurtured him or his kind. You would think the chance to return to his homeland would fill his heart with relief. Deep down perhaps it did. But Kasic could not deny that after waiting so long, a little part of him was afraid to tread those shores again. He had been a child when he left, and would be a man when he returned.

Life had changed Kasic, and it had no doubt changed his home. Kasic could not help fear that once they were reunited, they would neither of them recognise the other any longer.

“How does it taste?” Della stood, ladle in hand, watching Kasic eat. Eyes closed, he let the flavours melt on his tongue. The scent of cumin and red pepper flakes danced in his nostrils. Delicately seasoned white fish crumbled and flaked and all of a sudden he was home.

“This is wonderful,” scooping up another bite; he brushed a roll of bread around the bowl. “Where did you learn this?”

Della nodded towards an old woman sleeping in a chair on the other side of the room. “It’s Maman’s recipe. She remembers it from when she was a girl. Never quite lived up to her standards, but I’m glad you like it.” She busied herself folding clothes and draping them across the end of the table.

“I haven’t had this since I was a boy,” Kasic recalled the way the women in his home used to stand, bent over open fires. Neither Demetrio nor Kasic could cook, and Mira had only ever known the basics. This was real, authentic. It was like tasting memories.

“Well, there’s always plenty here.” Della walked to her sleeping companion. A cane leant against the back of the chair, soft blanket loosely draped over the old woman’s knees. Kasic assumed, going by her features and colouring, she was Della’s grandmother-in-law.

Taking a smaller bowl, Della used a fork to mash a little of the stew into a smoother consistency. “Wake up, Maman, it’s time to eat.”

Maman started, opening one eye and peering around. Della pulled a stool a little closer and sat. Mouth falling open, the old woman made a

smacking sound, thick dark tongue flicking out of her mouth and wetting her dried lips. Della lifted the spoon and let the woman find it. Maman's face twisted, frowned, and let her one eye travel up to Della's face. "Too much garlic."

"It's exactly as you told me to make it," Della countered, shoulders already slumped in defeat. Kasic remembered well the futility of arguing with an Urni matriarch.

"No," Maman said in short, clipped words. "Not the same."

As much as his heart had lifted at the offer of home-cooked food and the chance to meet another of his fellow countrymen, Kasic couldn't help but feel he was intruding.

Placing his spoon down, he realised he ought to thank Della for her kind offer and leave the family to their business. He could arrange to meet Della's husband at a time where he would be less obstructive. The chair creaked ever so slightly as he leaned forward. Maman's good eye shot over to the table. "What is this?"

Feeding her another mouthful, Della reassured Maman all was well. "Don't get yourself upset, it's just one of Zaab's friends. You know they're always in and out of here."

Kasic was about to attempt some sort of pleasantries to calm Maman, when the door flew open, banging against the wall. Della frowned. A tall, dark haired man stood, framed against the street. He looked from Maman to Della to Kasic.

"Della, what the hell is this?" The man stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. He considered Kasic with a piercing, intense stare. "You invite some stranger into my home? You give him my food?"

Kasic was unsure of how to react. He had no wish to bring any upset to Della's home, especially after the hospitality shown to him. The man, who he presumed to be her husband, took a step forward. "Who are you?"

Kasic would try to explain. He would apologise for the chaos brought to their door and in particular, to Maman, who was moving her head, trying desperately to focus on what was happening across the room.

"I..." he began.

The man lifted a hand. "I suppose I shouldn't expect anything better from a flat-footed, knuckle-dragging, sheep-loving Kassan," he only managed to get halfway through the sentence before the façade broke. "A shit-eating..." Staggering forward, Della's husband grabbed the back of a

chair, laughter wracking his body. “Ah, your face! I thought for a moment there you would punch me right in the teeth, but I had to take the risk!”

Kosic was confused, and a little insulted.

The man struck out one hand. “You’ll forgive me. It’s not every day you come home to find Kosic the Undefeated sitting at your table. Now I shall be able to tell everyone I insulted you and lived to tell the tale! I’m Zaab and you are very welcome here.”

“If you’re quite finished with your little show,” Della stood. “You’re upsetting Maman.”

The old woman scrunched her face up. “I’m not upset, you bring boy to me,” Fumbling at her side, the old woman grappled for the cane and lifted it. “I give him good, hard smack.”

Zaab clapped Kosic on the forearm. “Don’t worry. She’s joking.”

It didn’t seem like she was. Zaab swept across the room and bowed at the old woman’s feet. Maman swiped out with the cane, with impressive dexterity. He yelped, rubbing at his temple. “Maman, it’s me.”

“I *know* who it is.” Justice dispensed, Maman resumed her previous position, head down and breath so shallow it could barely be seen.

Della narrowed her eyes at her husband. “Must you be so dramatic?”

Pulling up a seat, Zaab helped himself to some food. He sat with a confidence and assured presence Kosic could not help but admire. For a relatively young man, Zaab held himself in the same sort of way Kosic recalled his own father sitting. Della took another seat, quickly explaining there would be more people coming later and Kosic would be introduced to all of them.

“Will they all call me sheep-loving Kassan?” He ventured, still a little hurt.

Realising the joke had not landed well, Zaab offered him a fresh drink in an attempt to make amends. “I apologise, forgive me. I realise that was careless. I forget that for many those words carry weight. No, there’ll be no more of it. You’ll find none of that rubbish under my roof. We’re countrymen, you and I, that’s an end to it. Now tell me, Kosic the Undefeated, what brings you to Lycroix?”

Kosic imparted what details of his journey he was able to as Zaab ate his dinner. Della sat quietly and Kosic did wonder why she wasn’t eating too. Then he remembered Urni women did not eat until the rest of the family had.

It was an old tradition, and one there seemed very little point in observing in the current circumstances. Then he noticed how she wore the silver rings on her fingers denoting her importance as caretaker of the family. When he had seen her at work, her fingers had been bare. Kasic wondered he had not noticed her put them on. He found himself suddenly filled with admiration for a woman who could slip so quietly and easily from one culture to another.

“How did you know who I am?” Kasic was curious.

“There are a few of us in Lycroix, we’ve all heard of you,” Zaab explained. “I saw you fight once, years ago in a town some way out of Lyren. I watched you defeat a pit fighter in the second round, saw him go down like a tree.”

“Some of the young boys are quite keen to meet you,” Della smiled.

Kasic wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He’d never asked for the mantle. The name was a curse more than anything, carrying with it certain expectations and pressures. You could only be revered as the undefeated for as long as it took for someone to come along and defeat you.

Sensing his discomfort, Della reached out and took his bowl. “We don’t need to talk about that now. I’m sure you have questions of your own.”

Feeling his pulse quicken, Kasic spoke in a low voice. “Della tells me you are going home. Is it true? Tell me how this is possible?”

For the next hour or so, Kasic listened as Zaab explained what had become of his country. How, after years of occupation, the Yiscjan soldiers had finally agreed their withdrawal from the territories inland from the Amidian Coast.

At long last Kasic’s homelands were back in the hands of their people. When he heard this part in particular, he felt his chest heave with a mixture of grief and happiness. The two countries were not at peace, but they were not officially at war any longer. Zaab told him how although there was still fighting, the majority of it had moved east and was concentrated around the mountain pass that punctuated the borders between their country and that of the Yisjcan.

More than twenty years of bloodshed was coming to an end and slowly, tentatively, people were beginning to return.

“We’ve booked passage on a ship to take us to the coast. From there we will travel north. It won’t be home, but it’ll be as close as I’ve been in all my life,” Zaab seemed cheerful at the prospect. The Urni region was too

close to the remaining fighting for them to go back to his homeland completely, but it would be better than not being there at all.

“Why so soon?” Kasic didn’t blame Zaab for wanting to take the earliest ship possible. But it was not yet entirely safe and the cost alone would have been far more than they could reasonably afford – judging by the state of their home. “Why not wait until it is certain?”

Leaning across, Zaab whispered. “Maman is old; she does not have much time left. I am worried if we wait any longer she will not be able to make the journey. If she is to die, let her die in her own country. Not as some refugee in a place that does not want her and will not mourn her.”

Without a word, Della reached out across the table and took her husband’s hand.

Kasic wondered how she felt about leaving her country, her roots, to set up in some place that was as alien to her as Soussan had felt to Kasic as a boy. Then he saw the way their fingers interlocked.

As the evening progressed, Kasic met the extended members of Zaab’s family, each person passing through and stopping for a while, sometimes two or three at a time. None of them seemed surprised or dismayed to find a stranger in their midst. The sense of kinship, belonging – Kasic felt it from his fingertips to his toes. It was as warm as anything he could have imagined.

As the light died, and they lit the lamps, Zaab and his family exchanged stories and memories until Kasic felt full with such a feeling of contentment he would have stayed the whole night if he could.

One of the adolescent boys who had been so excited to meet the famous Amidian champion leant over the cooking pot. Zaab slapped him away. “That’s not for you,” he said, coming to the defence of his wife’s supper.

He glanced at Kasic. “Never bloody sated, these youngsters.” It was strange to hear, seeing as how Zaab couldn’t have been more than seven or so years older than the boy.

Reluctant, but not wishing to outstay his welcome, Kasic rose and thanked Della for taking such good care of them all. He thought briefly about saying goodnight to Maman, but it was impossible to tell if she was conscious or not.

“Come, walk with me.” Zaab gestured towards the door. Outside, he stopped and looked up at the darkened clouds. “I meant what I said earlier. We need all the help we can get, it won’t be an easy journey and there are a

lot of young ones here never seen their own country. They don't know who they are or where they come from. You should come with us, help rebuild. Teach them what it means to be Amidian again."

"I'm not sure I know myself these days." Kotic said with some regret.

In the end he agreed to think about Zaab's offer. They would create a space for Kotic, if he could pay his way. The money would not be an issue.

Even as he walked through the streets to the apartment, Kotic knew all he need do was ask and Cooke would give it to him without question. By the time he arrived home, the hour had grown late. He pushed the door open only to be caught in the glaring beam of two large dark eyes.

Carmen sat, cross legged on the cot. "And where," she asked, coolly, "have you been?"

Kotic had long dreamt of the day he could come home and tell his friends their wait was over. He often imagined wrapping Demetrio and Mira up in a joyful embrace and toasting the liberation of their homeland. It should have been a celebration, something they could have shared and taken comfort in together.

Carmen was still watching him.

"Nowhere," he replied. "Just out."

Daisy Two-Fingers

Vanguard scratched his chin. He stood for a moment and felt the soft droplets of rain slipping down the back of his neck. Glancing at his pocket watch, he frowned. Trust Hector to be late to his own stakeout. Across the road, standing beneath the soft glow cast out by the street lamp, George Sambray stood flanked by two men. They each watched the road from a different direction. Vanguard narrowed his eyes, squinting against the mist that rose from the cobblestones. A figure emerged. Not to be outdone, Yanis brought eight of his men with him.

“Yanis,” Sambray lifted his hands to show he was unarmed.

“George,” Yanis returned the greeting.

They were both carrying. Vanguard could spot the bulge of a pistol from quite a distance. Shifting his weight, he rubbed at his leg. Knowing there would be at least another few minutes of posturing before they got down to business, he took the last of Mandego’s pills and slipped it under his tongue. It only took a few seconds to take effect, lifting the pain and sending soothing waves of relief over his body.

“Le Faye’s yard is still closed,” Yanis narrowed his eyes, “you told me your man would deal with the Reds before the next shipment came in. Sanquain knows something.”

Sambray scoffed. “He doesn’t know anything. Le Faye’s up to his balls in debt, nothing to do with our deal. Don’t worry about it.”

Yanis clicked his fingers together, upon which his men spread out. It was clear he didn’t trust Sambray and didn’t care if Sambray knew it. “Reds all over the place should be a worry to all of us.”

“Makes no difference if they’re there or not, the deal still stands.”

“So where is it?”

Sambray patted his breast pocket. “You think I’d let you down?” Even from across the street, Vanguard could see George was genuinely hurt by the question.

Yanis nodded to one of his boys who dropped a bag. He kicked it over to Sambray who looked at it, practically salivating. Vanguard heard no shake, so it wasn't coin. Maybe pharmaceutical. Vanguard licked the corner of his mouth.

Bargain struck, Yanis made it clear he had no desire to stay any longer in Sambray's company than was necessary. He turned away, following the road back in the direction of the Pits. Sambray backed into the mist, disappearing with his crew.

Vanguard almost felt disappointed. They weren't even trying these days. Times were once a meeting between two of the crime lords would have been quite the show. No wonder Hector sat this one out.

Slipping from the shadows, Vanguard too turned in the direction of the Pits. Yanis and his boys had just reached the outskirts of their territory when Vanguard heard a familiar whistling. A man emerged from out of an archway. Vanguard stopped short.

"Yanis," Mandego chirped, "You're all wet."

Damn it, Hector.

Vanguard knew a set up when he saw one. He just wasn't sure who was being set up.

Sneering, Yanis spat at the floor. "Hector, I've no time for your theatrics. Are you selling up or not? I'm a busy man." Stepping forward, Mandego produced a package. Yanis took it. "How much?"

Vanguard strained to hear against the pattering of the rain. He caught a few words, moving carefully forward to a better position. Mandego and Yanis were engaging in some back and forth over price. What Vanguard couldn't understand was why Mandego would be selling to Yanis at all.

Yanis looked at the offering, head bent as he considered. "What the hell is this, Mandego? Are you trying to insult me?"

Hector seemed offended. "How could you say such a thing? This is excellent stuff."

"At a bad price," Yanis countered.

Grinning, Mandego reached back. "Tell you what, as we're friends, why don't I sweeten the deal? A gesture of good will from me," he touched a hand to his chest, "to you."

A waif figure came from behind the curve of the doorway. She stood clutching a blanket around her shoulders, battered slippers soaking up the puddles. Eyes cast to the ground, she trembled and Vanguard knew it was

not from the cold. Yanis looked her up and down, “She’s only got two fingers.”

Mandego shrugged, holding up one finger on each hand, “What do you want more than that for? One for scratching, one for poking.”

He beckoned the girl closer. She shuffled forward, tendrils of hair hanging across her face, small and lamb-like between two wolves. “If you don’t want her someone else will. Say hello, Daisy.”

The girl mumbled. “Hello.”

After a quick inspection, Yanis stepped back and nodded towards the girl. One of the sentries took her by the arm. “Take her to Kitty and get her cleaned up.”

Vanguard saw Daisy enveloped into the fold. Mandego picked a bit of dead skin from behind his ear and flicked it to the floor.

“You’ve got a deal,” Yanis crooked his fingers to indicate that his companions should continue their journey. The men moved as one, taking their prize with them.

Mandego smiled, “An absolute pleasure doing business with you.” Within a few minutes they were gone and the road was empty save for Hector. “You can come out now.”

Vanguard stepped out into the hazy light. “What are you playing at, Hector?”

Mandego stuck a finger in his ear, “That would be my business, wouldn’t it?”

“So what am I doing here?”

Mandego retracted the digit and examined it, “I’ll tell you what you’re doing here. You and I are going for a walk.”

Vanguard didn’t like the sound of that. Still, it was not the time to argue. Mandego needed to restock his supply and would be unlikely to do so if Vanguard did anything to put him in a mood.

“I told you something is happening. I can feel it in my arse crack. George Sambray puffing his chest up and walking around like he’s a big boy now? Three times the bloody reds stinking up the Hook?” Mandego sniffed. “It tastes a funny colour to me.”

Vanguard looked down. “You’re full of shit.”

Mandego beamed. “I know, right?”

Something was amiss, Vanguard knew it. Mandego was playing a game and Vanguard could feel himself being manoeuvred. Reaching the centre of

the Pits, Vanguard stopped. He shrank back, indicating Mandego should do the same.

A few moments later several guards stamped past, rifles at their backs. Vanguard could practically feel Mandego chomping at the bit, the prospect of offing a few reds deliciously tempting. Once they were sure the patrol had passed by they continued. Vanguard kept his eye on the rooftops. It had become a habit.

Eventually Mandego declared they had arrived. Vanguard found himself looking at a four storey house. Kitty's was a decent enough establishment, with a middling reputation Henriette had often argued was ill-deserved. Vanguard was familiar with a few of the girls working there, though not in the way most were. Kitty's house was not nearly as refined as Henriette's.

As far as Henriette was always concerned, Kitty was a pale imitation.

"Here we are then," Hector announced, "you just pop in there and get whatever it is Yanis has in his pocket and afterwards we can go home for a bit of supper. I'll even let you have a sausage if you like."

"You are joking? Even I'm not so mad as to go in there to try and steal something, even if none of the bastards can see me. Half the bloody Pits will be in there. How the fuck am I supposed to get to Yanis through closed doors?"

"That's your problem, but I'd get moving. You know Yanis likes to test his own product. If you get in nice and quick, and get me what I want, I'll turn a blind eye to any acts of derring-do you might want to perform on behalf of young Daisy," Mandego nodded towards the third floor. "Think of it as an incentive."

"You bastard."

Hector shrugged. "Fair enough, suit yourself. Shame for poor little Daisy Two-Fingers though,"

Mandego paused just long enough to be sure the words had taken affect. "She could be up in one of those rooms right now, poor little mite, getting fucked six ways sideways and inside out. Probably squeaking out your name. No doubt she's heard all about you. I can almost hear it now. *Vanguard. Vanguard. Come save me from a sore arse.*"

Something within Vanguard spilled over in that moment. He turned, taking hold of Mandego's coat and driving him back into the wall.

He slammed into Hector, the weight of his body pinning him down. "You know, I almost forgot for a moment what you are. But I remember

now. You and I are done with each other. Do you hear me? We're *done*."

There was a vicious laugh. "You didn't forget. You turned a blind eye because it suited you." Mandego hissed, flecks of saliva spraying from his lips. "You're a walking corpse, Vanguard. You'll be dead in a week without me and you know it."

Vanguard tightened his grip, considering the pros and cons of smashing Hector's skull into a hundred tiny pieces.

He stepped back, teeth grinding. Mandego stood straight, brushed a little grit from his hair. "Don't think I'll forget that."

Looking towards the windows on the upper floor, Mandego pointed. "Yanis is up there now and I want what he's got. You're going to get it for me. You do that and I won't mind if you want to run in all heroic like and put a stop to any dirty deeds that might currently be being wrought on our poor unfortunate little lass."

"And if I do what's to stop you sending her straight back in there?"

Mandego rolled his eyes. "For fucks sake, I really don't care two nuts about the tart. Take her home with you if you want and nurse her 'til her fingers grow back. Get me what I want and I'll be fair,"

A few minutes later, Vanguard stood on the ground floor of Kitty's house, eyes stinging from the scent of incense and perfume. The hallway was populated by young, shirtless men being stroked and straddled by Kitty's harem of half-baked whores. They walked about in various states of undress, eyes glazed. He didn't really need to try to go unnoticed. Kitty's patrons were hardly aware of their own presence let alone his.

Despite the state of her clientele, Vanguard was surprised to find Kitty's establishment was actually clean and pleasantly decorated. Henriette had greatly exaggerated the tales of its dilapidation.

Placing one hand on the railing, he climbed the stairs until he reached the third floor. One sentry stood in the hallway. This was a fortunate turn of events. Vanguard could deal with one.

Hands at his side, Vanguard walked towards him with silent steps. The man did not look up until Vanguard's elbow was already on its way to meet his face. Dazed, the sentry wavered. It didn't take much for him to go down. Vanguard helped him along the way, easing the man towards the floor until he sat against the wall, eyes closed. Anyone who came along would presume he had drunk himself into a stupor and passed out.

A door down the corridor opened. A young girl carrying a crate of pineapples walked out. She looked up, frowned and crossed to the opposite room before disappearing. Vanguard decided regardless of whether or not Yanis was in there, he wasn't opening that particular door. There were some things a man didn't need to know. The clanging of metal sounded from outside. Hector.

"Durbin is coming!" Pineapple girl tore from the room she had just entered and threw herself against the curled railings of the balcony. "Durbin is coming!"

Chaos erupted. Customers emerged from the rooms in various states of undress, pushing each other out of the way in an attempt to reach the stairs. Another door burst open and Yanis stormed out, angry the Reds should choose this moment to inconveniently get their noses stuck in his business.

A meek figure appeared behind him. Daisy Two-Fingers looked like she'd have been more than happy to see the inside of a prison cell. Fortunately she still had her clothes on.

Vanguard didn't have time to waste. Hector's distraction came with a time limit. Yanis would discover the ruse soon enough and return to finish what he started.

He barged past Daisy and into the room, scanning quickly for Yanis' jacket. He found it, crumpled at the end of the bed. Reaching inside, he retrieved the envelope. Stuffing it hastily into his pocket, Vanguard turned and made for the door. He stopped abruptly. If Yanis discovered the letter was missing and Daisy was still there, she would get the blame for its loss, regardless of fault. Vanguard reached out a hand. "You should come with me. I won't hurt you."

She shook her head, lip trembling. Vanguard repeated the same with as much urgency as he could muster. Another five seconds and he'd have to leave her there to survive alone. Once Yanis realised there was no raid, the doors would close and Vanguard would be stuck. "You either come or you stay."

She reached out and took his hand. Vanguard yanked her forwards, unable to act with any gentler motion. They hurried down the stairs to the ground floor. Vanguard burst out of the house, Daisy clattering behind him. Dropping low to the ground, obscured by the shadows of a stoop, Vanguard used his body to shield Daisy from view. He turned left then right, heels dug into the ground, still clutching onto Daisy's wrist.

The world seemed to be spinning. Somewhere, too close for comfort, he could hear the sound of patrol footsteps. Hector's little performance had only served to alert the Reds to their presence.

"Over here, there are more of them."

He couldn't tell what direction the voices came from. Blood rushing in his ears, Vanguard felt his pulse rise, vision clouding. Every heart beat was hammering inside his chest, threatening to burst from beneath his ribs. Pulling Daisy along, he tried to get them away from the house.

Blinding pain erupted through Vanguard's entire body. He collapsed, knees driving into the cobblestones, salty blood filling his mouth. Vanguard willed himself to get to his feet. Daisy was tugging at him, trying to help as best she could. The patrols would be on them soon. He was going to die. Daisy grappled at his coat, tried to use the straps of the bag to steer him but it was no use. Vanguard was going down. He stumbled forward, crashing to the floor and felt the world darkening.

There was the sound of footsteps. They came to a stop right beside him. A man's voice drifted out of the darkness. "Is this the guy?"

Another one followed. "I'd say so – better tell Monroe we've found him."

Salvation

Blinking a few times, Vanguard felt his nostrils flare. The smell of vinegar and mustard tickled the hairs in his nose. There was a tight, knotting pain in his gut and something soft beneath him. Eyes easing open, Vanguard looked at a blurry face. Two fingers pinched the bridge of his nose. "Open up again, we're not done yet."

Vanguard felt the rim of a cup pressed to his mouth. Confused, disorientated, he couldn't stop the liquid flowing down his throat. Immediately his stomach convulsed, throwing him to one side so vomit could spray from his lips.

"That's better," the woman patted his shoulder gently. Vanguard lay back and felt the touch of something warm and wet across his face. "I think that's all of it for now."

The sweet lull of unconsciousness was pulling him once more towards the abyss. He tried to fight it, to resist. The woman's hand was gently comforting. "It's alright, sleep now."

"Are you sure he'll make it? He looks dead already." A male voice this time.

The woman sounded irritated. "Are you insinuating I don't know what I'm doing? He's been through hell; of course he looks like shit. He'll look worse tomorrow and no better the day after that. Lord knows what they've been giving him to get him into this state. There's too much in his system for me to do much of anything until it clears out and that takes as long as it takes."

"Will he be alright?" There was the sound of footsteps across the floor. Vanguard felt the sunlight streaming through a nearby window. Everything ached. It felt as though his skin were on fire, crawling with insects. "Do you think he knows where he is?"

The woman sighed. "I don't think he knows anything right now. This will take a while. I can only do so much while he's half-conscious."

Someone plucked something from the floor and dragged it away. "Do you fancy a cup of tea?"

"Ooh, go on then."

Over the next several hours, Vanguard drifted in and out of consciousness. Sometimes he heard voices, sometimes he didn't. Blurred shapes and flashes of light moved back and forth, behind his closed lids.

At times he dreamt of pleasant things, others less so. Henriette made several appearances. She was yelling at him but he couldn't work out why.

Vanguard tossed and turned, body turning freezing cold and burning hot in turn. He saw ghosts, the faces of the dead and disfigured.

There was a moment where he felt sure the bed had burst into flames and he was burning alive. At one point he began to retch, throat filling up with bubbling saliva. The woman instructed the man to fetch the bucket. "Hold him down before he does any damage."

"He's talking in his sleep again." The male voice drifted down over him.

"Is he making any sense?"

"Not really."

The next time Vanguard opened his eyes it was dark. He looked up and saw a pair of battered curtains gently fluttering, the night breeze providing blissful relief. Vanguard rolled his head, adjusted his eyes and saw a ghost.

"Fuck me, you're actually alive." Vince pitched forward on his stool.

Vanguard tried to speak. Nothing came out. A pair of hands touched his forehead, feeling the heat of his skin. The blonde woman with the round face held him for a moment. "Don't try to speak," she peered into his eyes, before glancing over at Vince. "I think he's over the worst of it."

"We thought you were dead." Vince looked at him.

Vanguard's lips moved. He had not seen Henriette's former doorman in many months. "Where am I?"

"My house," Vince replied, adding "in the Hook."

Vanguard tried to sit up only to find a pair of hands holding him in place. Vince shook his head. "That's Beth; I find it's best not to argue with her."

"What happened to Daisy?"

"She's safe."

"How did you find me?"

Vince snorted. “We didn’t so much find you as trip over you.” He became serious for a moment. “To be honest until a few days ago we didn’t even know if you were still around to be found.”

Reaching down, Vince pulled a familiar blade from his belt and placed it on the bed. He must have seen the look on Vanguard’s face. “She’s alright too, safe and sound,” Vince raised one eyebrow, “though she’s a fair handful with that thing, Marianne.”

Beth’s face scrunched up. “Don’t know what on earth you were thinking, giving that little scrap of a girl a blade like that. Do you know anything about children?”

“Not much.” Vanguard smelt the air. Something was on the stove. The thought of food made his stomach growl. He watched Beth place a hand over Vince’s shoulder. She squeezed gently. “I’ll warm some food up.”

“Twenty-six years and she’s still my angel,” turning his attentions back to Vanguard, Vince looked at him curiously. “What the fuck happened to you? Where have you been and what the hell have you been doing?”

Vince had a lot of questions. Vanguard wasn’t sure where to begin. Beth brought some pillows over and lifted him up. She was surprisingly strong. “It’s lifting the little ones up and down all day long. I could lift a wagon off a penny with one hand.”

The cot was in the kitchen, which also served as the front room. Vanguard could just about make out two further rooms beyond that. Although it was really only one room with a section partitioned off, the second half hidden by blankets secured from the ceiling. There were a further two cots positioned on the other side of the room. Vince’s children were nowhere to be seen. Vanguard was sure he had a few. Beth bustled about, bringing him a bowl of soup and a spoon. She handed one to Vince just as a loud, piercing wail emitted from the other room.

“Is it time again already?” Beth hurried behind the curtain, unclipping the front of her dress as she pulled the sheet back.

That answered the question of where at least one of their offspring was.

The soup brought welcome warmth to Vanguard’s insides. Every bite was painful, his angry muscles contracting each time he swallowed. But it was worth it. The flavours danced on his taste buds as though they were waking up after a long sleep. Vince gave him a look. “It’s not that good.”

A voice floated around the side of the curtain. “Yes it is, and don’t you forget it.”

Vanguard felt the strength returning to his bones. The pain was easing. By the time he finished the bowl he felt like a new man. Or at least, he felt like a man who didn't want to vomit up his own liver, which was quite the improvement.

There was a gentle snoring coming from the other room. Vanguard realised Beth must have been up all day and night, keeping him from choking to death. No wonder she was exhausted.

"Is that your youngest back there?" Vanguard asked before realising it was a stupid question.

Vince grinned. "That's Phoebe; she's got a set of lungs on her I'll tell you that much. Surprised you slept through it. Nobody else gets to. Ollie is due back in a bit. Usually Pheeny would be around but we thought what with you throwing up all over the place she'd be better off with Violet and her lot. She's married now – got some of her own. So does Fi, she moved to Vhaan a few months back."

It was a lot of information to get in one sitting. Vanguard thought Vince didn't really look like a grandfather. He and Beth had obviously gotten a head start on things when they were very young. "What sort of name is Pheeny for a poor kid?"

"It's Josephine but nobody calls her that, Beth was just going through her fancy name phase." Vince placed his bowl on the floor. He tensed. Vanguard could tell they weren't going to be making small talk much longer. Voice lowered, Vince shook his head. "Really, what the hell happened to you?"

Vanguard wasn't sure what to say. It was then he realised that since the Splinters, he hadn't uttered a single word of what had happened to another living soul. He didn't have anybody to say those sorts of things to. He opened his mouth to begin. And he talked. And talked. The words spilled out like there was no stopping them.

He told Vince everything. All the events that had transpired, every ache and pain, every step and turn along the way that led him to the alley outside Kitty's house. Vince sat and listened, nodding and making the right sorts of noises in all the right sorts of places. Vanguard told him more than he had ever told anyone about anything. Cooke. Tarryn. Bellitreux. He breathed life into ghosts, resurrected memories he had not realised he needed to speak of.

When he was done, Vanguard felt empty.

Vince blinked. "Well, fuck me."

They sat in silence for a little while and thought about the world and how everything had come to be what it was. After a while Vince leaned back. Vanguard noted the hitch in his side as he did so. Vince had been through a hell of his own - one that was mostly of Vanguard's making. What sort of thing did you say about that?

"It's good to see you, Vince."

"Thanks. You too."

They were getting perilously close to an emotional interlude Vanguard was ill prepared for. Fortunately at that moment the door burst open. A young lad with jet black hair hurried in, pushing past with a great sense of purpose. He immediately set about investigating the soup pot for any remaining food.

Vince scowled. "Get out of it you little arse, you're stinking up the whole house."

Beth's head poked around the curtain. "Outside and use the wash bucket."

The boy groaned, dropping the spoon back into the pot. He suddenly seemed to realise there was a stranger in their midst. Eyes narrowing, he looked at Vanguard. "Who's this then?"

Vince reached out and prodded the boy in the side. "Mind your own business, that's who."

The boy gave them both a long, hard stare before relenting. Vince and Vanguard sat and listened to the child outside, using words someone of his age had no business using, while he washed off the day's work in the cold water.

"Don't pay any attention to him," Vince lifted his arms over his head, stretching out his back. "He's twelve, it's a funny age."

"I should go," Vanguard attempted to roll off the cot. His bones creaked. It was going to take more effort than he'd anticipated.

The curtain rolled back and Beth marched out, a baby balanced on one hip. "Don't talk nonsense. Where else would you go? You can barely stand."

It was a good point. Vanguard was in no state to deal with Mandego and there was a good chance he wouldn't make it back to the church either way. His legs felt like they were made of paper. "I'll be fine now, honestly."

Beth's face fell. She had quite the glare on her when she had the inclination. Vanguard lay back down meekly. Something told him this was not a woman he wanted to get on the wrong side of.

The next few hours passed quickly. Vince and Beth went about the business of being a family. Vanguard kept his eyes closed and pretended to be asleep for most of it. Eventually, the house fell quiet. Vanguard sat up again, resting his weight on his elbows to look about the room.

Vince was asleep on the bed behind the curtain, visible through a small gap. The baby gurgled in a crib next to him. Another small child, who seemed to have materialised out of nowhere slept against his chest, thumb jammed into a small, sticky mouth. The young lad curled up at his feet like a cat. Vince had the look of a man who hadn't slept in a bed alone for a long time.

There was a gentle creak. Vanguard glanced up. Beth leant over the stove, tending to the last of the coals. She moved quickly and quietly about the room, straightening this and tidying that.

Vanguard admired that sort of energy. He saw now why it had never been a problem for Vince to spend so long working where he did, keeping company with the sorts of women he did. There was nothing about Beth to suggest she was anything other than exactly who she wanted to be. There was a specific kind of woman that made no excuses for what she was and had nothing to prove to anyone. Beth had an air of something unrelenting about her. "He still won't talk about it, you know."

Vanguard craned his head up. "What?"

"You know what," Beth picked up a cushion. "Those girls, what happened to them," she rubbed one hand against her face. "Five days it took us to find him. I suppose in all the chaos nobody thought to tell us what happened." She nodded towards the bed behind the curtain. "It was Ollie found him in the end."

Vanguard felt a rising sickness in his stomach. He didn't need to see Beth's face to know there were tears in her eyes. He also didn't need to know her any better than he already did to know that this was her time to cry – alone, in the shadows, where nobody would see.

"When he did come back, he was different." Beth replaced the newly-plumped cushion. "Wouldn't let me see the wounds for days, kept saying it was nothing. Even let the little ones climb up on him when it was hurting so bad he couldn't breathe."

Vanguard felt his head hang.

Wiping her cheeks, Beth drew in a sharp breath. “They’re going to ask for your help and you’re going to say yes. You owe Vince that much,” she glanced at her sleeping husband. “You owe *me* that much. We both know what’s coming and what it does to men like him. I won’t lose him to that darkness. Not again.”

Vanguard opened his mouth to speak.

Beth clapped her hands together. “Still,” She smiled. “Time for bed.”

Vanguard liked her immensely, even though shame burnt across his face. There in the dark, Beth didn’t need to mince words. He wondered if she had ever met Henriette. He imagined they would have made quite the dynamic pair.

As he watched Beth pull back the curtain that separated their rooms, Vince rolled over in his sleep, the paunch of his belly bare. The puncture marks were clear to see, still angry and pink. They were the scars, the memories of what Vince had survived. Like Vanguard, it didn’t matter how much time passed, he would never be able to forget they were there.

A Monopoly on Grief

Vanguard had often contemplated the concept of hell – a place of eternal torment, in which the damned would endure endless degradation.

He'd never really believed in it. A few days convalescing in Vince's house forced him to reassess his opinions on the subject.

For some people, torment was pain, suffering. In Vanguard's case, it was the constant attentions of other people and in particular, small ones.

To his credit, Vince had exiled his youngest offspring to the home of his eldest daughter in order to keep them out of the way. However, for all he tried to keep them at bay, there was a never ending stream of them parading in and out of the house at all hours of the day.

At one point Vanguard wondered if Beth had some sort of tunnel hidden in the back of the house, through which she could shepherd a never ending line of snotty noses and sticky fingers. He wasn't even certain all of the children were hers.

He sat up, flexing his fingers over the tender flesh around his shoulder. Vanguard pushed into the muscle, feeling it tense beneath his touch. It was healing well, though he knew now it had not been the injuries doing the most damage. Beth had seen him through the worst of the first few days.

When it had become too much, she and Violet took turns. Vanguard found Vince's eldest provided quiet and pleasant company. Neither judged nor commented as the drugs Mandego had given him began to purge themselves from his body or when he lay in a dead sweat, shaking and crying out. After a few days the symptoms began to fade and Vanguard found for the first time in months, he had a clear head.

"How is the leg coming along?" Beth sat on a chair, sewing patches onto a pair of trousers. Phoebe slept in a basket at her feet, whilst a small child with weeping eyes poked Vanguard in the chest. "Stop that." Beth chided as she pulled the child away.

“It’s better than it was,” Vanguard tried stretching it out. Whatever Beth had been giving him was certainly helping his recovery far more than the tablets Mandego had provided.

Of course, he had been a fool in that regard.

“Good. Vince needs you up and about. The Reds still have Le Faye’s yard closed, so things are strained, what with people having nothing to do but bide time,” Beth gave away the worry in her voice. “There are a lot of people not feeling safe at the moment.”

Vanguard pushed down on his palms, adjusting his weight until he could turn on the cot enough to hang his legs over the side and test their strength. The blood rushed to his head. It had been a few days since he had last been as vertical. The front door opened.

“Good, you’re up,” Vince looked at Vanguard. “You’ve sat on your arse long enough, time to make yourself useful.”

Vanguard would have argued that technically he was only half up, but the child had resumed jabbing parts of him and he was eager to remove himself from the situation.

“You’re going nowhere ‘til you’ve had something to eat, you’ve been out since crack of dawn.” Beth was taking no nonsense from her husband. Vanguard got the distinct impression that whilst it was said with affection, Beth was keeping Vince on as short a leash as possible.

It wasn’t that she objected to the work he was doing, but if left to his own devices it was quite obvious Vince would allow it to consume him. A man with a purpose was a wonderful thing to behold, but only if said purpose was met in balance of other things. Vanguard knew the tipping point between a purpose and a mission, and Vince was dangerously close to it.

“Give over, woman,” Vince rubbed the back of his head, “I’m hardly wasting away.”

Regardless, Beth made Vince sit at the table and have breakfast. Something Vanguard was grateful for being as how, in truth, the act of getting up was one requiring a short period of mental preparation.

“Where are we going?” Vanguard was yet to find out what it was Vince spent his days doing.

“There’s something I want to show you,” Vince ate fast, getting as much food down his gullet as possible in the shortest time. “It’s a bit of a walk, sorry.”

“I’ll manage. What is?”

Vince threw his spoon down, “Better you see it for yourself.”

“Right then,” Vanguard picked up the bag and slung it over his shoulder. The weight felt strange, like it was new. The knife, which Beth assured him Not-Marianne no longer required, was back in its proper place once again. “I’m ready.”

He wasn’t sure who he was trying to convince.

Vince stood and kissed his wife. The child, who did not take kindly to two people showing such affection towards one another, screamed. Sighing, Beth bent down and plucked the infant from the ground. The child immediately began beating against her chest with rolled, chubby fists. Vince reached down, absent-mindedly squeezing the child’s toes. Beth flashed him a tired smile. “Off you go then, best get out from under my feet.”

He couldn’t tell how long the journey took, but Vanguard did know by the time they stopped, he was more than ready for it to come to an end.

“What is this place?” He looked up at the cracking brick walls. High above them, wooden boards obscured large windows, any glass still visible thick with dust.

“You’ll find out,” Vince gestured for Vanguard to follow as he crossed the concrete plot.

It was an old factory, long abandoned from the look of it. The city was littered with them. As the smaller merchants steadily lost their business, the larger ones swelled and bloated until they consumed everything else.

It wasn’t unusual in D’Orsee for a man who had once built his own modest fortune to find himself suddenly on an assembly line, picking wires for the bastard that put him out of business.

Vince rapped on the door. There was a grinding of heavy bolts. The door shuddered, creaked and then groaned open.

Inside the building was a wide, open plan affair full of people. A set of metal stairs led to a balcony floor above and a few further rooms separated by wide, looming glass walls.

“Come on, I’ll show you what we’ve been doing.” Vince ushered him forward. Two men shut the door behind them, easing the bolts back into place. Stepping inside, Vanguard looked around. The lower floor was a good size, accommodating clustered groups of pull out cots, mattresses and piles of sacks stuffed with ripped newspaper. Lines hung between the old machines, damp washing taking its sweet time to dry in the musty air. Walking along, Vanguard was forced to duck, reaching out one hand to lift away the blankets.

“Watch your pockets, we try not to encourage thieving but some of the young ones can’t help themselves.” Vince smiled amiably at a group of youngsters ducking and diving between the beds. “They don’t know any better.”

One of the children barrelled into the back of Vanguard’s legs, knocking him sideways. The child glanced back, confused. She seemed to only then realise anyone was there. Vince shook his head. “I never did understand how you did that.”

“I didn’t know I was.” Vanguard felt something creeping over him, an uneasy feeling. He wasn’t trying to hide. Vince could see him well enough. The men on the door had certainly noticed Vanguard walk in. Perhaps the child wasn’t paying attention. That must have been it.

As they walked between the beds, chairs and barrels, Vanguard watched people hold out their hands to Vince. He saw them smile at him, comforted by his presence. Vince had always been one of the more popular men in the Black Zone.

An old man smiled a toothless grin at them, nodding and gesticulating with great fervour as Vince enquired after him.

“That’s Dougal,” Vince explained as they moved on. “Old fool got himself mixed up with some of Pincer’s gang.” His brow darkened. “They took his granddaughter, just sixteen she was. We’ve been keeping an eye out for her but...he knows. She’s long gone. He’s been here about a month.”

Vanguard counted the people he could see. It was hard because the children kept moving about. He reckoned about sixty or so. There was a flurry of movement as a figure darted out from behind one of the blankets. Daisy appeared, fresh-faced and clean. “They said you’d come.”

“You look...different.” Vanguard offered. Daisy was not the most attractive of girls in the cold light of day. She seemed happier though, and

that was something.

“I’ve been washing sheets.” She said, sounding proud of the fact. Vanguard suspected she’d never once in her life been given anything to do that didn’t hurt.

“Good. Very helpful.”

Vince leaned in. “Best carry on now, Daisy, or they’ll all still be soaked come bed time.” Vanguard watched as she yelped in horror at the idea and scurried back behind the wet blankets. Vince sighed. “Most of them are just looking for a way to feel like they’re helping. It gives them something to spend their days on, y’know?”

Vanguard wasn’t sure what to say.

“Come on, you look like you want a drink.” Vince approached a large cabinet and opened it. Taking two bottles, he nodded towards a table. Vanguard sat down. His sobriety had been suffering since Henriette left. Vince noted his hesitation. “Trust me; you’re going to need it.”

Vanguard suddenly got the feeling Vince hadn’t just taken him there to see Daisy washing sheets. He was being prepared for something. If Vince said he was going to need a drink then Vanguard was going to damn well drink it.

A boy sat at a table not too far away, picking at the label on a brown glass bottle. The bottle was as empty as his gaze. It stretched out across the room, piercing through everything but not really seeing anything. Vanguard had seen that stare before. “You did all of this?”

“We did it, all of us together. What? Did you think we’d all been sat around picking our arses waiting for Cooke to come back? We can’t all live in the shadows. There’s a real world here, full of real people. That’s what we’ve been doing, keeping that alive.” Vince took a swig of his drink. “And it’s been hard.”

Vanguard toyed with the bottle. It was a lot to take in. Stuck between Mandego and Sanquain, he had somehow forgotten anything else existed outside of his own dark world. They sat for a few minutes. “Why do they call you Monroe?”

Vince shrugged. “Saw it on a bar of soap, seemed as good a name as any.”

“Fair enough.”

They spent the next hour or two talking. They swapped tales. Vince still said nothing of his own experiences but told stories of nearly every other

person walking the floor. As the hour grew late, Vanguard learnt of the Cousins attempts to inconvenience the Red Badges and give aid to the people they were able to help.

“The patrols make it difficult. You should have seen them, Reds swaggering through the Pits a few days ago handing out parcels of food. Rotting shit you wouldn’t even feed a dog.”

They drained the bottles. Vince put his down on the table with a little more force than he likely intended. A few heads snapped upwards. Vanguard got the feeling half the people in the building would shit their trousers if so much as a cork popped. This was how the world had left them.

“Come on, there’s more.” The heaviness to Vince’s voice served to confirm Vanguard’s theory that the alcohol was a preparatory aid.

Another metal door led to a small walled-in area at the back of the factory. The sunlight glinted against the machinery too heavy to lift without mechanical intervention, left to rust where it sat.

Taking a step forward, Vanguard looked at the hundreds of little pots sitting in lines across the length and width of the space. They filled it up, stretching as far as the yard would allow. In each one a single wooden stake stood. Some of them had beads wrapped around them. Some had pictures or notes nailed to them that fluttered in the breeze. It was a graveyard, built for people who had no bodies to bury but more than enough dead to mourn. The nameless fallen in a war that had never truly been announced.

Vince walked through the lines until he came to a large pot, the sort used for fancy plants in parks like the ones in the Golden Quarter. He bent low and touched the ground, fingers lightly grazing the dirt. Vanguard looked at the marker. Ludnor’s cleaver stood, blade buried deep in the dry earth.

“We’re all Cousins here. Every single person that walks through these doors is the same. They all have their story. They all have their Bellitreux.” Vince stood, dusting the gravel from his palms. “You wanted to know what this place is. Well, now you do. This is the place where you don’t get to have the monopoly on grief.”

Vanguard was glad now Vince had given him the drink. Given the chance he would have probably opted to have another.

Vince cleared his throat. “We found you for a reason. We need you. I think you’re going to need us too. There are things coming that are going to

change everything. When you're ready you should come back in and we can talk some more. I'll give you a bit of time."

Vince clapped him on the shoulder and retreated into the factory. Vanguard felt the sun on the back of his neck. Despite the nature of their surroundings, the place was somehow peaceful. It felt still and quiet.

Vanguard had known Vince for around a year before all the events that transpired. Nobody would ever accuse Vince of being a man of many words. Sometimes he would go a week without uttering a single one. Vanguard had heard Vince say more in the past few days than in the entire time they spent at Henriette's house.

It was funny how some people just had a particular way of waiting for the right time, for knowing when it mattered. And how when they finally did speak, no matter how soft or cutting the words may be, they were exactly the ones you needed to hear.

Two Worlds

Some men were two people. They lived two different lives in two different worlds. Vanguard did, and suffered for it. Vince was also such a man. However, in his case, whenever Vince moved from one world to another, he went from the hard, the cold and bleak to something light and good - something worth holding onto.

That thing was Beth.

His parents, in particular his mother who was never a woman to mince words, had argued he was far too young, at the tender age of fourteen, to have dismissed all other women.

Vince in turn argued some things were inevitable. Of course, Beth had taken no interest in him at all at first. Why would she?

The first time he saw her she was sitting in church. Vince didn't care for prayer, but offered up a few of his own that day. He asked for Beth, and, two long years of attending services later, his prayers were finally answered. Vince had sneezed in the middle of a particularly long and pious sermon. The congregation turned en masse to scowl at him and a hand, sweet and smooth-skinned, passed him a handkerchief.

Violet came first. They were too young to have her really, but only realised after it happened and there wasn't much they could do about it then. A little while later they had and lost Sarah. Vince never imagined a pain greater. After the funeral, Beth declared she would never have another, but that was a betrayal of her true nature and she was not a good liar even to herself. So they had Fiona and by the time Oliver came along they'd gotten rather good at the whole thing. Vince thought they might stop at that, but Beth had other ideas and in his experience, she knew better.

Beth was determined to fill her world with noise and life, moving through the years with the enduring fortitude of a matriarch who could not be worn or defeated. Not by sick stomachs, or raging tantrums or scraped knees. She was a powerhouse of love. A force of nature perpetually

wrapped in a cloak of tiny people who depended on her, needed her, adored her.

Jobs were scarce. When Vince had taken the position at Henriette's house, Beth went to see it for herself. Some women would have baulked at the place, indignant by what they witnessed.

Beth arrived, spoke with Henriette, made no fuss and left soon after. The next day she packed a basket with soap, biscuits, wash cloths and sewing materials. She gave it to Vince, announcing it would be very useful to those girls and never went back again. She didn't need to and Vince didn't want her to. After that, his worlds became separate things and the two did not meet again until Tarryn came.

On the day Vince woke in the hospital, he lay in bed staring at the ceiling. There had been a spider crawling across it, weaving strings of web in one corner. He thought of nothing else for days. Even months later, he still could not remember anything about what happened in the time it took for his family to come, save for watching the spider spinning.

When Oliver did find him, Vince had become a man stuck in neither one world nor the other. He existed in the gap between them. For a long time, he feared he would not find his way back to either. Oliver had taken him home, but Vince was not there. He did not speak. He did not move. Beth sat at his side. Violet had come as did the others. They dressed him and fed him and rolled him and bathed him. But Vince was somewhere else.

He lived for weeks, hearing the cries of girls split open and lost in dreams of things which could not be seen and he could not escape.

Once he gathered enough strength, Vince had left the house and returned to the wreckage of his old world. Beth said nothing. She knew where he was heading and why he had to go. Vince didn't know how many people stopped to watch him working that day, nails held between his teeth as he hammered planks and boards across the windows of Henriette's house.

But it was there that they had found him, stitches popped and shirt speckled with blood, still hammering.

He never asked how Beth got word to them, or what she'd told them. All he knew was he was grateful for it. The Cousins nursed him in a way that Beth could not, because for all her grace and strength, Vince had always kept her out of that world. There was a part of Vince now darkened,

hardened – a part of him that would have ripped out Tarryn Leersac's heart with his bare hands.

Thankfully, the Cousins offered him another path. A way to give shelter and aid to others, and by doing so, ease his troubled mind. They became family. The Cousins helped them find their new home in the Hook, and it was the Cousins who brought his family blankets on their first night there. They gave him a sanctuary and a purpose by which he could carve out something new. Something Beth could be proud of. And in time, the man who had stood outside Henriette's house became Monroe, and Vince was able to return to his family and feel contentment again.

"So what do you think?" There was a tone to Vince's voice belying a pride Vanguard worried might be premature. "It's taken a lot of blood and sweat to get our hands on all of this."

Vanguard could imagine. He plucked one of the rifles from the cupboard and turned it over in his hands. It was a good weapon – if you were planning to beat someone to death. He half expected it to crumble beneath his fingers.

"It's certainly something."

"We've been salvaging them for months."

"Where from? The canal?" Vanguard realised he sounded a little harsh. Though, looking at the scene before him, it seemed a little harshness was required.

"Took a few off the Reds. Found a few before Durbin could get them in the raids. We know they're a bit battered, but looks aren't everything."

That was true, but the problems with the weapon Vanguard held were more than surface deep. He guessed a seasoned soldier with a good eye could perhaps break down and reassemble parts from the collection into something resembling a firearm or three.

"When Cooke comes back, we intend to be ready," Vince took the gun and laid it back with the rest. It was a sorry looking collection.

Vanguard knew the Red Badge armoury well enough to know if war were declared, Sanquain's men would be the best equipped out of any city.

“Is this all of it?”

Vince nodded. “There are a few more around but this is most of them.”

“Do any of you know how to use them?”

“Some, not all. But they’re willing to learn.”

Vanguard decided to keep his thoughts private. He had no idea what Vince or his companions had been through to get what few provisions they did, but he could guarantee they paid for them in blood. It would do no good to tell them they might as well be collecting sticks and stones.

Said thoughts were interrupted by raised voices echoing from below. They both moved towards the railings that overlooked the lower floor. A young man with a shaved head was talking to Dougal. Seeing Vince, he clapped the older man on the arm before pacing towards the stairs. Vince tapped the metal railing. “That’s Violet’s husband.”

A moment later, Oliver came crashing through the door, holding something in his arms. Vince met with Violet’s husband at the top of the stairs. “Marcel? What is it? Is it one of the babies?”

Vanguard stood back and let them talk. It was hard not to notice that Vince and Violet’s husband were - as far as the eye could see - essentially the same person. He seemed young to be married. Vanguard wouldn’t have guessed more than twenty. Marcel shook his head. “They’re fine, it’s not that. We went to the Blessed Iris like you said - to have a look about and... it’s on fire.”

Turning to look at Vanguard, Vince’s lips twisted into a grimace, “Who did you piss off?”

“Hector Mandego.”

“Shitting hell.”

There would be repercussions to his actions at Kitty’s house, Vanguard had been aware of that. He was probably the only person to have stolen the same thing from two crime lords in the same night and lived. The envelope was still in his bag. His intentions were to find out more about it once he was well enough to leave the Hook, but so far the chance had not been forthcoming.

Oliver stumbled up the stairs, still trying to keep hold of his treasure. “Look what I found,” he dropped the bundle to the floor.

The cat promptly stalked across the balcony and pissed up the wall. He growled, gave Vanguard a hard stare and went about licking his balls.

Vanguard supposed he might well be angry. After all, people kept trying to set fire to him and that sort of thing got old quickly.

Oliver furrowed his brow, "Is it your cat?"

"It's *a* cat."

"What's his name?"

"He hasn't got one."

Obviously intent on making his feelings clear, the cat further added insult to injury by dropping at Oliver's feet. It rolled onto its back, legs akimbo and began purring. Vanguard could have sworn it was eyeballing him. Oliver seemed delighted. Vanguard, if he was honest, felt a little put out.

"Vince," Vanguard turned away. "Can we step outside? There's something I should show you."

The safe house was situated in an industrial block comprising four large warehouse buildings, two factories and a yard with storage buildings running lengthways along the side of a brick wall. As hiding places went, it wasn't bad - plenty of cover and high vantage points. They had chosen well.

Vanguard followed Vince to where an old man and a boy sat on wooden stools outside a half covered hut. A few feet away a number of horses stood secured to a fence, noses in their feed bags.

On seeing Vince, the old man pushed the boy to his feet. "You need 'orses?" His lips seemed to find navigating the words a challenge. A set of false teeth smacked in and out of his gums.

Vince placed a hand on his shoulder, "Not right now, Josiah. Why don't you go inside and get something to eat?"

The old man nodded at the boy and they both wandered off in the direction of the safe house. Vince leaned against the door of the shed and crossed his arms, "So what's all this about, then?"

Without saying a word, Vanguard reached into the bag and took out the envelope. He gave it to Vince, waiting a few moments whilst he scanned the page and took it in. Vince licked his bottom lip, fingers ever so slightly tensing against the paper, "Where did you get this?"

"You know what it is?"

"Maybe. You say you took it off Mandego?"

"Not exactly," Vanguard shifted on his feet, "Sambray took it from Le Faye, Yanis took it from Sambray and I took it from Yanis."

There was a creaking as the door supporting Vince's frame bore the weight of his body sliding down until he sat on his haunches. He looked at the page, brows furrowed in concentration.

"So?" Vanguard asked finally.

Pressing a finger to the paper, Vince trailed it down the first set of numbers. "Well, this part is easy enough. You work on the docks a few weeks and you see these on every crate. They're shipment numbers."

"What about the rest?" Vanguard tried not to sound irritated. This was the sort of thing he ought to know and felt embarrassed it did not occur to him before.

"The letters are obvious," Vince said. "These are places around the yard. *E.G.* is the east gate. *D.G.* is the docker's gate." He scrunched his face. "The rest, not sure. Could be dates? That doesn't make sense though, the digits are all wrong. Look at this one, *12.30.6*? What does that mean?"

Taking the document back, Vanguard looked at it with fresh eyes. It couldn't be dates. Times, perhaps? He tried to think. It wouldn't be for the ships coming into anchor, they all came in early in the morning often before sunrise. A sudden thought occurred. "What if they are times but not for inside the yard? What if they're times for something on the *outside*?"

"You're talking about the patrols?" Vince sucked in a breath.

Now he looked at it from afar, Vanguard felt an idiot for not working it out. Cargo numbers, locations, times and the numbers of men in each patrol unit. Sambray hadn't been stealing for Yanis; he'd been getting the instructions for Yanis to get what he wanted for himself – a blueprint to a raid. Whatever was coming into Le Faye's yard, it was valuable enough for Yanis to risk association with Sambray to get it.

Cracking his neck, Vince began to voice the suggestion dancing on his lips. Vanguard could see it coming like a bull charging across a field. Probably because he'd had the same idea himself the moment they figured out what they held.

"We need to know," Vince said finally, "if this is big enough for Mandego and Yanis to get involved, it's important. This has to be why Sanquain shut the yard down."

"You can't just march in and take whatever Yanis plans on stealing. We don't even know what it is or what he wants it for."

"We can't get in there. But you can."

Vanguard thought for a moment. It didn't seem like much to go on, but it was better than sitting around Vince's house, errant children poking at him. Besides, without Vanguard, Vince and his crew had less chance of success than a child stealing sweets. Courage they might have, but they were inexperienced in stealth and tactics.

Vanguard nodded. "I think you're right. But if we do this, we do it my way. It'll be dangerous and your boys don't know what they're doing. No offence."

"None taken," Vince struck out his hand.

Vanguard felt a tingling in his gut. It was the feeling of a long lost spark reignited. "Get some of the men ready," he said slowly, "we're going to the waterfront."

You Call Yourself an Amidian?

Their time in Lycroix was drawing to a close. Carmen had been counting down the days and would be relieved when they could all be on the road once more. Then things could get back to normal. The way they were supposed to be. She sat on the edge of the bed, one foot tapping against the floorboards.

“You’re being distracting,” Demetrio opened one eye. He’d been pretending to be asleep for twenty minutes, the pages of a book pressed against his face.

Carmen wasn’t sure who he thought he was fooling. “What time is it?”

“Ten minutes since you last asked.”

“Aha!” Carmen narrowed her eyes, “I knew you were awake.”

“Allow me to bask in your deductive skills,” Demetrio let the book fall away, wriggling in the chair to reposition his legs.

Carmen was starting to suspect Demetrio would rather she wasn’t there. If that was the case, she was more than happy to acquiesce. Kasic was supposed to be taking her to see the park in the western side of the city and was decidedly late. “I’m going out,” she announced.

Demetrio didn’t argue. The park was no more than a few hours walk from the apartment and Carmen had a good memory for places. She left Demetrio to his peace and went down into the dining room. Figuring Kasic would appear eventually; she stalked over to the bar and gestured to Abel.

He frowned, “What do you want?”

“Can I leave a message for my friend?”

“Who’s your friend?”

“The Amidian one.”

Abel rolled his eyes, “Which one?”

“He’s about this tall,” Carmen lifted up on her toes and reached, “tattoo’s on here,” she pointed to her arm and then stopped. Her face dropped. “What do you mean *which one*?”

A few minutes later, Carmen sat at a table nursing a glass of water. She folded her arms across her chest and stared at the door. He would have to turn up sooner or later. Sometime, in the very near future, Kosic was going to learn a valuable lesson about keeping promises.

“I thought they called you the undefeated?” A roar went up from the group gathered on the boxes and barrels in a tight fenced courtyard behind a cluster of small houses. Lines of cloth in colours and patterns not usually seen in Soussan fluttered, caught by a gentle breeze that broke the warmth in the air.

Quick movement kicked up a cloud of debris, feet sliding across the ground, scattering flecks of gravel and sand. The man who called out the question raised his arms, turning to the audience.

A victorious grin spread across his face as his felled foe lay sprawled out on the floor. “Looks to me like you’re on your back.”

Arms aching and winded from the impact of landing against the ground, Kosic coughed up a mouthful of dust. He rolled his neck to meet his competitor’s eyes, the glare of the afternoon sun obscuring his vision. “The light was in my eyes.”

Zaab grinned, “I think it’s a poor excuse to blame the sun, here,” he offered out a hand.

Kosic took it, staggering to his feet. Being the size he was had its advantages, but there was no denying he lacked the technique of his opposition. Zaab grinned. With a glint in his eye he swept one hand towards Della, who was kicking both legs over the side of a stack of crates. “Perhaps you would have better luck with a less experienced competitor?”

She scraped up a handful of gravel and tossed it at her husband. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Zaab took up a flask from one of the others and drank. Kosic leant forward, resting his hands on his knees. “I think I am done; besides sparring does not count.”

“And you call yourself an Amidian,” one of the younger men of the group snorted. There was a smattering of laughter.

“Della, our new friend is worn out. How about a song?” The lad who heckled Kasic clapped his hands, starting up a rhythm that petered out when nobody else joined in. The rest of the party roared with amusement at his disappointment.

Slinging one arm around Kasic’s shoulders, Zaab led him into the centre of the group where they were met with playful shoving.

Despite the constant goading – which in fairness, they seemed to do to everyone – Zaab and his family had embraced Kasic into the fold upon the first day – no hesitation, no conditions and no expectations. They were kinsman, countrymen. It was simple, decent and Kasic felt himself at long last, somewhere he belonged.

The oldest of them was Maman. The youngest was a boy of about fifteen with bad skin and an attempt at a moustache. Aside from Della, there was one other Soussan – a man similar in age to Kasic. He spent his time sitting in a chair next to Maman, not speaking. After a few days Kasic had come to realise he was mute.

The man seemed to be particularly attentive to Maman, often holding her hand and stroking the wrinkled skin on her arm. Maman was in turn, particularly affectionate towards him.

“Ralph is Maman’s protector, isn’t that right, Ralph?” Zaab handed a water flask to him. The man reached up and took it. Kasic noticed Ralph struggled to grip the container, fingers clumsily grasping at it with shaking hands. Zaab knelt to help him, carefully ensuring the water did not spill down his front. Ralph tried to smile, though the muscles in his face only seemed to work on the one side.

“Has he always needed this help?” Kasic asked, wondering if it was intrusive to do so.

“Ralph?” Zaab shook his head. “No, Ralph’s only been with us a year or so. He was an officer in the Lycian guard before this.” He twisted the top back onto the flask. Zaab must have noticed Kasic’s curiosity as he gave a sad laugh. “I know. It does seem unlikely.” He patted the man on the shoulder with a level of affection that made Ralph’s presence in their midst even more unusual.

“They’re not all like the ones you’ve met. Ralph was one of the good ones, though they’re a rare breed these days.”

Zaab explained how he and some of the younger boys had worked as night men once, often coming home stinking of shit and sewerage. One

evening they happened upon a tosher gang who thought to attack and rob them. A passing Lycian patrol came across the brawl and in the confusion; one of the guards was pushed over and subsequently cracked his skull on the concrete. He died the next day. Zaab and his friends had been put in irons and hauled away on a charge of murder and were expected to swing for it.

“Ralph here spoke out for us,” Zaab spoke with sincere admiration. “He knew what it would mean for him, but he did it anyway. Saved us all from the rope. His colleagues didn’t take too kindly to it, called him a traitor to his own. They went about him with clubs, battered the brains right out of him. Now he’s with us and we take care of him. Maman wouldn’t be without him, would you, Maman?”

“What’s that?” The old woman looked up.

Leaving Ralph to guard his charge, Zaab clapped his hands together. “Come on then Della; let’s have that song shall we?”

“Not now,” Della rolled her head back. “It’s too warm and I have to go to work soon.”

“Ah come on,” the younger boy nudged her with his elbow.

Maman, who sat at Della’s feet reached back and patted her knee. “You sing now.”

Kosic might not have known the group for long but it became apparent very quickly that while Zaab might have been their leader, it was Maman who was in charge. She was a still and quiet woman, often sitting without saying a word for hours. It wasn’t until Della admitted the truth to him that Kosic realised Maman was almost totally blind in her remaining eye.

Della leaned down. “You sing one.”

“Ha, I cannot remember songs, you do it for me,” Maman replied, as if there was no further argument to be had - which there wasn’t, because for a woman who could barely see she was a cracking shot with the cane.

Della jumped from her perch. One of the younger men slapped the lid of a barrel to count her in. She threw her head back and launched into a joyful patter that rose in tempo.

As the song gathered, Kosic felt himself transported across the sea to a place he had not been since childhood. The pace increased along with the drumming and, with each line and verse, the courtyard came to life.

Kosic watched as she sang and for a moment did not realise why he felt the tightening in his chest, or the burning sting of saltiness in his eyes. Then

he let himself listen. Della was not Amidian, but she was singing in their language. It was a little stilted and some of the dialect was certainly regional, but there it was all the same.

Back in the Splinters they had spoken in their own tongue, but it was always to speak of secrets. Their language protected them, gave them a shield to use against the world. As Della sang, Kosic realised that in this case, she was not hiding from the world. She was offering something to it – something beautiful and sincere. Zaab smiled at him, dark eyes shining. “You’ll stay yes? Have dinner with us. We can play games.”

Glancing up at the fading light, Kosic realised Carmen and Demetrio would be waiting for him at the boarding house. Demetrio had asked no questions about where it was Kosic had been spending his time. Carmen had been curious but after some cajoling from Demetrio, dropped the subject. He did feel guilty that he had not told Demetrio about Zaab and the others. It was different for him though. Despite his roots being Amidian, Demetrio had found a place in the world where he could feel useful.

For whatever reason, Kosic could not bring himself to share in his discovery. He needed to keep it for himself for a little while.

“Well, as much as I hate to say no to games, seeing as how I do love to defeat you, I have to go to work,” Della hopped down from her crate.

Zaab took her about the waist, drawing her in until their hips connected. “You know you’d rather stay here with us.”

She laughed, “Don’t tempt me.”

Kosic saw the way Zaab was around his wife. How they were when they were together. Kosic wanted that - something simple and straight forward. He saw how all of their differences, all the obstacles and opposition to their being together just fell away until there was nothing left but the simple fact they made one another smile.

“I’ll walk back with you,” Kosic offered.

Della nodded, pulling her hair into a sweeping twist at the back of her head. Zaab feigned disappointment, although he soon cheered as one of the others produced a game board. Turning back to the group, he rubbed his hands together. “Who will play Rush?”

Out on the street, Kosic could not help but think about how different things were for Zaab and Della. How simple their lives seemed. Making the journey towards the boarding house, Della seemed to read his thoughts. “Go ahead, you can ask.”

“I did not mean to intrude.”

She laughed. “You want to know how we met?”

“I am just curious.”

“It’s not a very exciting story,” Della kept her eyes on the road, “I was in the bar and he just showed up one day. Kept coming in for weeks after that. On the eighth week, I finished my shift, he walked me home and the next day we were married.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

The further they walked, the more Kasic began to notice little things about Della he had not before. The way she slipped the odd phrase that was distinctly Amidian into the conversation, even if they were loose translations. He saw she wore her silver rings on a chain around her neck when she worked, and marvelled out how she passed so smoothly between her own world and the one she had adopted. “It was never hard for you?”

“It had its moments. For the first six months we were married Maman would only ever refer to me as ‘that woman’.” She shrugged with a light smile. “But overall? No. It’s never hard with the right person.”

The bar hove into view in the distance. Unlike Zaab, Della didn’t speak to Kasic of his decision as to whether he would join them, and he was glad, because he was not ready to make it yet. As much as the thought of such a thing might have been tempting at one time, now he was not so sure. More so than ever, Kasic felt himself at a crossroads and unsure which path to take.

“What kind of time do you call this?” Abel yelled across the din of the crowd.

Della unbuttoned her coat and hung it on the hook. “Keep your hair on, I’m not late”

The dining room was packed with hungry patrons. Kasic’s feet were sore and there was a sofa in the apartment calling his name. Though he’d never admit it, Zaab had landed a few good knocks during their match. Kasic quite liked the feeling. It was refreshing to have a worthy competitor.

He turned to make his way upstairs and felt a pair of eyes burning a hole in the back of his skull. It did not take long to identify the source. The crowd parted a little.

Kosic let his shoulders slump. How was it that some women had a skill for letting a man know exactly how much trouble he was in with no more than a twitch of the lips? He shouldered his way through the customers and stood at the table.

Carmen glanced up, "Oh, hello."

Kosic was tired, he did not have the energy for the conversation they were about to have. "Can I sit down?"

She shrugged and looked away, "Suit yourself, you can do what you want."

Kosic kept his eyes from rolling. He pulled out a stool and sat down. Carmen glanced at the bar, at Della. "Who is that?"

There was an edge to her voice Kosic wondered if he should worry about. "That? Her name is Della," he let his arms come to rest across the table and leaned in, "She's a friend. I am sorry I did not take you out, I forgot we had plans."

Carmen turned her head to meet his eyes and he saw the hurt in them. Kosic knew it was the kind of hurt that didn't come from being forgotten, or jealous. It came from somewhere deeper.

She lifted her chin, "I don't care about that, it's only grass and trees. It all looks the same anyway." She bit her lip. "Are you leaving us?"

Kosic reeled back. "Who told you this?"

She shrugged again. "It doesn't matter."

Kosic let his shoulders fall. "I don't know - I haven't made my mind up yet."

"Were you going to tell us?"

He searched for a way to explain, that would not further compound the hurt she was clearly feeling. "I had not made my mind up yet, so there was nothing to tell."

Anger flashed across her face, "But you knew! You knew you might be leaving us." Tears formed in the corner of her eyes. She brushed them away roughly. "You're leaving *me*. We're all supposed to be together. You, me, Henriette, Demetrio..."

Now it was his turn to feel angry. Kosic had the sort of nature where a lot of things could go unheeded; a lot of words could go unspoken. But

there were times to be kind and times to be honest. “What do you want from me?” he tried to put it as simply as he could. “I want to go home, and you cannot expect that we will stay together forever. The world does not work like that.”

He saw the way her face paled. It seemed like the life drained right out of her and she was no longer Carmen. She was someone else – someone scared and small.

“But I don’t have a home without you,” her voice cracked. “I don’t know *where* I come from. I don’t know who I am. You and the others, you’re all I’ve got. Now you’re leaving, and soon Henriette will leave too. Then that just leaves me and Demetrio and Cooke and that doesn’t make *any* sense. What happens to me then? Where am I supposed to go?” Kotic reached over to take her hand. Carmen pulled away, turning her face so he could not see the tears.

“Tiny girl...”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Please understand...”

She pushed the stool back, chair legs scraping across the floor. “Fine!” She rose up, waving her hands in the air, “go then, I don’t need you, I’ll do fine on my own.” With that she was gone, storming out, the glass still rattling where it spun on the table.

Kotic glanced up at the bar and caught Della’s eye. She gave him a sympathetic smile and went about serving the dinners. Kotic was still somewhat dazed from the exchange when she appeared at his table. “Aren’t you going to go after your friend?”

“I don’t think she wants to talk to me.”

Glancing furtively to see if Abel was looking, Della leant in and gave Kotic a knowing look. Her voice was firm but sympathetic. “Maybe not, but I’d be willing to bet right now all she wants to know is that you care enough to follow her. I’m guessing that poor thing’s not had any person in her life longer than a passing moment. Besides, girl like that out on her own? That’s just asking for trouble.”

Trouble

One benefit of the time spent in close quarters with Carmen was that it had given Kotic a pretty good idea of how her mind worked. For one thing, she moved like a whirlwind when she was in a mood. It was as if her body and thoughts were one, constantly darting in every direction, which made it unlikely she had gotten far. She was likely walking in circles somewhere nearby.

He also knew when Carmen was upset, she liked to hear music. There was a man who played viola on the corner of a street not far from the boarding house. He turned and began walking in that direction. Kotic did not get far before he heard the sound of urgent footsteps approaching from behind. He turned; surprised to find someone careen straight into him. Kotic peered down. "I'm sorry. Are you alright?"

A girl looked up at him. "Are you Kotic?"

He frowned. "Who are you?"

She shook her head. "Please, there's no time for that. She said to ask for Kotic, is that you?"

A sense of unease washed over him. Kotic glanced from side to side. There were one or two people across the other side of the street, gathered outside a tavern. "Who told you to ask for me?"

She turned, looking back the way she had come. "Your friend."

"What happened?"

"There was an argument. Someone called the guards," she grabbed at his arm. "Please, we really don't have time for this, you have to come now."

Kotic knew the way of the world well enough to know what happened to girls like Carmen when they poked the beast too many times. Carmen had done nothing but jab at Lycroix since they arrived. Nodding, he moved forward. "Show me."

The girl seemed relieved. "This way."

Following her up the street, Kasic found himself pushing through the narrow lanes that twisted away from the main roads. It was busy, the evening traders selling goods from boxes stacked up against walls. Kasic began to lose pace, struggling to manoeuvre his way between the obstacles. The girl turned and waved. "Hurry up!"

There was a growing sense of urgency in her voice. Kasic gathered as much speed as possible, knocking a crate of peaches in his wake and trying not to crush them under foot. The girl looked back to check he was still coming before disappearing around the next corner. Kasic followed, coming to a stop at a dead end. A wire fence ran along one side of a short alley, penned in by a brick wall on the other side.

The girl had gone; the only thing left aside from Kasic and a selection of overflowing bins was six foot of sinewy balding muscle. Kasic's stomach dropped. He'd been stupid. He'd been very stupid.

Turning back to face the way he had come in, another man who looked like he made a living biting off noses appeared, blocking the exit.

The man standing in the entrance snarled, purple gums and yellow teeth. "This is *our* street, Amidian." He spat at Kasic's feet. "We don't want your lot here,"

"You do not want to do this. Trust me." Kasic warned, clenching his fists.

"Oh," the man grimaced. "I think we do."

Kasic became aware of movement behind him. A searing pain tore through him like a hot iron. He buckled slightly. Touching a hand to his back, he found there was a sticky patch already seeping through his shirt. Gritting his teeth, Kasic turned and swung a fist towards the balding man who brandished the blade.

His fist hit home, slamming down onto his attacker's shoulder and crunching the bone in its socket. The man reeled back. Kasic barrelled forward, head down. The other attacker struck out with his foot, landing a kick to Kasic's right ankle. Kasic felt hot, sick. He held out one hand to counter a strike, the blade slicing through his palm. His attackers drew closer, both of them snarling like dogs. Another blow came.

The man with the balding head had a strong hook. Kasic felt it, the impact of the shot jarring his insides. He swung blindly with his left arm. One of the balding man's molars found itself vacating the stinking chasm of his mouth.

“Finish him and let’s go.” The man with yellow teeth snapped. Kotic felt his arms growing heavy, vision blurring. He staggered back in an attempt to avoid the blade that was coming again, crashing against the metal fence. There was a scuffling noise from above, like a cat running across a roof.

Kotic was just about able to make out something small as it dropped out of the sky. There was a flash of metal and a loud crunching sound. He tried to focus.

The man holding the knife crumpled to the floor like an old tissue. Struggling to find his feet, Kotic pulled himself up the fence. His eyes cleared long enough to realise Carmen now stood in the alley, brandishing a large metal bin lid with a significant dent in it.

The man with yellow teeth looked down at his companion and then back towards Carmen, who was holding the lid like a shield. “And what exactly were you planning on doing now?”

Kotic heard Carmen’s voice, clear and defiant. “I don’t know - I hadn’t thought this far ahead.”

The man lunged forward. Carmen yelped, holding onto the bin lid for dear life as he tried to get purchase on it. Jaw clenched, Kotic clamped one hand across his chest. Scrambling forward, he plucked the discarded knife from the ground with the other. Adrenaline coursing through his veins, he pitched forward and ran towards them.

The knife struck deep. Grappling at the blade now lodged in his back, the man took a few steps forward and fell, taking Carmen with him. Kotic the Undefeated dropped to his knees. It would seem they would not take the title from him that day after all. There was a grunting as Carmen shuffled inelegantly out from beneath the body.

“Can you walk?” She leaned around and peered at the knife wound on his lower back. “I really don’t think I can support you much.”

Kotic swallowed. “I can manage.”

She took his arm, taking care to move slowly. Together they slipped from the yard and into the lanes. Kotic had no idea how they were going to get back to the boarding house.

“This way,” Carmen guided him through a broken fence panel. “I know a shortcut.”

“What were you doing there?”

Carmen looked up and down the street. “It doesn’t matter; we can talk about it later.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. Don’t tell Demetrio, but you’re my favourite.”

“You’re delirious.” Carmen watched as a young couple walked hand in hand across their path before disappearing into one of the stores.

Kosic was swaying gently. “I’m sorry I hurt your feelings.”

She tightened her grip on his arm, “I’ll survive.”

Kosic shuddered, a fresh wave of nausea washing over him. Medicine wasn’t his forte, and he had no idea how much blood it was safe to lose before he ought to be concerned. “I need to sit down.”

He felt the tension in her arm grow a little tighter. “Don’t be dramatic.”

“I think you might have saved my life.”

Carmen scrunched her face up. “Well,” she pressed them on towards the boarding house. “I suppose somebody had to. I’d never have heard the end of it from Demetrio otherwise.”

Stitches

Kosic lay on his front, arms spread at either side and drooping off the edges of the bed. Demetrio peered over the top of his glasses as he tried to thread a needle.

Carmen was aware she was hovering. Halting his work, Demetrio rolled his eyes to the left. "Do you think you could give me some room?"

Carmen chewed on a nail. "Is he going to be alright?"

Hearing her voice, Kosic turned his head in the direction of where he presumably thought the noises were coming from. "Don't be worry, tiny girl. I'm happy. Feel fine." He drew the word 'fine' out for several seconds. He actually seemed quite happy given the circumstances.

Demetrio bit off the end of the thread. "He's always like this when he's cut up. Just mind you don't pay any attention; he doesn't know what he's saying in this state."

"Are you going to be able to do this while he's like that? Awake I mean?"

Demetrio shrugged. "Granted, it would be easier for him if he was asleep, but I can manage." Reaching down, he patted his friend and gave fair warning it was about to begin.

"Can I help?"

Demetrio nodded. "Yes, hold his arms – be careful, he's a flincher."

Rounding the bed, Carmen stood next to Demetrio and placed her hands on Kosic's shoulders. The touch of her hand seemed to relax him. He smiled, eyes rolling around of their own accord. "You have skin like baby pig,"

Ignoring what felt like an insult but was likely meant as a compliment, Carmen turned her attentions to Demetrio and his work.

The wound looked much smaller now it had been cleaned - a neat puncture mark to the lower back. Demetrio touched his fingers lightly to the

surrounding skin. “It’s a pretty clean wound, they missed the kidney so that’s something. The damage is mostly muscular.”

Carmen nodded, her attention focused.

Demetrio pointed. “See this? It’s called the posterior serratus.”

Kosic tried to nod. “Mmm, strophanthus.”

Demetrio patted his head. “Don’t interrupt.”

Taking the needle, Demetrio pushed the tip through the skin. Kosic jolted.

Instinctively, Carmen reaffirmed her grip. She watched Demetrio work quickly, explaining as he did about the finer points of the human body and how it all went together. Carmen nodded, listening. It was all quite fascinating - far better than reading about it in a book. Finally, he threw the needle into a bowl and observed his work.

“And we’re all done.” Demetrio wiped the blood away with a fresh cloth and lay a hand on Kosic’s shoulder. His touch was met with a gentle snoring.

“Is that it?” Carmen was half-disappointed.

“That’s it.” Demetrio tossed the cloth aside. “He’ll need to sleep for a few hours and rest for a day or so – we’ve already bound his hand and it doesn’t need stitching. Come on,” he nodded towards the room on the other side of the wall. “I don’t know about you but I need a drink.”

Climbing onto the bed, Carmen stretched her legs out. Demetrio reached into the drawer and pulled out a small brown bottle. He popped the cork and offered it over, shrugging an apology for the lack of glasses. Carmen took it, pressing the rim to her lips. She took a slug and winced. “That’s awful.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers.”

Figuring he was right about that, she tipped the bottle up and took another sip. Handing it back, she yawned. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

“I’m always nice to you.”

Carmen shook her head. “No, you’re not, you’re always telling me what to do or not do, rolling your eyes and I’ve heard you talking about me with Cooke. I don’t know what a delinquent is but I’m sure it’s not very nice.”

“Well, you are sometimes a delinquent. Anyway, this thing that I’m doing isn’t being nice to you. This is me showing you respect.”

“Oh.” Carmen sat staring at her feet. “I quite like it.”

“You earned it.”

They sat and drank, watching Kasic sleep through the open door. Carmen pulled the blankets up around her legs to keep them warm. Demetrio had a paper bag full of biscuits in the drawer as well, which she was quite pleased about.

“Did you know he was thinking of leaving?” She leaned back against the bed frame and picked at her nails, quite determined she shouldn’t seem that interested.

“Of course I knew. Someone as big as Kasic is hardly built for stealth. Besides, Della is here five days a week. Plus Abel told me.”

Carmen tried to keep the irritation from her voice, “Well, nobody told me.”

“Does Kasic have to tell us all his secrets?”

“I guess not.” Carmen felt a flush on her cheeks. “I wasn’t very nice about it. I’m sorry now but I don’t know if it will make much of a difference.”

Demetrio smiled. “I would not lose sleep over it. Kasic doesn’t have it in him to hold a grudge.”

Carmen looked down. “I don’t want him to go.”

Placing the bottle down on the mattress, Demetrio rolled his head towards her, “I don’t wish to offend you, but what exactly did you think was going to happen? That we would all be together forever?”

Carmen felt her face grow hotter. “Well, no... not exactly.”

Demetrio leaned over and spoke softly. “You know you’re much smarter than you think you are. Capable too. Whatever happens next, I for one am glad we got this chance to get to know one another. That is how I see it.”

They sat for a bit and Carmen began to realise how tired she felt. More tired than she had ever been before. As if she had run a long way and not even realised it.

Demetrio frowned. “I’m curious, how exactly did you come to be in that alley?”

“Oh, that. I thought you might ask. Truth is, I hadn’t gone very far. I thought if I hid outside, maybe Kasic would go back to those people and I’d follow him. I wanted to see why he wanted to go.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I know it was childish now, but I wanted to see for myself.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing you did. Though if you didn’t know where you were or where you were going, how on earth did you find your way back? Through the lanes and such? There’s people been here a year couldn’t navigate those alleys.”

Carmen shrugged. “I don’t know - I just knew where I was going.” She fidgeted, readjusting her skirts. “Demetrio, could I show you something?”

“If you like.”

Rising from the bed, Carmen padded around the side of the room and pulled a little book from beneath a pile of clothes. She rubbed one finger over it, the leaves loose and curling at the sides. Demetrio waited as she sat back down, heaving her weight against the mattress. She passed the book across, letting him take it. As he did, a handful of sheets fell to the floor. Bending down to retrieve them, he picked up the first. “Did you do this?”

Carmen nodded. “Yes, it’s not very good though. I’m not sure I liked the way it turned out.”

It was a sketch drawn of a crossing way between Lycroix and one of the smaller towns they passed through on the way to the city.

There they had seen a beautiful old church, half derelict and falling to ruin, commenting on the intricacy of the architecture. They couldn’t have seen it for more than a few minutes, but for some reason it stuck in her head.

Letting out a breath, Demetrio whistled. “Carmen, this is more than just good...it’s accurate. These images on the stone, they’re Saint Aurus. Did you ever see his image before?”

She shook her head.

“If I asked you to, could you draw me a map from the Splinters to Henriette’s house?”

Taking up a pencil from the night stand, she took back the book and turned to a fresh page. Her hair fell down about her face as she dashed strokes across the paper. It was like someone had turned the key on a tap and all the contents came gushing forth, flowing from her brain, down her arm and onto the page.

She stopped, and looked up, “like this?”

“Yes, like that.” Demetrio spoke with admiration. “Why have you never shown me these before? All the lessons we have done, you’ve a clear aptitude for drawing. You’ve even remembered the inscriptions over the church door.”

“That’s the thing; I don’t think I *do* remember them. I just know them.”

“This is remarkable.”

Carmen had never seen this side of Demetrio before. It was pleasantly surprising to find that there was a kindness and softness to him that she had not known about. “I think,” she paused, “I think perhaps I might like to know where I come from.”

“I see.”

“I mean,” she wrinkled her nose, “is it not strange that I pass by a church once and I can remember every little detail about it, right down to the shape of the door knocker but I don’t remember anything about the house I grew up in?”

“It is a little unusual.”

Carmen snapped a biscuit in half and looked intently at the two pieces. “I think it’s time for me to find out about the things I don’t know, all the stuff that got lost.”

“That, I can understand.”

“Kosic said you could help me – that you’d helped other people who forgot things to remember them. Is that true?”

Demetrio sighed. “There is a way, but there’s no guarantee it will work. I’ll need some time to prepare and Carmen, please understand,” his brow lowered into a more serious expression, “I will do this for you, but you might not like what you find.” The words felt like warnings, tinged with wire stingers. “I’m not telling you this because I don’t like you. If anything I like you more today than I have done in all these months. Maybe I’m telling you this *because* I like you. Sometimes things are forgotten for a reason.”

With that, he rolled from the bed and strode across the room. He placed one hand on the door handle. “I’ll go and fetch us some supper.”

Carmen stayed where she was, listening to Demetrio’s footsteps fading down the corridor.

After a moment, she lay on her side and touched one hand to the back of her head. Bringing the book towards her once more, she turned the pages to the very last one.

Seeing the image before her, a cold chill ran down her spine. Carmen’s own image looked back at her, a perfectly-imagined portrait with wide eyes and long lashes peering over her shoulder and out of the paper. It would

have been quite lovely, were it not for the hole in the back of her skull. The sketch was not unfinished. It was not a work in progress.

When Carmen drew herself, she had very deliberately and carefully drawn around what she imagined to be a large, dark void.

Over the Edge

“Are you certain about this?” Henriette perched on the edge of the sofa. Pulling the blanket tighter around her shoulders, Carmen nodded.

Placing a bowl on the table, Demetrio rolled up his sleeves. “For in case you need to vomit,” he looked at her with remorse. “That can happen, I’m afraid.”

Henriette, who had concerns about this sort of thing and loudly asserted as much, picked up one of the dried roots that had been laid out in preparation. “Looks like hocus pocus to me.”

Frowning, Carmen cast an apologetic look at Demetrio. “It’s nothing of the sort. It’s science not magic.”

“It *is* science, but not an exact one,” Demetrio confessed. He had already warned Carmen several times she should not expect too much from the endeavour. That it was as likely to end up in a sore head and a vengeful gut as anything else.

“We don’t know how your body will react, but,” he crumbled the root into a mug, “if it does what we want it to, your mind will start to relax and we can begin.”

“Is it safe?” Henriette sounded concerned.

“Perfectly safe,” He assured them both. “This is just to help you find the right state of mind; it really has little else to do with the process – that’s down to you.” He placed a hand on Carmen’s arm. “Are you ready to begin?”

Whether or not she was ready seemed rather a moot point. Nothing else seemed to work. No matter how hard she thought of the past, Carmen’s memory would only allow her to travel so far back. It was as though there was a wall between who she was now and who she had been then, and neither could stray far from the place they were. She nodded.

“You understand once you start down this road, you’re on it until the end?”

Again she nodded.

Demetrio passed the cup. Holding it with both hands, Carmen drank a good amount as quickly as she could. She winced as it burnt the roof of her mouth. Taking it back, Demetrio sighed. "I keep telling you, it's only tea. It isn't magic. This will take time."

Henriette leaned forward. "Her eyes are red."

"That's because she just scalded half her tongue off," Demetrio looked intently into Carmen's eyes to see if there had been any change. "Sometimes it helps to lie down."

Carmen flopped back onto the sofa and studied the ceiling. So far, she felt exactly the same. "Nothing is happening," she had been expecting more – swirling lights or some great revelation. All she had was a vague feeling of light headedness.

Demetrio sat next to her. Holding his glasses, he ran a small cloth gently across the lens. "Carmen," he spoke softly, "what's the last thing you remember from when you were young? Take me back as far as you can. Where did you live?"

Closing her eyes, Carmen tried to think. "With Charlie, my step brother, in a building in the tenements. There were twenty of us. We had one half of a room and an old man had the other. I don't remember his name, but he was nice. He had a canary."

Demetrio continued to speak, rubbing the lens as he did. She couldn't see him, but she felt the movement of his arms as the cloth danced over the glass. "Before that?"

"I don't know,"

"Very well, tell me about Charlie. When was his birthday? Did he tease you or run races around the streets? What games did you play together?"

"I don't remember."

"Yes you do. Think. What happened to your step brother? Why did he leave you?"

Irritated at the suggestion, Carmen pursed her lips. "He didn't leave me. He looked after me. He cared for me. Then we both grew up. That's what happens. We couldn't stay together."

"That isn't true is it? There were plenty of places you could have gone. You could have stayed together. You were family after all. You shared a childhood. Did he not love you?"

Carmen fought to open her eyes but found she could not. The lids were too heavy. She heard her own voice as though it came from a hundred miles away. “Of course he loved me.”

“Then why abandon you?”

“He didn’t!” Whatever Demetrio was doing wasn’t working, and the tea was making her nauseous. The fact was Charlie was good to her – better than many step brothers would be. When the time came they were grown, their paths had parted as paths are so likely to do – it was just a part of growing up. Had she been sad about it? Yes. Why wouldn’t someone be sad about losing a part of who they were? Their last link to the past? It had always been the two of them. Hadn’t it?

A wave of something washed across her body and she felt a tension in her chest. The tea wasn’t sitting well. No, it wasn’t that. It was something else, something important.

Demetrio’s voice came again. “Your stepbrother was special to you. The last connection to your family – the place you came from. So why don’t you remember growing up together? Surely you played games? Chased each other around the streets and fought like cat and dog? This is what siblings do is it not?”

Carmen lurched forward, rib cage constricting tight around her lungs. She felt as though she were suffocating. Henriette must have noticed because the next voice Carmen heard was hers, telling Demetrio to stop, they had gone far enough. Still he continued to wipe at the glasses, the movements creating a rhythmic motion that kept her anchored to the room. “Carmen, why can you not remember growing up with Charlie?”

Something was happening. She didn’t know how, but somewhere, deep in the very darkest part of Carmen’s mind, a spark flickered. She could feel it, sense it. All she needed to do was reach out and grab it – a memory.

The experience was akin to standing at the precipice of a great waterfall and looking down to the crushing blue foam below. Carmen arched back, fingers grabbing at the sofa. She felt Henriette’s hands on her forehead. Muscles jolting, she gasped. In a single breath, things that were lost became found. Suddenly, she knew.

She absolutely and completely knew and just like that, she went over the edge.

“What do you see?” Demetrio demanded.

The darkness seemed to change, beginning to falter and split, like a picture broken into fragments. There was colour and shape, distant and out of reach. She lifted one arm to try and take a piece, but it slipped from her fingers. Whenever it felt as though one came close some invisible force pulled it away.

“You know the answer,” Demetrio urged. “Who was this man? What was he to you?”

Carmen cried out. She saw the image come together. It swelled and pulsed, something flickering in and out of view like a mirage.

More hands, but different this time. Strong, male, they wrapped around her and lifted Carmen up and out of the darkness, warm, safe and kind. There was a new sensation. At first she could not tell what it was but then she realised it was rain. Cold, wet rain against her face and now they were outside in the street.

She saw the moon above and the rolling clouds. They seemed to rush overhead until Carmen realised they were not moving. She was.

“What the hell kind of tea is this?” Henriette’s voice pierced through the darkness.

Carmen felt her body twist beneath her. “We’re running.”

Demetrio’s voice felt closer now, “both of you?”

She shook her head. “Charlie is running but I’m not. He’s carrying me because I’m too small to run. It’s like I don’t weigh anything at all.”

“What are you running from?”

The smell of rain seeped into Carmen’s nostrils, the feeling of the wet woollen blanket around her. She heard Charlie; words ringing out from the depths of a memory so lost it was more like a dream. *Be quiet Ruthie, you must stop crying. They’ll hear you. Please, stop crying.*

But she couldn’t stop crying. The tears must have seeped out of the dream and into reality because she knew her cheeks were damp. Carmen felt the hammering thump of Charlie’s heartbeat against her head, cradled to his chest. Then she was falling, the arms that held her giving way.

“What was Charlie running from?”

Another gasping breath. “From *them*.”

A new image honed into view behind her closed eyes. There was a glint of metal and the squeak of wheels on a polished floor. Carmen heard the rattling chains and the wailing of babies hungry for milk. They were coming for her again. She didn’t know why. They came for all of them in

turn, taking each of them away and returning them to their cribs when the work was done.

Carmen felt hot, flushed. She cried out as more hands reached for her, this time cold and clinical. She felt so small it was as though she had ceased to be, diminished down into a single speck of life clinging to the world. A needle pierced her arm and set her skin aflame.

Whatever was happening in her mind obviously had a physical effect on her body because now Henriette was clinging to her, screaming at Demetrio to stop.

“She’s had enough!”

“I told you, she needs to see it through to the end.” Demetrio was uncharacteristically firm. Carmen had no way of telling – she barely knew what was real and what wasn’t – but she could have sworn he whispered something to Henriette. “Or all of this is for nothing.”

Demetrio spoke to her once again. “Carmen, who are you afraid of?”

The world came to an abrupt stop. Carmen felt herself thrown as if from a speeding carriage. She sailed in the darkness towards an unknown destination and as she threw out her arms to brace herself, she screamed out. “*Constantin!*”

There was urgency to Demetrio’s voice. “What else do you remember? Quickly, tell me now.”

She wanted it to be over. “I don’t know.”

“Tell me exactly what happened before you and Charlie separated. What did he say to you? Why did he have to leave?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Try.”

She frowned, letting her bottom lip flick in and out beneath her teeth. “I remember being sad, like I knew something was wrong. I think I knew he was leaving. He told me he was going away for a while and I should find somewhere safe to go until he came back. He gave me an address.”

“Henriette’s house.” Demetrio interrupted before she could finish. “There is something more, something important. Why didn’t he just take you outside of the city? Why did he tell you to go to Henriette of all people?”

The rain came again, and this time Carmen could see it. A deluge, all around, thundering like the heavens themselves had opened. The drops of water hardened and sharpened until they became knives falling from the

sky. Carmen cried out as they cut her skin, blood pooling beneath her fingers. The drops rolled down her arms. She felt sick and dizzy. There was movement on the left, and then the right, ahead and behind her.

Yellow eyes like wolves circling in the shadows. She saw the flash of blades. Then, amidst all the darkness, came a scarred face.

Without warning, Carmen felt something at her back. It threw her forward, casting her spinning like a pinwheel through the rain.

She hit the ground.

Her eyes opened and she was back in the apartment with her two companions. The afternoon light was dulling and she was soaking wet. Demetrio held a bucket, the contents tossed over the sofa. Carmen's mouth was dry and she could not keep from shaking so hard it moved the furniture about. Henriette sank to her knees, wrapping both arms around her. "It's over now."

Looking over her shoulder, Carmen knew with absolute certainty it was not over. What Charlie had done - the way he had thrown her into Henriette's care and disappeared without trace had undoubtedly been an act of great love.

But it had never been about bringing her to Henriette.

"Are you alright?" Demetrio handed Carmen a cup of something considerably stronger than tea.

"I think so," She took a sip, holding it with both hands. Having changed into clean, dry clothes and moving to the bed, Carmen felt somewhat recovered from her experience. She didn't feel good. But she did feel better. Lighter somehow.

"I'm sorry," Demetrio too had recovered, having almost worn the lens of his spectacles away to nothing during the process. "It's never easy but at least you've taken the first step."

For a good few hours after the effects of the root faded, Carmen remained very quiet. This had worried Henriette, who spent the entire time alternating between pacing the floor and stroking her hair – an act which only served to make Carmen feel all the more uncomfortable.

Scratching his ear, Demetrio, who still hadn't quite wrapped his head around the whole thing, pressed for more details. "Constantin Agenor, he was the instigator of this," his voice trailed away "...project?"

Casting a glance at Carmen, Henriette spoke with a crack in her voice. "Nobody knew for sure, but there was a place. They called it the Green Doors. People spoke about it, but no one knew the truth. Only that there were rumours," her gaze slipped downward. "Experiments. Degradations."

Carmen felt her hand squeezed a little tighter. It was rather nice. She felt comforted by the fact Henriette felt such clear sorrow for what she had lived through. Carmen didn't particularly feel anyway about it just yet, though she suspected that might change in time. Despite seeing the memories, she did not yet feel connected to them. It was like seeing a picture of someone else's life and then discovering it was your own.

"This man, he thought himself to be some sort of doctor?" Demetrio wanted to know more.

Eyes narrowing, Henriette squeezed too tight.

Carmen yelped.

Apologising, Henriette explained that no, to those who suspected him of his crimes, Agenor had never considered himself a mere doctor. He considered himself a god. It was the stuff of myth. A secret kept locked behind closed doors. Constantin had built his own little universe and declared himself master and creator of all. A cult, they called it. Some even went so far as to accuse Agenor of being a black magic practitioner.

Whatever it was, the authorities had eventually seized the place. Constantin and his followers fled. Nobody knew what happened to the people who worked there. Only two things were certain.

Firstly, anyone involved in the operation of the Green Doors project was tracked down and disposed of in the bloodiest manner. Second, that of the few hundred orphans, drifters and destitute who passed through there, not one of them had ever been seen alive again.

Still dizzy from her ordeal, Carmen curled up tighter under the blanket. She shivered. "I don't understand why he would lie to me though. Why would he tell me I had a family when I didn't?"

Demetrio shrugged. "Maybe he had a good reason. You were very young. A child told stories enough times will begin to believe they are true. Charlie told you of a past and you accepted it as fact. Perhaps it was a good thing."

As the realisation began to hit her that Charlie was most likely dead, Carmen felt a pang of anger and regret. It was her fault they had been separated. It was her fault he most likely suffered at the vengeful hands of Constantin's followers.

Stifling a yawn, Carmen cradled her head against the wall. She could feel her eyelids growing heavy. Each person in the room caught the yawn in turn.

Henriette seemed grateful when Demetrio suggested she remain there for the night rather than going back to her own lodgings.

"Just remember, what we've done tonight is only the beginning," he warned as Carmen bid him a goodnight. "All we've done is found the key to unlocking what has been hidden."

With that they retired for the night.

Henriette took up most of the bed. She couldn't help it. As Carmen's thoughts began to drift, she heard Henriette whisper to her. At any other time, Carmen would have assumed she imagined such words. But on this one occasion, they were as clear as anything. "I couldn't have done what you did. That was brave of you."

Carmen wasn't sure bravery had much to do with it. Rather, it somehow felt as though it had all been inevitable. The strangest thing was, even if Henriette had not chosen to spend the night there, Carmen would not have been alone.

Part of her knew as of that night, she would never truly be alone again.

There was a reason Carmen's mind had not allowed her to fill in the gaps in her own history. It had been trying to shield her, to protect her from something. If Carmen knew of the visions that plagued Vanguard and Tarryn, perhaps she might have felt better prepared for what emerged from the dark place in her mind.

Because Carmen was different.

Where Vanguard and Tarryn had only ever seen perhaps one or two, a handful of ghosts, Carmen saw more. They appeared, filling up every space in the room until there were more than she could count. Ten, twenty, fifty - yet she wasn't afraid. Somehow she felt they had always been waiting for her to find them - to *see* them. And now she did, they all stood staring back at her, as if wondering where she had been all that time.

No One Ever Gave a Deer a Pistol

The world was a dangerous place. A man, for example, might hunt a deer and be at risk of another hunter – bigger, stronger or in possession of a deadlier weapon - taking his prize away. They lived with the ever present threat of losing what they worked, fought and bled to claim. That was the lot of men. It was harsh and it was unfair, yet no more or less than it was for the deer.

True, the deer could survive. But they had to learn. They had to be smarter. That was the lot of women. After all, the hunter might be forced to fight to keep his quarry – but nobody ever gave the deer a pistol. This was why Henriette had been reluctant to give hers up. Cooke had insisted ladies in polite society did not need to carry side arms. Henriette felt the world would be a very different place if they did.

Despite her counters, Cooke reminded her that a small gathering for supper at Javier's house was unlikely to result in any duels to the death, and so Henriette had relegated the pistol to the chest of drawers at the boarding house. Under the gentle warmth of a mild sky, she carefully wound her way through the market. They all had their places in Cooke's grand scheme, and their jobs to do. On this occasion, Henriette's job was dinner.

Not wanting to burn bridges with Javier, Cooke had suggested they spend a pleasant evening with each other before parting ways. Henriette didn't mind so much. It would be nice to spend an evening conversing without ulterior motive. Besides, Javier's chairs were a good sight more comfortable than the ones in the apartment.

People went about their business quietly and politely. Guards patrolled the area in pairs, tacitly keeping watch for trouble without being intrusive or obstructive. Traders called out, cheerful and good natured. Their offers of special prices and deals only available for those who happened to be walking past at that exact moment gave Henriette cause to smile.

A trader caught her eye. “Good morning, can I interest you in some oranges? Very good for you,” his eyes locked onto her rounded middle. “Tell you what, I’ll give you three for the price of two.”

The man waved an arm across the stall, indicating with a deep smile this was indeed a very good deal. Picking up an orange, Henriette lifted it to eye level and inspected it. She didn’t really know what for, but that was what you did when perusing fresh goods.

“A fine lady like you must know a bargain when you hear one,” the stall keeper pushed his luck. “Tell you what; I’ll throw in some of those peaches as well. Three for two then? I can’t offer better than that.”

Henriette put the orange down. “Actually you can and did, about twenty minutes ago when you told me they were five for three.”

The stallholder scrunched his face up. “Did I?”

“Yes, you did,” Henriette was quite convincing. “But then I suppose one forgets prices when they change so often.”

Clearly worried at the prospect of losing a sale, the man began counting out oranges. “I remember now, actually, I do – five for three sounds about right,”

Henriette paused, giving him a slight nod. Beaming, the stallholder picked out five large oranges and put them into a bag. He took the money and held it out. Henriette cocked one eyebrow. The man seemed confused, looking at the bag and then back.

Henriette frowned. “The peaches?”

“Oh yes, of course.”

If the prices had been fair in the first place, Henriette wouldn’t have been quite so harsh in the negotiation. As it was, the man charged at least seventy percent over what he ought to be asking. Everyone else was just too polite to do anything about it. She took the items and bid him a nice day. No sooner than she had gotten five paces from the stall, he was already offering some other woman six apples for the price of four. And people thought the criminals were the ones on *her* side of the tables.

She glanced at the next few stalls, considering the various fish and langoustines. The fishmonger waved a hand towards the cart. Henriette shook her head. Lobster tails were certainly too ambitious. Argent hadn’t actually bothered to ask Henriette whether or not she could cook when he suggested they provide supper. She wasn’t sure if they would be expecting her to prepare it herself. Henriette had been to a party once where they

soaked orange slices in wine and spices. That seemed the sort of thing that would work for such an occasion and looked easy enough.

Moving through the crowds, Henriette paused occasionally. The market was at least three times the size of the ones in D'Orsee. There was room enough to breathe between stalls. When people greeted her or exchanged hearty pleasantries, she returned in kind.

Had she been so inclined, Henriette could have forged a magnificent career in theatre. Nobody would have known she did not belong.

Drawing level with a stall selling pocket watches, she noticed someone lingering a few paces behind. Whoever it was, they moved with her, face shrouded in a hood. Henriette glanced over her shoulder without drawing attention to the fact. Stopping, she took stock of her surroundings. There were a few guards around but they seemed more occupied with keeping a watchful eye on the traders who, Henriette presumed, could afford to pay for their attention.

With no way to tell if her stalker meant her harm, Henriette had no choice other than to push onwards. Perhaps once she left the market, she could find a way to slip from their line of sight. It would be quicker to get from where she was to Carmen's apartment than it would to her own. Hopefully somebody would be there. Two against one would be preferable odds - even if the second person were Carmen.

Picking up her pace, Henriette took a route from the western to the eastern side of the market and passed under the wrought iron gateway, cloaked figure only a short distance behind.

It was becoming increasingly clear they intended to interrupt Henriette's journey long before she could reach assistance.

Henriette had a pretty good hook, but anyone with a bit of experience and dexterity could outmatch her, especially in her current condition. Weapons be damned. Henriette was adaptable.

A bell rang out as she stepped into a shop no more than a few doors down. "Good day," The shopkeeper pressed his palms into a wooden counter. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, actually," Henriette smiled, "can you tell me how much that one weighs?" She pointed to the item hanging from a hook above his head.

Looking at the joint of meat, the shopkeeper rubbed his chin. "That one? I should say around seven pounds or so."

She nodded. "Perfect."

A few moments later, Henriette left. Satisfied her stalker was nearby; she located a suitable space behind the butchers, quiet and away from prying eyes. Turning the corner, Henriette stopped short. Back straight, chin high and with a great sense of dignity, she gave it a second and then swept the joint with both hands through the air at approximately head height. There was a yelp, her stalker knocked sideways, bouncing off the wall like a dried pea in a tin can.

“I don’t know what they teach you around here,” Henriette sniffed. “But where I come from they know never to try anything untoward with a woman holding a leg of pork.” Lowering her arms, she tried to catch her breath. “Now you better tell me who you are or else...”

Henriette had no idea how to finish the sentence. She could scream. It was unlikely anybody would care much.

Besides, her stalker didn’t actually seem that intimidating. Henriette was surprised to find the sleeves of their coat drop slightly to reveal long, manicured nails.

“I’d like to get up now,” A woman, far more diminutive than expected, peered out from beneath the hood. She was on the prettier side of plain, with the sort of sallow paleness that suggested a life lived in parlours and not on the pavements. “Would you mind? I mean, I don’t want you to hit me again.”

Henriette stepped back. She thought for a moment before nodding. The woman stood. She seemed in her late thirties. Clean, well-kempt and delicate. Not particularly the type for back alley grabbing and slashing. Beneath the cloak and coat – which, Henriette thought far too many layers for the type of weather – she was well dressed. Henriette narrowed her eyes. “Well, what do you want?”

The woman looked from left to right; seemingly worried their interaction might draw attention from passers-by. Henriette couldn’t see how anyone would care much about two women standing around.

The stranger kept her voice low. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. My name is Lucy Favreau. I think I may have news for you.”

“You think? How can you *think* you have news for someone? You either do or you don’t,” Henriette was not a person of infinite patience. The woman kept shuffling from side to side. Henriette was starting to get the idea she didn’t do this sort of thing very often.

“Because it is vital what I have to say is kept secret. I had to be sure you were the right person. I believe we have a friend in common.”

“What friend?”

“I need to speak with Argent.” Lucy held out both hands in appeal. “Can you take me to him?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Henriette lifted her chin. “And I think I should leave now – I’m expected somewhere.”

“*Please*, we’re old friends and he’s going to want to hear what I have to say,” she let her eyes slip downwards. “And I need help.”

Henriette sighed. “You’re not used to doing this kind of thing are you?”

Lucy stepped a little closer. Henriette could see the beginnings of tears in her eyes. “I’ll explain everything but you must take me to Argent. There isn’t much time.”

There was a peal of mirth from the street, the crowing of a trader making blue jokes met with equal approval and disapproval from the crowds. Henriette turned her attentions to the narrow entryway to the alley. Giving it a moment of consideration, she nodded. “Be at the Union Street boarding house this evening at ten. Ask for Kosic. If you are who you say you are, I will bring Argent to you. Don’t let anyone know you’re there.” Then she added as an afterthought. “Don’t let Carmen ask you too many questions.”

The woman pulled the hood back over her face. “I’m grateful.” With that, she backed out of the alley and with a last look; turned into the street.

Henriette leant back against the wall, one hand pressed to her stomach. She found her condition more exhausting than she expected. Not that she’d ever let anyone see it. Once she found the strength to move again, Henriette stepped through the alley until she reached the discarded pork. Damn it, she had forgotten about the dinner.

Henriette bent at the knees and awkwardly eased her way down to the floor in a manner that made her glad nobody else was around to see. Taking hold of the joint, for a moment she feared she would not be able to get back up again. Fortunately all it took was a few deep breaths and a little bit of wobbling from side to side. She wiped the side of her sleeve against the meat and once it was reasonably free from debris, tucked it under her arm. There was no point wasting it.

The Hand that Casts the Bone

“You did the right thing bringing this to me,” Sanquain curled one hand around the back of the chair. Sitting beneath him, Jayson Tunnock squeezed a cloth cap in both hands.

Stepping forward, the captain indicated to the desk. “Would you like something to drink? Tea, perhaps some water?”

Tunnock croaked. “Water, please, sir, thank you.” The foreman shifted in the chair, eyes flickering over the lavish furnishings. There was dirt from his boots trodden into the carpet.

The captain poured a drink from a crystal jug, taking his time to fill it to the brim. Tunnock took it, dusty fingers tarnishing the glass. He leaned forward, catching the overspill. “Beg your pardon, Captain; I don’t know what’s come over me.”

Sanquain dismissed the apology. “No matter,” Sliding open a drawer, he produced a coaster and set it down on the desk.

Assuming his seat, he pressed his fingers together. “Tell me more about the arrangement between George Sambray and Yanis Ypres.”

“Well, it’s like I said. Le Faye told Sambray there was some big shipments coming in, real expensive stuff, so Sambray made a deal with Yanis, to get him manifests and shipment trackers, that sort of thing. I don’t know no more than that.”

“I see,” Sanquain rubbed his chin, “these shipments, who else knows of them?”

Wringing his hands, Tunnock shook his head. “I can’t say, Sir. I never did any dealings with Yanis, only George.”

“And how exactly was Sambray getting these documents?” Sanquain knew the answer of course. That was why Tunnock was there, to save his own hide. Rumours were running riot in the Black Zone, telling of how Yanis was already taking measures to cut Sambray and his associates out of whatever deal they had. Something about it had gone sour.

“Well,” Tunnock stammered, “George made me take them, but I never wanted to - that’s why I’m here, I said I wanted no part of it – crime lords and double dealings.”

“Very citizenly of you,” Sanquain mused, “of course, the fact you bring this information to me after the event is less than a good indication of your trustworthiness.”

“I never meant to do anything wrong,” Tunnock lamented. “He didn’t give me no choice.”

The door opened and a contingent of guards marched in. Sanquain saw the colour drain from Tunnock’s face. The men proceeded to fan out, walking across the room and removing various pieces of furniture. “Excuse my guard, we are preparing for guests and there is much to do.”

Still shaking, Tunnock reached out and took the glass of water.

“May I ask what brought on this sudden sense of civic duty?” The captain was curious about that one. There were plenty of people in the Black Zone willing to turn on one another, but few would go against any of the crime lords and even fewer would risk throwing themselves upon the mercy of Felix Sanquain.

“The last manifest Sambray wanted, he sold it to Yanis but it’s all over the Black Zone Yanis ain’t got it any more. I don’t know who has it, but they’re sayin’ Yanis is looking for someone to blame.”

So there it was. Jayson Tunnock was not an opportunist, or an ambitious man. He was simply trying to protect his family. Sanquain considered the news. This was a situation he could turn to his advantage.

It was inevitable that sooner or later, the crime lords would find out about the shipments Sanquain had coming into the city and what they contained. When they did, they would come sniffing around like dogs over a bone. Perhaps Tunnock’s confession would turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

“And now I know of this situation, what would you like me to do about it? After all, you stole confidential documents.”

Tunnock swallowed. “I know it was wrong, but I don’t want to go to the Hole. I put myself at your mercy. I just want to protect my family – I got four daughters.”

For begging it was hardly impressive. Tunnock should have been on his knees, but Sanquain had no patience for histrionics. Besides, Tunnock was small fry in comparison to bigger and better fishes. Sanquain lifted one

hand and clicked his fingers. Immediately one of the Red Badges marched over. The guard stopped, standing next to Tunnock. The foreman's voice cracked. "Please, Captain, I've got a family."

Fortunately, Sanquain was feeling unusually forgiving. He put it down to the pleasant weather.

The captain spoke over the foreman's head. "Escort Mr Tunnock to his house," switching his stare back to Tunnock he added, "there will be a fine to pay but we shall otherwise consider the matter resolved."

Tunnock seemed to deflate, the last shredded edges of his nerves evaporating. He thanked the captain profusely, several times. Sanquain nodded his acceptance of the man's platitudes. There wasn't enough room in the Hole for a man who would sooner or later find himself facing the Black Zone's own brand of justice. The crime lords would not take kindly to the news Jayson Tunnock was a sell-out snitch.

This way, he'd at least get to enjoy one last evening with his daughters. Tunnock left escorted by the guards. He was still snivelling and dropping muck all over the place as he went.

There were few things that could truly surprise Felix Sanquain. For this reason, he always found a sense of value in it. The day a man stops being surprised is the day he loses his grip on the world. Of all the crime lords in D'Orsee, Sanquain never expected it would be George Sambray whose ideas would elevate well above his station. That sort of thing rarely went down well with those in D'Orsee's criminal hierarchy.

The Hook was a rat hole, but soon it would become a prize. Perhaps, rather than avoid the chaos, it was time to embrace it. The crime lords were growing restless, waiting for a war to start.

Sanquain was not a betting man, but if he had been, he'd have put money on it that Mandego and Pincer were already making plans to prevent Yanis from getting his hands on the Hook.

The hours passed and Sanquain busied himself, not troubling to look up as the staff continued to prepare the chambers for their guests.

After a while, Sanquain stood, walked over to the table and ran one finger across a small filigree case. The last of the guards filed out, taking with them a stack of papers. Once he was alone, Sanquain unclipped the box. Taking forth one of the delicate truffles from inside, Sanquain placed it under his tongue. He was a man with few vices, but some things were made to be savoured.

Rich, earthy, imported - no other man in the city could taste what he did right then.

It was funny how everything came down to resources. Who had them, who wanted them, and who would die for them.

It turned out, that in the end, stealing from Felix Sanquain had been the most useful thing George Sambray ever did. That was the thing, when you cast a bone into the dog pit to watch the hounds fight; it was not the strongest dog that won. It was the hand that cast the bone.

“Travers?” Sanquain called for the clerk.

A ruddy-cheeked, bespectacled face appeared in the open doorway. The captain shut the box, pressing the lid firmly closed. “Send for the boy.”

Body Language

Henriette sat rubbing her temples in slow, circular movements. She was getting a headache. Worse yet, Cooke's constant, uncharacteristically erratic movements were beginning to give her motion sickness. At one point, he managed to stop pacing briefly on Henriette's insistence that if he didn't, there would soon be a grove in the carpet. But it did not last.

Fruit knife in hand, Henriette began slicing chunks from one of the oranges. If she was going to miss supper, she was going to eat something – even if it was without red wine and cardamom seeds. Cooke glanced at the clock. “And she didn't say anything about what it was she had to tell me?”

Shaking her head, Henriette cut away the peel. “No, she didn't tell me anything really. How do you know each other?”

“We were children together,” Argent stood for a second. “We haven't spoken for quite sometime though. Lucy went overseas not long after...” he paused, “well, let's just say it's been a while.”

Over the years, Henriette had learnt to tell when someone was not speaking the whole truth. Argent was keeping something from her. It wasn't so much he was nervous, or afraid, or agitated. Cooke seemed, for want of a better word, excited.

“What would a woman like that be doing creeping around looking for you in secret?”

Henriette guessed Lucy was cut from the same cloth as Argent. She had seen no sign of work or wear on her hands. There was something not right about it. For one thing, rich people didn't do their own sneaking around. They had people to do that sort of thing for them.

“I don't know,” Cooke shook his head. “I guess we'll find out.”

Putting the knife down, Henriette folded her arms. “What are you not telling me?” Before Argent had chance to feign ignorance, she lifted one finger, “and don't pretend there isn't something. So you best just spit it out.”

Sighing, Cooke conceded. Stepping forward, he took a chair. After all his pacing, this worried Henriette, who wondered if perhaps she ought to brace herself.

“She was Lucy Favreau when I knew her. But that hasn’t been her name for many years,” Cooke held her gaze. “She is Lucy Reuban now.”

Henriette’s eyebrows lifted as she recognised the name. There were few people of a certain age who would not.

Cooke continued, “From your expression I can see you have an idea now of why it is so important she comes to us in secret,” he let his shoulders fall, “Lucy is Alexander Reuban’s wife.”

All at once the cause of Cooke’s tension became glaringly apparent. No wonder he could not sit still. Henriette herself felt a sudden overwhelming need to walk to the window and back, if only to give her mind time to process what she now understood.

Many a man made a name for himself during the last war. Felix Sanquain was not the only one back then to court fame and success. For a short time, his predecessor Jules Piven looked likely to beat back the rebels and secure his future.

That was in thanks largely to his second-in-command, Alexander Reuban.

Of course, Piven had fallen from favour and Sanquain was the one to bring about a conclusion to the conflict. Reuban helped him too, though it did Reuban no favours to do so. Plenty of men in positions of power met with unfortunate ends in the months that followed the end of the war. Alexander Reuban had, like many, disappeared. Most presumed he was dead.

Henriette could almost hear Cooke’s mind turning over. “You think Reuban is alive?”

“I don’t know. There were always rumours.”

Henriette shot him a look. “There are rumours about everything.”

“You’re right, and it is probably foolish to hope...” Cooke trailed off. Henriette felt herself growing frustrated. Sensing her irritation, Cooke gave a smile. “There is something else.”

“Obviously.”

“I can’t be sure it is true, but there has been talk Reuban has been in the Yiscjan mountain range north of the Amidian heartlands. Some people

claim to have seen a man bearing his likeness leading a small guerrilla company in the occupied territories.”

“And you’re wondering what happened to those men?” Henriette ventured, though it seemed a pointless question. They could not make plans based on speculation. Though, she rather suspected Argent already was, and had been since the moment he knew Lucy had come back to Soussan. After all, her arrival could mean one of only two things. Reuban was either dead, in which case Cooke must come to Lucy’s aid or Reuban was alive in which case, Lucy had come to theirs.

Suddenly Henriette was not as hungry any more. Rather, she felt old and tired. This game of changing fortunes was one she no longer wished to play. Cooke resumed his pacing. Just before nine, Henriette retired to her room so Cooke could wash and change before they left.

Alone, she sat on the edge of the bed. Henriette brushed her hair, washed her face and dabbed a little perfume behind each ear. At the very least, she would smell nice.

Henriette had never been insecure in her younger days. It seemed stupid she felt so now.

There was a mirror in the bedroom, leaning against the wall, a shawl draped over the glass. These days Henriette had no interest in looking at it. Her reflection couldn’t tell her anything she didn’t already know. Her hair was greying and her skin dulled to the point where no creams or potions could mask the fact that Henriette had lost her vibrancy.

It wasn’t about vanity. For the most part, Henriette did not care for how she looked or what anyone else thought about it. Looks faded. Any woman who did not accept and prepare for that inevitability was a fool to herself and Henriette had never been that. No, there was more to it than simple pride. Henriette might not have been attractive, but she had built something that would last long after her lips thinned. She dedicated her life to it. But that was gone now and it showed on her face.

That was why Henriette could not bear to look in the mirror. Without her home, her business, and her girls – what was she? An ageing woman painted in rouge. She had become ridiculous.

There was a knock at the door. Argent informed her Kotic had arrived to drive them across town. Henriette stood and adjusted her dress. It was time to find out what the future had in store for them all.

Carmen was a person not well equipped for long uncomfortable silences. Demetrio poured them each some coffee. The quiet clinking of cups against saucers only made the lack of conversation more apparent. Carmen didn't even know where Demetrio had gotten cups and saucers from. He offered the unfamiliar woman sitting on his chair a biscuit.

"Oh, no, thank you," Lucy set her drink down.

Carmen thought about offering once again to go and check to see if the wagon was back yet.

Before she could suggest it, the woman spoke. "I'm sorry if I'm intruding. I understand all this must be very strange."

"Not at all," Demetrio was all politeness.

Carmen concentrated on keeping her mouth shut. This was one of those times when she obviously ought to be listening and not speaking. She used the time to chew her fingernails and took stock of the woman. Lucy had lovely nails. Smooth and polished, without a chip or splinter in sight.

"You're not very tanned," the words blurted out before she could stop them. Demetrio shot her a look. Undeterred, Carmen continued. "If you've been on the Amidian coast for all these years, why aren't you tanned?"

Lucy shifted, "I try to keep out of the sun."

"Why?"

"It's not good for the skin."

"Oh," Carmen resumed nibbling on her fingers.

A very long ten minutes later, the rest of their party arrived. Cooke swept into the room greeting each of them before coming to Lucy. Carmen watched as the two stared at each other for a moment. There was a slight hesitation before Cooke crossed the room and swept the woman into his arms. Carmen had never seen him react to anyone that way before. It occurred to her then, perhaps this was the first time Argent had seen a friend from his own world for a very long time.

Parting, Cooke stood back and looked the woman up and down. "You've not changed at all."

Lucy smiled. "Neither have you."

Obviously they were both being polite.

Carmen wished they would hurry up and get to the point. There was too much tension in the room for her liking and for some inexplicable reason; Henriette was wearing so much perfume as to almost be offensive about it.

Finally, Cooke took Lucy by the hand. "I'm glad you're here and I wish we could spend more time reminiscing, but you've come to me for a reason. So tell me, why are you here?"

With that, Lucy told them the story of what had become of Alexander Reuban.

"I mean, it isn't the *worst* idea," Demetrio ventured, the silence finally breaking.

"Could you provide an example of something that would be?" Henriette sat on the edge of the bed, dark circles beneath her eyes. Carmen thought about going downstairs and asking Abel for some more coffee, but she did not dare move.

Argent stood at the window. "How long since Reuban and the men were taken prisoner?"

Sniffing, Lucy wiped away a few errant tears. "It's been several weeks. One of our contacts managed to secure me passage back to Soussan. I made my way here after I heard you'd left D'Orsee. Alexander and most of the men were making their way through the pass towards the foot of the range when the Yiscjan discovered them. The rest remain hidden. I need to return to them as soon as I can."

Demetrio shook his head. "Why can Reuban's men not free their comrades themselves?"

"They've tried. More than once."

Cooke frowned. "You don't need to explain yourself, you've come here to ask for our help and that is what we must give. So tell me, what is it you think we can do? Lucy, you know I have no influence, no forces. I have no power here, let alone across the sea."

He looked at Lucy who was pressing her hands together so hard the knuckles turned white. She glanced at the floor and then upwards. "It's true;

I do need your help, but not to rescue Alex. I need you to help me get a message to John Vanguard.”

Carmen wasn't sure her ears heard correctly. It seemed unlikely Lucy Favreau and Vanguard would have ever been the best of friends. She also couldn't help but notice the way Lucy said his name made Henriette bristle. It was quite clear she did not appreciate Vanguard and this woman being on a first names basis.

Lucy went on to explain they had met years ago, when Vanguard first became a soldier, eventually coming to serve under her future husband. Carmen suspected there might be more to the story than that. So did Henriette judging by the way she was acting. There was knowing someone, and then there was *knowing* someone.

“Wait,” Henriette countered, “So what happens if Vanguard does receive this message? What exactly are we proposing? That he escape D’Orsee, find a way across the sea, travels through a strange land and meets with men he does not know to infiltrate a fortress he knows nothing about? It would be suicide.”

Carmen bit the skin around the top of her finger. She'd run out of nail to chew. Not knowing much about the Yisjcan, other than what stories Demetrio imparted, she failed to see how any of their prisons could be much different to the one in D’Orsee. Vanguard had come out of that twice, though admittedly not without aid.

Cooke looked irritated. “Vanguard is a seasoned soldier. Don't forget he was a part of Jules Piven's private army long before the Ninth formed. The Amidian coast will not be new to him. It won't be the first time he has traversed that region and besides, he wouldn't be alone.”

“But he *will* be alone,” Henriette interrupted. “Isn't that the whole point? You don't have enough men to take the prison, but if he can get in and open the doors for them, well, they can just march right in.”

Cooke stepped forward, talking with a snap in his voice that surprised them all. “You're being unfair; Lucy risked a lot to bring us this message.”

Falling silent, Henriette glowered from her seat. Without thinking, Carmen got up and crossed the room to sit at her side. If Henriette appreciated such an act of solidarity, she did not show it. “And what if he does go, and ends up stuck in some prison cell on the other side of the world?”

It wasn't really the other side of the world. It wasn't even a quarter of the way around. Carmen had checked. She reached out and took Henriette's hand, only to have it promptly snatched away. For someone who spent so much time cursing Vanguard's name, Henriette seemed greatly opposed to any plan that might end in his capture.

Having remained silent for some time, standing by the door and listening for potential eavesdroppers, Kotic straightened. "None of this matters unless we get a message across wall. Vanguard must decide if he will help this man or not. We can stand and talk but it is not our decision to make. He must choose if he stays or he will go."

Cooke nodded, "You're right; I must return to D'Orsee. This information is too sensitive to be trusted to written word. Vanguard will need to hear it directly and be made to understand the stakes," he turned to Lucy. "You must be sure too. Reuban has many enemies here. If he were to ally with us, there would be no going back."

Carmen saw the way Cooke's eyes flashed. In a way it was a relief. This was the Argent she knew – bright, articulate, and full of ideas. He was already thinking five steps ahead, planning the best course of action. There was no thought of failure in his mind, because there could not be. It had to work. This was the best chance they had. And who better to be their first great ally than the man who created the Ninth Company in the first place? The man who liberated the city of Lycroix? No wonder Cooke was practically salivating.

"Well, that's stupid," Carmen said it before she'd realised what she was doing.

Cooke shut his mouth and turned. They all did. Standing, she adopted what she imagined to be a particularly assertive stance. She was about to be very persuasive and Demetrio recently taught her about the importance of body language.

Carmen lifted her chin. "The fact is you can't set foot in the capital without being shot or worse."

"Under the right terms, with proper guard..." Cooke began.

She shook her head. "Sanquain won't follow terms. You'll be dead in a day," she looked from one person to another, "Henriette can't travel, Kotic is wounded and besides, he's leaving anyway," she said the last part with a little more venom than she meant, "You need Demetrio here with you, he's

the only one that knows all the codes and messages, so that leaves us with one option,” Carmen stood as tall as possible. “I’ll go.”

Before Cooke had time to argue, Henriette did. “Absolutely not, have you gone completely mad? If you go back in there you might never come out.”

Carmen shrugged. “I’ll be no worse off than I was before.”

Whether it was a mad idea or not made no difference – it was the only sensible option. Time was a luxury they could not afford and there were few people they could trust. Cooke would not be able to delay leaving Lycroix. They had already risked too much staying as long as they had. More than that, Carmen had been waiting for an opportunity to do something of worth and now one had fallen into her lap. There was no point ignoring it. Besides, how difficult could it really be? It wasn’t as though she’d be going to war – just on a long, dull journey to deliver a message.

She nodded. “I can do it.”

“I believe her,” Demetrio came to her aid, “She can.” Carmen gave him a grin. It was nice, this being respected.

“I do too,” Lucy added, as if they needed her opinion.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Cooke finally conceded, though not without terms. Javier had a delivery bound for the capital which his man would soon be taking. He could arrange for Carmen to travel with the cart – at least that way she would not be making the journey alone.

“Meanwhile, it’s not safe for you to move around the city,” Cooke spoke to Lucy. “I suggest you stay with us until we have things more settled,” he turned and clapped his hands together. Carmen braced herself for what was to come next. “I don’t suppose Henriette would mind if you stayed with her for a few days.”

Lucy nodded. “That sounds delightful.”

Henriette nodded, jaw clenched into a smile that could have shattered teeth. “Wonderful.”

Plan set, they left in agreement that Cooke would speak with Javier, and they would all begin preparing to depart. Carmen slid her eyes over to the door. Kotic was watching her with a slight look of amusement. It was typical, after all her griping and complaints of being abandoned; it would be she who would leave first. There was very little doubt in her mind he would have something to say about that.

A Horse called Horse

It was still dark when Javier arrived with his associate in the early hours of the morning.

Carmen stood on the side of the road, sleep in her eyes. Cooke went to discuss the finer points of the journey with his cousin and Carmen's travelling companion. Lucy was nowhere to be seen and Henriette, not one for relishing goodbyes, had said all she wanted to say the evening previously and remained in bed.

Demetrio stood square to Javier's man, pushing his glasses higher on the nose with one finger. Carmen watched as her erstwhile teacher made abundantly clear the importance nothing untoward should befall his student on their travels.

Stepping up to the horse, Kosic rubbed its flank. The creature whinnied, one foot stamping at the ground. Leaving it to the handler, who set about checking the tack, Kosic approached and took Carmen's hand.

"You gave me a lot of shit, tiny girl," he said without a hint of malice.

Tipping her head slightly, Carmen shrugged. "Ah well, you see that was entirely different."

"I did think it may be," Kosic laughed. "What will you do after you have found them?"

She looked down, considering the cracks in the stone beneath her feet. Lifting her head, she smiled a little but not too much. "I'm not sure yet but I think I might stay in the city for a while. I think it's time I went home."

She was not speaking of Henriette's house, and they both knew it.

"You know you might not like what you find."

Carmen knew that too, in fact, she was certain of it, but it would be better than not knowing. "If we never see each other again, I should like it known I never had many friends, but I'm glad you were one."

"Ah, so we are friends?" Kosic grinned.

She sniffed. "If that's what you want, doesn't matter much to me one way or the other."

He leaned forward and kissed the top of her head. Taking her hand back, Carmen slung the small bag Henriette had packed for her over the edge of the wagon. Cooke proffered a hand to help her up. Carmen took it, climbing into the seat next to the driver. She gave Cooke a confident look. "I'll make sure they know."

He nodded. "I have every faith."

With that he stepped back to stand with Kotic, and Carmen felt a twinge of sadness to be leaving behind two of the only people who ever truly believed she was worth bothering with at all. The wheels of the wagon ground against the stone in the rising light of the new day. Settling back in the seat, she turned to look at Javier's driver, a red-haired, broad faced young man with freckles exploding all over his cheeks. He seemed a serious sort. No doubt he was less than pleased at the prospect of spending two and a half days travelling with a complete stranger. Carmen gave him a wide smile. "Do you know any good games?"

"Not much of a talker, are you?" Carmen watched the scenery passing by as they made their way down the track. Javier had insisted they take the long route; sticking mainly to the countryside or what there was of it traversable by road. Most of that part of the country was wide, open fields peppered with rocks and boggy patches of mud. It didn't roll or sweep as she thought it might. The landscape was so flat you could see the towns rising up on the horizon long before you got to them.

"I'm used to travelling on my own," Gabriel nodded over his shoulder. "There's a flask back there if you're cold. It's not very good, but it's better than nothing."

She leant back and pulled the cover from the back of the cart. There was a small hip flask tucked between the barrels. Unscrewing the cap, she lifted it to her lips. The liquor was unfamiliar but not unpleasant. It had a bitter taste that had some medicinal qualities.

“I told you it wasn’t very good,” He held the reins steady, keeping the mare from winding too far one way or the other. “Feels better once it’s down though.”

There was a pleasant warmth emanating from her stomach now. The early evening had seen a marked drop in the temperature.

“How’d you come to know Javier?” Gabriel hadn’t asked many questions up until then. She’d rather been hoping he wouldn’t be interested. “You’re not high class.” Seemingly realising he might have said something insulting he shook his head. “Not that I mean it in a bad way.”

“Of course not,” Carmen hoped if she changed the subject he might forget he asked. She nodded towards the horse. “Does she have a name?”

He made a face. “This one here is ‘Elian Saint Honour’ – Javier always gives them stupid names. I just call her ‘Horse’ because that’s what she is.”

“What an incredible imagination you have.”

He grinned. “I just call things as they are.”

“Do we carry on through the night?”

Gabriel shrugged. “Up to you. We can stop in Massette if you’d rather. It’s a nice place.”

Carmen leaned back, stretching out her legs. “I don’t mind, doesn’t seem like much point stopping if we don’t need to and I can always sleep on the wagon.”

Gabriel wasn’t terrible as a travelling companion. They kept their conversations short and light. It didn’t require too much in the way of mental strain. As they continued on, Carmen watched the sky turn from pale grey to dusky lavender and eventually to a star-dotted black. They stopped to let Horse rest at the side of the road. Carmen drank a little more from the flask and found the flavour grew on you the further down you got.

Her companion kept himself to himself. She guessed he spent a lot of time on his own. It wasn’t actually a bad job from what she could see. She slept a little on the front seat, curled up beneath a coat.

“How long until we get to Massette?” She asked. There was a chill in the air. Given some thought, perhaps it might be better if they did stop. Her stomach was growling and there were only so many dry rolls she could eat.

“An hour give or take, here.” Gabriel passed her the flask. “There’s a nice coach house just outside the town do a good fish and chips. Javier and I stopped off there for the night on our way back from his business trip.”

Carmen pulled the coat higher around her shoulders. The gentle rocking motion of the cart was lulling her back into a doze. Something flickered in the back of her mind. She furrowed her brow. Maybe she had misunderstood. “No,” she murmured, “that can’t be right.”

“What are you talking about?” Gabriel’s voice grew strained. Carmen could tell he was frowning without opening her eyes.

“You can’t have stopped in Massette on your way back, Javier came back from Port Fenahm, and it’s on a completely different road.”

Gabriel spoke slowly. “It’s a short cut.”

Sitting up, Carmen felt a pit growing in her stomach. Why was Gabriel lying? She had seen enough maps to know this was no shortcut between the sea ports and Lycroix. In fact, it would have taken them hours out of their way. There were very few places Javier would have gone that would bring them through Massette. Only one would be a journey he would feel the need to lie about.

“You’re tired, you’re mistaken,” he said briskly.

Carmen pressed her lips together. She noted the way his hands tensed around the reins. Horse moved slowly. Every now and again the cart would veer and they’d feel the wheels pressed into the soft mud at the side of the road. Gabriel shifted in his seat. “You should go back to sleep.”

That was the last thing she was going to do. The cart dipped slightly as they hit a divot in the track. Carmen followed her instincts. Jumping from the seat, she lost her footing as she landed, sliding a few feet in muddy grass. She heard Gabriel pull the wagon up. “Don’t be stupid, get back in the cart.”

Fumbling around in the dark, Carmen realised she was ankle deep in ditch water. She must have slipped down the embankment.

Gabriel was getting out of the wagon. “Why couldn’t you have just gone to sleep?”

Carmen kept low to the ground. Gabriel appeared at the top of the slope illuminated by a small lamp. “Don’t make it worse than it needs to be, I’m not trying to hurt you. I told Javier I wouldn’t kill a girl.”

Trying to shuffle her way further back into the shadows, away from the light of the lantern, Carmen thought fast. Gabriel would spot her any second and she needed to run. The land around was thick with mud. She wouldn’t have been able to get more than twenty yards before he caught her. She could try fighting, but Gabriel was not small built and likely armed. She had

little more than her fists. That wasn't going to help against someone three times her size.

Gabriel was scrambling down the side of the bank, closing the gap between them. "This wasn't how it was supposed to be," he insisted. "I was only supposed to take you to the gates and leave you there." There was an urgency and irritation to his voice. He turned the light towards her and Carmen shrank down.

Run.

At first Carmen thought she imagined the voice. She had not. A female figure stood a distance away, watching. If the fact that a random woman was standing in a dark bog in the middle of the night wasn't enough to suggest to Carmen what she saw wasn't entirely natural, the fact the figure's skin was ever so slightly aglow was. The woman glanced down.

Run.

At any other time Carmen might have thought she was hallucinating. She was on her hands and knees in the mud with nothing but the stars high above and miles of wet, sodden grass all around. Yet the woman was calling to her – a beacon it seemed only she could see.

Come to me.

There wasn't time to second guess anything. Gabriel's light caught her face as he searched the field. He stamped over the grass, "Get back in the wagon." Springing forward, Carmen began to sprint towards the woman. Her progress was made slow by the weight of the mud on her skirt, but so was Gabriel's by the pulling on his boots. "Get back here, *bitch*."

By the time she was half way to the luminous figure, Carmen could sense him gaining on her. He lunged forward, missing the back of her neck by a fraction. Gabriel cursed, spewing strings of vileness into the dark air.

Carmen felt him at her back, sprinting the final few feet and wondering how in the hell she was ever going to find her way back to the cart in the dark even if she did get away.

Gabriel made one desperate attempt to close the gap between them. Carmen turned, putting her hands up defensively as she prepared for him to strike her. Gabriel faltered, a loud cracking noise filling the air. He screamed out as he fell to the floor. The lantern rolled across the ground to reveal the remnants of an old rabbit warren, roof caved in by his weight.

"My leg," he gasped, "I think it's broken."

The woman had gone. Carmen edged forward cautiously. Her stomach lurched when she saw bone protruding through the skin. Reaching down, Carmen plucked up the lamp.

“Please,” Gabriel looked as though he might pass out at any minute. “I really wasn’t going to hurt you, it’s just a job,” he pleaded, “you have to help me, you can’t leave me like this.”

Unsure as to what she should do next, Carmen sat on the grass. It was damp but she didn’t care. Her chest was aching, and her legs felt like jelly.

“I don’t much feel like helping you at all right now,” she rubbed her arms. “So what exactly was your plan?”

“Look,” his voice was strained, agony evident in his eyes. Carmen didn’t care, she was glad he was in pain. “When you work for a man like Javier you don’t say no – you just do what you’re told. It wasn’t personal.”

“It *felt* personal.”

“I’m sorry, like I said; it’s only what I was instructed to do. I was supposed to drive you to the gates but not take you in, I was to hand you over to the guards and then take the wagon to meet Javier’s contractor. That’s all I know – I swear. Javier didn’t tell me anything more than that, why would he?”

Unconvinced, Carmen set the lamp down on the ground. Gabriel tried to move, making an attempt to drag himself forward. The night sky filled with the pitched sound of his cries. It did nothing to make her feel sympathetic. You got what you wrought. “Why would Javier lie about being in D’Orsee?”

Obviously desperate, Gabriel pointed to the road. “Fine, I’ll tell you as much as I know,” he sucked in a breath, “there’s a medical bag on the wagon. If you get me something for the pain, I promise I’ll give you as much information as I can.”

Carmen thought for a moment. “Where exactly?”

Making her way back, Carmen climbed the steep embankment. She took the lantern with her, leaving Gabriel in the dark. She wouldn’t struggle to find him again. He was making enough noise to wake the dead.

She reached into the wagon, rooting through the various bags. Her fingers roved around the boxes. They brushed something that made her frown. It was metal. Hard, cold, balls of metal. A shiver ran down her spine. She knew the feeling of bullets.

Moving onto the next box, she pulled out a stack of documents. Turning them over, she felt a knot in her stomach. Gabriel was moaning from the ditch. She peered at the diagrams before her and a chill ran across her body. Carmen might not have known much about the world, but she knew what a gun looked like and this looked like no gun she had ever seen before. Her eyes travelled over the document to the bottom of the page. Her heart sank and the bile rose in her throat. There was the stamp of Felix Sanquain's seal, and next to it, the signature of Javier Pollier.

Carmen didn't need to look any further. She might not have considered herself the most brilliant person in the world, but any idiot could see what kind of deal it was Javier had been overseeing.

"What's taking so long?" Gabriel's voice floated out of the darkness.

Carmen felt her heart harden. Nothing could convince her Gabriel had been ignorant as to what they were transporting or why – and she needed no further assistance from him now. Plucking a pack from the front seat, she made her way back across the grass. Gabriel looked up as she approached. He smiled; no doubt convinced he had persuaded her of his innocence. His face fell as Carmen threw a bag onto the ground.

"What's this?" He asked.

"Water and a little pain tonic."

"What do you mean?"

Without a word, Carmen turned and began to walk back towards the wagon. Gabriel's voice called out after her. "Where are you going? You can't leave me out here like this. I'll be dead by morning; nobody will see me from the road."

Carmen did not answer him.

"Get back here, you bitch," his voice rose, echoing around her. "Do you hear me? I said come back. You *fucking whore!*"

He really didn't have much of an imagination.

She found the wagon a little further down the road than she left it. Horse had taken it upon herself to wander in search of something to eat.

Carmen walked up alongside her and laid a hand on her back. The mare spooked a little, but seemed relatively calm. Satisfied the horse was secure, Carmen collapsed against the side of the vehicle. Every bone ached and every muscle was screaming. She felt dizzy. Knowing she had no other choice, she stuck her fingers down her throat. Carmen retched. When she was done, she wiped the mud from her skirt.

The luminous woman stood now at the front of the cart, seemingly admiring the horse.

"I saw you before," Carmen began, "After I drank the tea. Lots of you."

The woman appeared quite fixated on the mare.

"What are you?" Carmen wasn't even sure whatever it was could answer. "Why are you here? What am I? Why is this happening?" Once the questions started, she could not stop them.

The woman smiled. For a moment it seemed like she was going to reach out and stroke the horse's mane. Her fingers passed right through it.

"Are you a ghost?"

Rolling her head back, the woman looked up at the stars. She seemed happy, peaceful even.

No, not ghosts, she sighed, as if she were searching for a word. Something else.

"What does that mean?"

We are part of what was and is not.

"That doesn't make any sense," Carmen felt her confusion growing. It wasn't every day you discovered that you could hallucinate people. At the very least, it was worthy of an explanation. "Did...did Demetrio do something to me?"

We are what is left behind.

"That doesn't mean anything."

The woman's features brightened. She had the look people got when they finally found something they were searching for.

I am the ripple on a pond. A footprint in the soil. I am the echo of a voice long silenced. Yes, that's it. I am a memory. We are the memories.

She seemed very pleased with the way things were. Carmen felt like she might be sick again. Bending at the waist she clutched her stomach and tried to hold everything in. It would seem there was only so much information of such a nature one could take at a time and Carmen had gotten a gutful of it. Looking back, she found herself staring at an empty path. Whoever she was, the woman was gone again.

It occurred to her then it was the small hours of the morning; she was standing next to a cart full of weapons intended for a man who was her enemy, bound for a city she did not know how to get to, in order to find a man who could not be found. With shaking hands, Carmen slid over to the drivers' seat and took hold of the reins.

“So,” She said to the horse called Horse. “What do we do now?”

The Void

It felt good to have a plan. Vanguard had worked alone for so long. Now he was a part of something, no longer standing on the fringes. Vince and his crew were responsible for that. They were good people. A little rough around the edges, most certainly with ideas wildly beyond their capabilities but still, there was something about them. Something decent. For the first time in a long while, Vanguard felt a flicker of the camaraderie he had known so many years ago.

He walked the road to the dock and knew for once there were allies at his back. Vince and the men spread out across the streets and dark corners of the Black Zone. They moved quickly and with caution. Despite his lack of experience, Vince commanded a level of respect amongst them, and Vanguard admired the way they listened to him. It was a little after midnight. Vanguard checked the contents of the bag. As he adjusted the strap, he felt a jolt of pain in his shoulder. Learning to live with it would take time.

Getting to the docks was not a problem. Getting into them, however, was going to prove more difficult. There were three gates – two large enough for heavy vehicles and another used for the gangers to make their way to the areas designated for loading and unloading. All were likely to be heavily secured.

By the light of day he could have perhaps hitched a ride, hanging between the wheels of one of the cargo wagons. The other alternative was scaling the wall. Vanguard wasn't sure his shoulder would sustain his body weight if made to dangle from a great height. Knowing his luck, the damn thing would pop right out.

As they approached the first marker, Vanguard heard a whistle. The signal Vince and his companions were about to divert their path and head for the furthest gate.

There they would create a ruckus to draw any guards to them, leaving the path clear for Vanguard. Part of him thought to point out it really didn't matter if there was the odd Red lingering around. Another part of him was relieved. Beth had assured him any recent failings of his abilities were likely caused by his injuries, and nothing more. Vanguard wanted to believe that. But the truth was, she had no more idea of how it all worked than he did.

"Fuck." He pressed back.

A gang of Sambray's men lurched past, stinking of liquor. Vanguard cursed himself for not paying more attention. His thoughts were focused on watching for Reds, not staying out of sight of petty thugs. They didn't appear to have seen anything. Vanguard allowed his fists to unclench.

One of the men had his arm draped around a woman who might have been forty but was probably only twenty five. She had the look of someone who'd lived that sort of life. Her companions were enjoying their stroll through the neighbourhood, showing scant interest in anything around them.

Vanguard stepped out. There was no reaction. They continued their walk, jostling each other and generally congratulating themselves for being alive. At one point, the woman glanced back over her shoulders and cast a look at the shadows.

After a while, the shortest of the three men stopped. He grabbed at his crotch, moved a few things around and called out. "Hold up."

Abandoning the group to find a quiet spot, the man leant against a wall with one hand and used the other to fish around in his trousers. Shoulders slumping, Vanguard got the sense of déjà vu. This was becoming a habit. Approaching the man, he emerged from the darkness, blade held forward until it touched its target.

"Which one of you has keys?" He pressed a little harder. "Quietly, whisper it to me."

"We ain't got no keys – that's the other crew."

Vanguard moved his feet to avoid getting his shoes soaked. He hadn't really expected the bluff to work. Until that second, he hadn't even known for sure there were any keys. "Try again."

"It's the truth; George said we're just meant to watch things. Le Faye don't even know we've got keys. Not that we do."

It was pathetic how easily the man gave forth information. None of Mandego's crew would have done. There was a shout from outside, the remaining men getting impatient to continue about their way. Hearing their voices gave the shorter man a boost of confidence. "What you going to do now? Three against one ain't it?"

There was a crunch as his skull connected with the wall. Out cold, the man fell to the ground, gash on his forehead and bits of him exposed to the breeze he probably wouldn't have wanted on display. Vanguard sniffed. "Now it's two."

"Come on, Reggie, what the fuck are you doing down there?" One of the remaining sentries stuck a head tentatively around the corner. His eyes narrowed, trying to make out the shape in the shadows. "Reg? Oh, shit."

Vanguard pulled the second man towards him. They turned together as one, Vanguard's fingers tangling in the lapels of the sentry's coat.

Placing a hand over his mouth, Vanguard pushed a palm hard against the muffled calls for assistance. The man squirmed, trying to twist away. His hands slapped at the wall, eyes bulging. Vanguard reached up and pinched the nostrils closed. It was so much easier when you could just kill them. Another target down, Vanguard left him to keep his friend company.

Stepping out from between the buildings, he made his way to the middle of the road. The light of the gas lamps gave him the sort of soft, hazy glow that put people's nerves on edge. The last of the three men turned, arm still draped around the woman. He'd been expecting to see his comrades. Instead, he saw Vanguard.

"What's this?" He snarled, pushing the woman aside. She looked at Vanguard, and then at her companion. Vanguard assumed she had no real vested interest in who killed who.

The sentry snapped his jaw towards her. "You don't go anywhere; I still got twenty minutes left."

Vanguard pointed the blade towards the man's chest. "I assume you're the one with the keys?"

"No, but if I had I wouldn't give them to you. Only way you're getting anything out of me is over my cold, dead body."

This one wasn't like his companions. He wasn't prepared to go down without a fight. Strangely enough, this one Vanguard felt more of an inclination to kill. Sometimes people didn't need to do anything particular to make you want to kill them, they just had that sort of face.

The sentry stood firm, fumbling for his own blade. He looked confused when he could not find it. Vanguard prepared to melt back.

“You just fucking try it, I’ll...” The man clutched one hand to his throat, blood slipping between his fingers. He looked surprised. So did Vanguard. His blade was clean. The sentry staggered forward, using his last few seconds to turn and look back at the woman, still clutching the knife in her fist. “You, *bitch*.”

He collapsed.

The woman looked up. She and Vanguard stood there, exchanging blinks and not much else. Whether she had stolen the knife earlier and always intended to use it, or had just seen an opportunity and taken it was unclear.

“I don’t suppose you know if they have any keys?” Vanguard asked. The woman shook her head. He sighed. “I’m guessing you won’t be telling anyone about this?”

She shook her head again. Not much for talking apparently. Vanguard leant down and grasped the dead man by the ankles. He was a little taken aback when the woman wordlessly took the other end. A bit of shunting and they managed to manoeuvre him into the alley alongside his friends. Vanguard scratched his chin. Well, two out of three wasn’t bad.

The woman pulled on her sleeve and pointed down the road to the ganger’s gate. Vanguard looked at her, confused. Seemingly irritated by his lack of understanding, she pointed again, more fervently and took a long, thin pin from her hair, making a twisting motion.

“You’re a lock pick?”

She nodded.

“Why would you help me?”

The woman looked back to the alley, face contorting. She lifted one hand, craning her head upwards and opening her mouth. Vanguard followed the finger to the stump where there was once a tongue. No wonder she was so keen to help him. He didn’t have the heart to tell her two of the men in the alley weren’t actually dead. Closing her mouth, the woman attempted a lopsided smile and gestured at him. The words she spoke didn’t come out too clearly so it took a second for Vanguard to work out what she was saying.

‘Shadow Man.’

On reaching the gate, Vanguard kept watch while the woman worked the lock. The main entryway was barred, but the smaller door within it, through which the workers clocked in and out, only locked. It didn't take long – clearly her true talents were being wasted. The lock clicked open. She turned and grinned.

Vanguard thanked her, suggesting perhaps she make herself scarce. Before she left, he imparted a particular address to her and suggested she might take refuge there. He was pretty certain the safe house could accommodate one more visitor.

That was the thing, something Sambray and Mandego really ought to have learnt. Vanguard didn't know much about women, but he did know they were a lot more responsive to your needs if you stopped cutting bits off them.

There was a gentle clanging of chains swinging against the side of a vessel. The smell of oil hung heavy in the air. Vanguard made his way across the deserted docks. The sound of wind through the sheds and crates made it seem as though they were shifting, aware of his presence. There were two wooden buildings close to the end of the yard, nearest the area where the water widened. It was a good place to keep an eye on what was coming into the city without actually having to get off your arse.

Vanguard didn't relish the thought of having to rifle through both huts to find what he was looking for – even at this time of night, the docks were not the sort of place you wanted to linger in longer than necessary. Fortunately for him, the first shed was completely empty. The second was a mess. Vanguard sighed. This might take a while. There were crates and boxes piled up everywhere. Stacks of papers lay strewn across three desks.

Vanguard ran a hand over the documents on the first. Hauling one of the boxes upward, he cursed as the bottom gave way. Papers and files scattered across the floor. He wasn't even sure what he was looking for.

"Come on, it's over here," A voice from outside caused his eyes to snap upwards. Two shadows moved across the window.

"Fuck." With no time to react, the door swung open and Vanguard dropped to his knees, letting himself merge into the darkness behind the desk.

Sambray strode into the office, a bored looking woman following. They shut the door behind them.

“I told you, all this is mine.” Sambray made it sound a lot more impressive than it was. “The name on the gate might say Le Faye, but I control everything.”

“Fascinating,” The woman was clearly overwhelmed with ambivalence.

“Do you want to see the warehouse?”

It was an odd sort of invitation. What the woman probably wanted was to take the money upfront, avoid any awkward conversation and get the job done as quickly as possible. The fact Sambray felt an overwhelming need to gain the admiration of a woman for whose company he was paying by the hour said pretty much everything you needed to know about the man.

And the fact that everyone seemed to have procured some flesh for the evening aside from Vanguard, said everything you needed to know about the fairness of the world.

Vanguard remained hidden, obscured by the desk and stacks of papers piled on top. He would wait for his opportunity, and then slip out of the hut unseen while Sambray was distracted.

Vanguard was just glad that from his vantage point all he could see were two sets of feet. There was a shuffling, the sound of a belt being undone and cast to the floor. Vanguard felt his top lip curl. Sometimes not being seen wasn't all it was cracked up to be. At this point he'd have been happy for someone to shoot him between the eyes. But there was too much at stake.

So instead he remained where he was, teeth gritted as the desk shuddered back and forth, narrowly avoiding hitting him in the face.

Sambray grunted like a boar. The woman reciprocated with mutual gasps and inhalations at perfunctorily timed intervals. There was a loud groan. The desk heaved one last time. George stepped back to admire his work.

Vanguard couldn't see his face but would have put good money on the fact he was waiting for a round of applause.

Eventually Sambray unlocked the door, ushering his companion outside without so much as glancing back. A man in his position should have had more awareness about him.

Glad of the chance to stand upright once again, Vanguard unfurled. Moving to make his exit, he caught one of the shelves.

A precariously balanced box tipped forward, contents scattering. Vanguard rubbed his elbow. Casting his gaze to the floor, he caught sight of one of the documents that had fallen. Luck must have been on his side. If

he'd been the sort to whistle, he might have been tempted to turn out a tune. It was exactly what they were looking for. A ship, due soon, chartered from the Yiscjan peninsular and big enough to hold a shipment of considerable size. That had to be it. With details of the particulars in their hands, it would not take long for the Cousins to work out what it contained. Vince and the others would be waiting.

He needed to get back so they could plan out their next move. Making his way through the haphazard crates, he reached the door and stepped out into the night. Vanguard stopped. Something was different. He was not alone.

He glanced out over the yard and for a moment didn't know if what he was seeing was real or some hallucination caused by the lingering effects of Mandego's pharmaceuticals. He hoped with every fibre of his being it was the latter.

This was going to be a good night. Tarryn could feel it in his bones. Finally Sanquain had seen fit to give him a mark worth pursuing – a crime lord no less. True, he was the runt of the litter, but far more important in the great hierarchy of the city than many men. It was a little unusual for the captain to request a job be completed on a particular date. Tarryn hadn't argued with it, concerned if he did, the opportunity would be snatched away again. It wasn't as though his death being one day or another would make any difference to Sambray. If the man hadn't lived enough life by now, that was his failing.

The area around the waterside was fast becoming Tarryn's favourite place to hunt. Funny, how for so many years it was the one place in the city he went out of his way to avoid. It was too full of things that could have been.

Of course, the Hook had always been on the wrong side of the water for him. Looking towards the canal, he considered the looming presence of a ship towering over the buildings. A colossal metal beast, dwarfing its smaller counterparts, primed to be loaded with goods for transport. It

groaned as it sat on the water, the vessel encumbered by its stillness. The life he might have led.

Tarryn walked along the buildings overlooking the tow path. Below, George Sambray was presenting the ships to a whore, like a king, munificently providing a subject with a tour of his dominion. Tarryn trailed them along the edge of the water until they reached Sambray's offices. There, they disappeared for a while and he did not care to venture closer for further elaboration.

A slight wind caught the back of his head, unsettling his hair at the crown. Tarryn smoothed it down. It was getting too long. It wouldn't do to let it grow out of control. The chill in the breeze sent a rolling tingle down his spine, which took Tarryn by surprise. He generally didn't feel the cold. Looking up to the sky, he saw prophetic clouds gathering above him. Tarryn smiled. He always liked the rain.

Sambray emerged from the building, kissing his companion on the hand. His lips barely left the skin before she was gone. Tarryn watched her. Perhaps he could have killed them both but there was really no need. Some people were destined to die at his hand, others the city would take without any need for his intervention.

Sambray was whistling. What he had to be so cheerful about was a mystery. Tarryn was about to turn away when the wind caught up again. Pushing the hair from his face, he was surprised to see another figure emerge from the building. Sambray could wait. Everything could wait.

Then and there, the sky opened. It was as though a divine being had designed this moment just for Tarryn, crafting it so perfectly that it came in the infinitesimal fraction of time between the clouds groaning and the first drops of rain hitting the ground.

Tarryn brought his gaze up to meet with the man standing on the other side of the yard. He didn't want to trust his eyes at first. But there he was. Greying hair pulled back against the nape of his neck, scarred skin on his jaw and the bag slung across his chest.

Vanguard stood before him, and as Tarryn finally allowed himself to believe it was not a trick of the mind, that the man truly was alive, something remarkable happened.

Tarryn Leersac smiled.

He was glad.

Vanguard felt sick. There weren't many things could still do that to him. Not after all the things he had done over the years. It wasn't fear – it was revulsion, remorse. Nobody liked to see their failings; their great mistakes, particularly if they happened to look back at you.

The angular cut of his shoulders and black dovetailed coat were almost unchanged from when they saw each other last. Some distance away, Tarryn Leersac stood watching George Sambray make his way down the docks. As if alerted to his presence by some unspoken connection, Tarryn's head turned. His face was blank, a mask punctuated by cold, piercing eyes.

Vanguard was unsure whether he was moving or not. He wanted to, and told his legs as much. They weren't listening. He wanted to run with all the speed he could muster to drive his blade straight through the boy. But his feet did not believe his eyes. So they did not move.

There was a whistle from beyond the wall. His attention averted only for a second. Vanguard looked back and Tarryn was gone.

Blessed once more with limbs he could control, Vanguard ran towards the buildings. Desperately searching for a sign of the boy, he twisted one way and then the other, passing between the crates and searching every nook, every crevice, every dark corner. Frustration. Anger. Guilt. Feelings he couldn't even name flooded Vanguard's body. Turning, he drove his fist into one of the crates. It barely moved. He would pay for that later but he didn't care. Shaking the hand free of splinters, Vanguard heard another whistle. Reluctantly, he withdrew, fists still clenched so tight they could have drawn blood.

A while later, Vanguard sat with his back against the wall next to the window in Vince's house. The family were sleeping. Vanguard wished he could sleep too, but his mind was on darker matters.

There were many questions he ought to have been asking. How had Tarryn survived the Splinters? Where had he been all this time? What happened next? Perhaps most troubling was that of all the questions he *should* have been asking, the one that plagued Vanguard the most was - why did it have to be now?

Cherries

It would have been nice if they could have both stayed longer. Tarryn wished it would have been so as he walked along the towpath. Naturally, Vanguard might think differently on the matter. He was still angry about what transpired between Tarryn and the whores.

Tarryn was smart enough to know things like that didn't matter. Not in the end. Sooner or later, they would both need to reckon with the things they had done. Tarryn found himself in a considerably lighter mood as he tracked Sambray along the water's edge.

He wondered at the audacity of a man who walked the Black Zone at that time of night without any guard. The only other person he knew who did was Hector Mandego. As far as Tarryn could tell, of the two crime lords, one was fearless and the other stupid. George Sambray certainly wasn't fearless.

That much became apparent the moment Tarryn appeared in front of him, and Sambray realised his time had come to an end.

"Which one of them sent you?" George fumbled at his belt. Tarryn took stock of the pistol and wasn't worried about it. "Yanis? Was it Hector?" Pointing the pistol upwards, Sambray touched a finger to the trigger.

"Neither," Tarryn eyed the barrel, "but you can keep guessing if you want."

Sambray's mouth opened. "Oh, oh," he appeared to have realised something important. "He *promised* me! He said I'd be safe. We had a deal!"

Against his better judgement, Tarryn allowed curiosity to get the better of him. "Who promised? What deal?"

Presumably thinking this was his one chance for survival, Sambray made a stupid mistake. He tried to appeal to Tarryn's better nature. Tarryn darted forward. The gun clattered to the floor. Bringing the blade to Sambray's chin, Tarryn urged him to make sure his answer was a good one.

“It was Sanquain,” Sambray stammered. “He came to me, said he needed some old documents and that he knew where they were. They were just lying around in an old safe. I didn’t even have the key for it but they just smashed it to bits. Came in the middle of the night with some Red Badge.”

“What sort of documents?”

“I don’t know!”

Tarryn did not find the answer satisfactory.

George struggled under his grip. “I can’t tell you what I don’t know; I swear, I didn’t even know it existed!”

“How could you not know?”

“Because I don’t know how to read!”

Tarryn stopped. It was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. Lowering the knife, he stepped back. “Everyone can read,”

Shaking his head, George quivered like a shitting dog. “I can’t, I never learnt.”

“Why not?”

Seemingly taken aback by the sudden change in the line of questioning, Sambray stopped shivering for a moment.

“Nobody ever taught me. I always got by pretending.” His eyes travelled down to the blade. “So you see I can’t tell anyone any secrets because I don’t know what the secrets are.”

Perhaps that might have been enough to save Sambray’s skin had it been John Vanguard holding the knife. Sadly for George, it wasn’t. Tarryn did do him the kindness of making it quick. And Tarryn was confident Sambray would have felt a lot better about his death if he’d known his body would be cast into the water right next to the sheds and warehouses he took so much pride in.

Everything seemed different on the journey back to the Golden Quarter. All of a sudden, the world seemed clearer, more vibrant. Vanguard was alive. Every inch of Tarryn was consumed with the thought of it. It meant, regardless of how they might feel about each other now, neither he nor

Vanguard were alone. They had each other, in a way nobody else could ever understand. Some people had friends to think of them. Some people had families. Tarryn had an enemy.

The relationship was no less important, no less real. For as long as there was somebody in the world who could hate him, abhor him, Tarryn would continue to be.

On his return, he was surprised to find there were lights on in the house. Tarryn took off his gloves and placed them down. He caught a glimpse of Mrs Brown through the open door of the kitchen, leaning over the large wooden table and pouring a good deal of brandy into a mixing bowl. The hallway smelt of fruit peel and cinnamon. He walked through and peered into the bowl. "Is that a cake?"

The housekeeper pushed past him, tipping a bowl full of cherries into the mix. "It will be."

"You don't seem the type to bake," Tarryn mused, imagining Mrs Brown to be more the sort to lace a cake with arsenic than liqueur. He dipped a finger into the mixture and tasted it.

"Your mother requires a fruit sponge and I do whatever the house requires."

Tarryn looked up. "Is she asleep?"

The housekeeper shook her head. "No, she said she was too excited to sleep. She's in the sitting room. She's perfectly fine." Mrs Brown assured him it had been a quiet evening and his mother no trouble. She simply refused to go to bed until given the opportunity to lick the spoon.

Lady Leersac was on the chaise in the sitting room, looking at a book held upside down. She seemed pleased with it, tracing her fingers around the words and periodically muttering 'Ah-ha!' Tarryn intended to say goodnight to her and retire to his room, where he could be alone with his thoughts. She wouldn't care, but there were only so many good nights left, and he did not want to deprive either of them of this one.

He bent and kissed the top of her head. "Goodnight, don't stay up too late."

As he made to leave, there was a pounding on the door. Frowning, Tarryn strode to the window and pulled back the curtain. A contingent of Red Badges stood at the doorstep. Tarryn listened to the sound of Mrs Brown's footsteps down the hall, and the door opening. "Good evening..."

The guards barged into the front room, pushing the housekeeper aside. Lady Leersac cried out as two of them took her by the arms, lifting her out of the seat. “What are you doing?” Tarryn clenched his fists.

“Stand aside,” Durbin marched in. “We mean her no harm.”

Fighting every instinct to cut the guard’s throats, Tarryn tried to control himself. “You will explain to me right now what you mean by this.”

“Your mother is a danger to herself,” Durbin indicated to one of the men, ready to use his pistol should it be necessary. “Captain Sanquain has ordered we escort her to the hospital for a time to receive specialist treatment. She will be well cared for.”

Mrs Brown shook her head. “I wasn’t told about this.”

Face twisting into a sneer, Durbin looked her up and down. “Why would you be?”

Tarryn tried to comfort his mother. It was obvious now why Sanquain had been so adamant Sambray’s death come on a specific date at a particular time. No doubt their intention had been to take her before he returned. He thought about stopping them. Tarryn could lay each person in the room dead on the floor before they were able blink; much less fire a single shot. He didn’t. It caused him great pain, but he didn’t.

“It’s too cold for a picnic!” Lady Leersac was distraught. “And I don’t have any slippers on.”

Durbin turned to the housekeeper. “Pack what Lady Leersac requires and bring it to me.”

Mrs Brown did as requested. The whole time, Tarryn stood and watched the guard with the pistol still primed at his temple. He took in the details of his face, making sure to remember every inch of the man. Several minutes passed before Mrs Brown returned. Taking a case from the housekeeper, Durbin indicated to the men they should remove Madeline from the house.

Tarryn’s mother looked at them, wide-eyed. “Where am I going?” She asked, a tremor in her voice. “Have I not been good?”

Durbin did not give any response. Tarryn followed them out of the room. He reached out to his mother, calling from the front door. “It’s alright; I’ll come for you tomorrow, don’t be afraid.”

Ushered into a waiting carriage, along with her escorts, Lady Leersac looked back from the window. The two other guards climbed up onto the back of the vehicle. Standing on the doorstep, Durbin turned to Tarryn. “The Captain says you are to continue in your work, and that your mother

will be looked after in the meantime. Sanquain will discuss the matter further with you when he is ready.”

With that, they left.

Tarryn watched the carriage disappear around the corner of the street. He closed the door, fists curling against the glass panes on either side. From the corner of his eye, he saw Mrs Brown in the doorway to the sitting room. Through clenched teeth, Tarryn hissed. “Leave, *now*.”

She did not need telling twice. Tarryn waited until she was gone. Turning, he stalked up the stairs to his room and shut the door. There, Tarryn tore at the sheets on the bed, ripping the pillows from their covers and sending flurries of feathers into the air. He dug at the mattress, clawing it out of sheer frustration. His fist met with the wooden corner post. Each draping velvet curtain that hung around the bed frame was torn away, poles splintering with the sheer force of it.

Tarryn slumped forward, head pounding. He stood amongst the wreckage of his fine things. Everything he ever wanted to provide for them. None of it mattered now. Tarryn glanced up at the window beyond the bed. Why had Sanquain done this? Was it to punish him? To test him? Tarryn seethed. He did not have time for these games. He ran a hand through his hair.

You were right to let them take her.

Wick’s face emerged from out of the papered wall. Tarryn, turned, driving his already-bruised fist into it. “Why won’t you leave me alone?”

The image of the boatman laughed.

She doesn’t need you any more.

Felix Sanquain entered into the main foyer of the hospital in the Golden Quarter. He spoke briefly to one of the administrators, making a point of admiring their efficiency. Upon reaching the first floor, a doctor met with him in a long corridor, the smell of chemicals and polish clinging to the walls. They exchanged a few words. Several guards stood stationed outside one room in particular. The door opened as they approached.

Lady Leersac sat up in bed, though her eyes looked glazed. Sanquain walked over to the old woman and peered at her, curiously. She seemed quite normal. There was another doctor, standing in the corner and taking notes.

“Hello, Madeline,” Sanquain spoke clear and slow. The old woman did not move a muscle.

“She’s heavily sedated,” the first doctor explained. “She was quite distressed when she arrived so we felt it necessary, at least until you joined us to assess the situation.”

Sanquain nodded, “Good, it’s probably better this way.” He turned to look at the doctor at the end of the bed. “Is this the colleague you told me about?”

The first walked forward, extending a hand in the direction of his counterpart. “Yes, Captain. May I introduce Doctor Renley?”

Renley offered a bow. “Captain Sanquain, a privilege. I can’t tell you how exciting this is.”

Turning back to Madeline, Sanquain watched her stare listlessly at the wall. There was saliva in the corner of her mouth. He had ensured she was to have her own room, and the furniture and surroundings be adequately dignified. It was clean, comfortable and not wholly unpleasant, whether she realised it or not. “Have you reviewed the materials I provided?”

Flicking through his notes, Renley nodded. “Yes, yes, absolutely fascinating. With your permission I’d like to conduct an examination of the patient and begin with testing the day after tomorrow.” The doctor’s eyes were gleaming with the thought of all the possibilities that lay before them.

Sanquain folded his hands behind his back. “I’m sure you’ve been apprised of the sensitive nature of this work. Our project is to remain strictly confidential. Only you, I, and Doctor Hersten are to know what occurs within this room.”

Renley let his arm drop, the chart at his side. “I understand completely, Captain; I can only thank you for allowing me to work on such a compelling project,” the doctor looked at Madeline, who sat unblinking. “It really is intriguing.”

“In that case,” Sanquain said, “you have my authority to begin tests as soon as you are able.”

Walking to the bedside, the captain took Madeline’s hand. She gave the softest whimper, as though she were trapped somewhere deep in the very

core of herself and could not escape. “I am truly sorry my dear, but sometimes, through no fault of our own, we become sacrifices in the name of progress. I shall think of you as such.”

With that, he replaced her hand and walked to the door. The two doctors immediately set about studying the old woman, impatient to get started.

Sanquain paused. “Do what you must to get results, but keep her alive as long as possible,” he turned the door handle. “She’s no use to me dead.”

The captain would never ask whether or not Madeline Leersac could or would feel any pain.

The information was irrelevant. In these situations, it was better to think of the person in question as being already dead. Her mind was gone; soon her spirit would be too. The body would be the only thing left and that was the only bit Sanquain needed.

Madeline had, many years ago, given life to a monster and now he wanted to know why – how Tarryn came to be. What was so different about Madeline that it allowed her to bear such a creature? So, unfortunate though it was, they would need to poke, and peel, and prod and pry until they found the answers they were looking for and Sanquain could choose how best to proceed.

For years he thought John Vanguard an anomaly. Then Tarryn had appeared and Sanquain began to consider perhaps their presence in the world was not a freak occurrence. Perhaps there was more to it.

So he had set about investigating and found that, when it came to men who moved amongst the shadows and could not be seen, Felix Sanquain was not the first person to have questioned whether or not there were more of them out there than they ever realised.

A Beautiful Day for a Slaughter

Vanguard must have fallen asleep at some point. When he woke, there was a small child sitting on him. It didn't appear to be doing anything, although Vanguard was highly suspicious as to what it might have been doing in the moments before he opened his eyes. Particularly in light of the fact it had something in its mouth it appeared reluctant to relinquish.

"Give me that," Beth prised open the infant's mouth with practised ease. Saved from death by choking, the child clambered away and went in search of more palatable sustenance. "There you go," Beth handed Vanguard his button back.

"Good, you're awake," Vince emerged from behind the curtain. He was fighting with a pair of trousers that refused to do up. "Beth, the baby's been at these again. She's chewed half the bleedin' fasteners off the damn things."

Vanguard noticed Vince referred to them all as 'the babies'. Even Violet, and she was three years married with children of her own. Now he thought of it, Vanguard realised that one might actually be one of hers.

"I told you she's teething," Beth retorted, dropping to her knees. Thrusting one hand into her pocket, she produced a selection of pins and set about using them to preserve the safety of her husband's dignity.

Vince stood, hands clasped on the back of his head. He glanced over at Vanguard. "I swear, one day that kid is going to shit out an entire outfit."

He might have been missing something, but Vanguard expected there to be more discussion of the events of the previous evening. Vince seemed oblivious to the fact there was anything to talk about at all. And that was with only knowing half of what Vanguard knew.

Beth turned on her heel, still knelt at Vince's crotch and spoke through a mouthful of pins.

"You can talk about everything later," she explained. "This is my home, not a command post."

Vanguard nodded his understanding.

“Right,” Beth pointed to the table, “There’s tea in the pot. You,” she stood up to reach eye level with Vince and pointed to the chair, “can sit down.”

Taking some water from the kettle, Beth poured it into a bowl and unfurled a small leather pouch. It held a cut-throat razor and a brush.

Vince’s eyes widened. “Oh hell, woman, can you not see we’re busy?”

Brandishing the razor, Beth stalked around the chair and placed a hand on her husband’s back, easing him into the seat. Vince tipped his head back, stealing a kiss as she did.

“Stop that,” She swiped him with a cloth, threatening to bring the razor to his throat if he didn’t comply with her orders. When it seemed he had relented, Beth went about scraping the blade across the top of his scalp.

Unable to escape, Vince sat, threadbare towel around his shoulders. “I told Dougal to let everyone know we’d be meeting at three. Ow, *damn it*, woman.”

“You moved,” Beth accused.

Vanguard shifted. He was still not used to the levels of normalcy with which Beth and Vince conducted family life. “The sooner we work out what it is Yanis and Mandego are after the better. I think Hector might have his mind set on a takeover.”

Beth scraped the blade against Vince’s neck. The revelation was poorly timed. Vanguard made a mental note that in the future; he ought not to impart worrying information to a man with a cut-throat so close to his jugular. Beth cursed as she pulled the razor away, narrowly avoiding slicing through the soft skin of his throat. Vince wiped his head. “You think that’s what he’s up to?”

“To be honest, I’m surprised it hasn’t happened sooner,” Vanguard wished he were wrong. The clock was starting to run against them. This was no time to sit around waiting for things to happen. They needed to move, and fast. Beth swept the scattering of hairs from the chair and tapped the back of it. Vanguard looked at her with a creeping sense of dread. “You can’t be serious.”

An expression that could only be described as one of pure joy spread over her face. “Oh, I’m deadly serious.”

Rubbing one hand across his head, Vince offered him no aid. “It’s easier to just not argue.”

Vanguard spent the next half hour in abject discomfort, sitting on the chair as Beth worked around him, cutting, chopping and slicing. There were no negotiations.

When it was done, she stepped back to admire her handiwork. Her face fell, head tipping slightly as her mouth turned down. Vanguard reached up and ran a finger through the hair, cut slightly below the shoulder. "It's not that bad, is it?"

Beth thought for a moment. "Maybe if I went a little shorter?"

Vince leaned in to give his opinion. "No, I don't think that's a good idea."

They both looked at him. Beth made a low humming noise. "It isn't quite..."

Vince agreed. "No, it isn't."

"For fucks sake, what's wrong with it?" Vanguard wasn't the sort of person who gave much thought to the way he looked. But then again, nobody ever really looked at him that closely.

Vince perked up. "It's the ears."

Beth nodded. "Yes, that's exactly it. The ears."

There wasn't time for Vanguard to work out what that meant. The door crashed open. Vince's boy barrelled in, almost falling over the rug. Reaching out, Vince grabbed him by the collar.

"Slow your damn feet." He righted the child, helping him stand straight. "Who set a fire under your backside?"

Oliver wriggled free from his father's grasp. He stared at them, clearly brimming with the sort of news that was much too exciting for a twelve-year-old to contain.

"You not heard?" He asked, clearly pleased to be the one to make such an important announcement. "It's all over the Hook."

"What is?" Beth rolled away the razor and brush.

"Someone's been and done George Sambray in – dead as a doornail he is." The boy looked at them expectantly, anticipating all sorts of questions to which he was the only one in the room that held the answers. It was the only kind of power you could get drunk on at that sort of age.

"Don't talk shit." Vince scoffed. "None of them would be that stupid."

"It's true! They fished him out the canal this morning, packed him up and carted him off, all wrapped up and bloody."

Beth reached out and grabbed the back of the chair. The blood drained from her face. Behind the curtain, the baby woke with a splutter and immediately made her displeasure about the situation known. It was as though the air was sucked from the room. None of them said a word.

In the space of a few hours, the Hook had gone from the arse-end of the city to being the most valuable piece of territory in the Black Zone and Vince's family were smack in the middle of it.

What's more, the news only served to confirm what Vanguard already knew in his heart to be true. That it had not been a ghost he witnessed, high above the ship yard. Vince and the residents of the Hook might have assumed Sambray's death came as a result of another crime lord growing impatient to take their prize. Vanguard knew the truth. He knew who killed George.

Hector Mandego held his breath, one hand poised and steady. Any slight slip or misjudgement now and they'd have to go back to the beginning. Dipping the brush into a ruby red paint, he lifted the tip and let it hover for a moment.

"Hold still," he instructed the canvas. "I don't want to have to wipe you down and start again," the soft bristles pressed against a bare nipple, inches from his face. Mandego's tongue crept from the side of his mouth, lodging there as he concentrated on the flourish of his signature.

There was a loud knock. "Boss?"

The woman moved ever so slightly. Losing purchase on the skin, the brush left a thick smudge of paint across the side of her right breast. The door opened and Royce walked in.

"Damn it, Royce," Mandego threw the brush down. "Do you know what a cretin is?"

He looked confused. "No, boss."

A woman stood, daubs of blue and gold all over a poorly maintained set of buttocks, image of a snake winding around her right leg.

Mandego looked up. "Nobody has any appreciation for art around here," he nodded towards the table and her clothes. "Go on, go and have a

bath.”

She didn't bother to put the clothes back on before leaving, flouncing past Royce without so much as a second glance. Mandego gestured for him to come in. Easing himself up from the floor, he dropped the brush into a jar of water. It clouded, turning a pale pink as the paint dispersed. “What is it?”

Royce stood to attention. “It's happened. Sambray's dead.”

Stretching out his arms, Mandego felt a warm glow emanating from his toes right up his legs, past the good parts and into his gut.

“Well then, what the fuck are you doing here? Get down to the barricades and tell everyone to knife up.” Mandego touched a hand to his belt, fingers slipping over the handle of a loaded pistol. “We're off to the Hook.”

Royce left Hector to prepare himself. The news of Sambray's demise spread quickly. Within minutes they gathered at the periphery of Mandego's territory. Each person stood weapons in hand, a swarm ready to lay waste to the city.

Mandego appeared, freshly dressed in an embroidered velvet frock coat that gave his walk just the right kind of swagger for the occasion. If you were going to do something, you might as well do it well dressed. Royce stood in the centre of the line, waiting to receive the order.

Hector spoke quietly. “You know the plan. Wait until you see the signal and then light them up. Don't fuck it up, or you know what to expect when you get back tonight.”

Stepping forward, Mandego lifted one hand into the air. A hushed silence fell. They all watched him, staring intently as the blood rushing around their veins became almost audible. Mandego relished in it. This was his moment of his ascension, and he had earned the right to savour its taste. He held them in the palm of his hand, authority total and unchallenged.

“Well, boys and girls,” he called cheerfully, “it's a beautiful day for a slaughter,”

Weeping and Wailing

The ground shook, pleas for mercy and aid falling on ears that could do little to help them. Pistols and blades and teeth and fists, screaming flurries of skin against steel – it was chaos.

Vince sat, back pressed against the side of an upturned cart. To his left, his neighbours crouched, ready to defend their homes.

At his right, a young man sat holding his head with both hands; blood pouring from a wound Vince knew would never heal properly. Placing a hand on the boy's leg, Vince gave him a reassuring nod. "Don't worry, lad, you'll be alright."

They blocked the street as best they could, hoping those who came to fight were too distracted by the battle at the docks to be concerned with looting and burning the houses deeper within the Hook.

Glancing over the side of their cover, Vince saw people running between the buildings. A pistol shot rang out, bullet splintering the side of the wagon. The real carnage might have been taking place elsewhere, but there was no doubting they were caught in the crossfire.

Vince looked back at his home; the windows and doors hastily boarded and thought of Beth and their children hidden within.

"What do we do, Monroe?" One of the older men rocked on the balls of his feet. He held a gun in his hand so thick with dust Vince doubted it would even fire.

"Until we know what we're up against, we sit tight."

"What good are we doing here?"

It was a good question. *Damn it, Vanguard, where are you?* Vince thought it and almost immediately felt a rush of movement. The men beside him moved, making room.

Slamming down, Vanguard squeezed in behind the makeshift cover. There was blood speckled across his face. Vince grunted. "What have you been doing?"

Vanguard pulled a strip of cloth from his bag and handed it to the boy with the bloody head.

“What you asked me to, I’ve been checking to see how fucked we are.” Arching his back, Vanguard peered over the side of the carriage and cursed as another bullet sent splinters spraying into the air. “Shit.”

“How’s it looking down there?”

Vanguard shook his head. The Hook was already done for – there would be no end to the fighting until someone emerged victorious. There were eight dead on the dockside and that wasn’t counting the ones in the water. “It’s a mess. No sign of the Reds.”

Vince grimaced. “Doesn’t surprise me, Sanquain’s probably more than happy to let them all rip each other to pieces and be damned to anyone who gets in the way.”

We’ve got another problem.”

“Another one?”

Clutching his blade, Vanguard felt the reverberations of battle shooting out of the ground and up through his legs. “I don’t think Hector is here – I saw Yanis and I recognise Pincer’s men, but I haven’t seen the Butchers.”

Vince screwed his face up. “That makes no sense, not if Mandego knows what’s coming into the Hook. You think he’s holding the Butchers back?”

Shaking his head, Vanguard pulled a slither of wood from one finger with his teeth. “I don’t know, this isn’t Hector’s usual style – he’s up to something, I can feel it.”

There was a blood-curdling scream. Vince’s whole body stiffened. Billowing smoke curled into the air, thick, black plume rising from beyond the rooftops of the houses to the south.

“That’s Cunholt,” the wounded boy cried out as he realised it could well be his home on fire, and if it wasn’t, his would surely not be far behind. More cries sounded as people ran from the buildings nearby – buckets at the ready. Vanguard could do nothing to stop him, grabbing the empty air left behind as the boy scrambled forward and began stumbling down the road.

“Where the hell are you going?” Vince yelled to no avail. “Get back here, you idiot.”

Another voice yelled from further away. “The barricades are coming down!”

“I don’t think we have time to worry about Mandego now,” Vince clutched his weapon with both hands, fingers curling around the stout wooden club. There was a warning cry from the other end of the street as the barriers gave way. “Right then, lads, I don’t know about you, but if they want my property they’re going to have to pry it from my cold dead fingers.”

A gaggle of men Vanguard recognised as being part of Pincer’s crew filtered through a break in the blockade. Glass and debris scattered at their feet, stones thrown at windows and clubs and hammers clanging against walls.

“Come on then,” the leader yelled, issuing challenge to anyone mad enough to stop them taking what they wanted.

Vince and his neighbours ploughed forth. Vanguard followed, keen his debt to Vince not go unpaid. Somewhere in his peripheral vision, Vanguard noted Vince landing a heavy blow to the man who issued the challenge. Beyond that, he just did what he always did.

Vanguard melted into the chaos, disappearing and reappearing – a shadow one moment and a man made of flesh and bone the next. He ducked, swinging and weaving his way around, blade cutting and slicing and never going anywhere he did not intend it to go.

The men around did well for themselves, but they were not killers. They took as many blows as they inflicted. Vanguard felt quivering muscle beneath his blade, skin splitting. The smoke curled around them, and after a moment or two, Vanguard realised there was nobody left to strike.

Vince stood, still clutching his weapon. Shoulders heaving, he looked down at the floor and blew out a long breath. Vanguard observed the five gang members who lay on the ground, evidence of his work all over their chests.

“How the fuck do you do that?” Vince started.

Vanguard looked up as the other end of the road filled with men from the Pits. They stood, faces contorted into scowls as they surveyed the remainder of Pincer’s crew still gathering their wits. “Never mind that, we

need to move, we're penned in here. At least down by the water its open ground."

"I can't leave Beth and the babies," Vince's stance hardened.

"They're safer than we are and you can't protect them if you're dead. That lot will be too busy killing each other to worry about anyone in the houses for a while."

Reluctantly, Vince nodded. He gestured to his neighbours who had not yet retreated back to the safety of their homes. "Let's go."

On reaching the water's edge, Vanguard saw one of Pincer's men and another who belonged to Yanis locked in combat, fist on fist.

Looking from left to right, he scanned the disarray for a glimpse of Hector. From what Vanguard could tell, there didn't seem to be a single man or woman of the Butchers fighting for the Hook. Then he saw them. Mandego stood, watching from the sidelines as a small bubble of land in the backside of the city tore itself apart. Vanguard didn't like the way he was smiling.

"What the fuck is that bastard waiting for?" Vince yelled from across the way.

Vanguard didn't have time to answer. There was an almighty bang, somewhere way beyond where they stood. A blast, loud enough to reach them from wherever it was detonated. Vanguard felt the tension in the air change. Down at the docks, all eyes and ears pricked at the sound. Putting one hand to his forehead, Vince looked up. "Did that come from the Tanners?"

Lips pressed together, Vanguard nodded.

Not a moment later, a second blast came from another part of the Black Zone. It became suddenly, dizzyingly apparent as to where the rest of Hector's men were and what they were doing. At a guess, he'd say Pincer and Yanis had both lost their storehouses, the bases of their operations. The first blast alerted the other crime lords to what was happening, and the catastrophic mistake they had made in going for the Hook. The second stirred them to action.

In the distance, Vanguard saw Adrian Pincer, a behemoth of a man with greying black hair taking his people back towards the Tanners with great haste. His face creased in anger, cutting down anyone in his way – regardless of whose man they were. There was no doubt Pincer already

knew what Vanguard knew, and what Yanis likely knew as well. Hector Mandego had just taken the Hook without losing a single man.

Despite knowing the battle was lost Yanis remained a few moments longer, reluctant to give up his position at the more defensible part of the neighbourhood. In the end, though, he had lost too many.

“Get everyone back to the Pits,” the crime lord seethed. Yanis flicked a hand and in an instant, his remaining men began to move out of the Hook.

At that, Mandego gave the nod. The Butchers ran forth and took the docks. Vince and Vanguard stood and watched, open mouthed. Blood and gore swam in the gutters.

Vanguard saw Yanis turn, eyes darkening. The lord of the Pits took a few steps back, blood soaked blade pointed at Mandego.

Hector walked forward, stepping over the weeping and wailing injured. He looked down and straightened his sleeves. “Now then Yanis, my old friend, let’s not be cunts about it, shall we?”

“Enjoy it while you can, Hector,” Yanis spat before Mandego could get any closer. “You and me, we have a score to settle now.”

With that, Yanis turned and fled. Out numbered, there was nothing he could do. Hector had won the day and hadn’t even broken a sweat.

Vanguard felt the pull of something on his arm. He looked back at Vince, who no doubt wanted to get back to his family. “Come on. We should go. There’s been enough blood for one day.”

Carrot and Stick

If nothing else, Sanquain did admire Cynthia Le Faye's commitment to the charade. He watched from the chambers as her carriage pulled up on the street below. The old woman emerged, supported by her ever-attentive manservant, Claude. Her son appeared, taking his mother by the arm. Slowly, Cynthia shuffled with great care towards the steps that led to the tower, leaning heavily on a cane.

The captain returned to his seat. Several minutes passed before the clerk announced the arrival of his guests. Mr Travers ushered the Le Fays in and offered them refreshments, which Simon made to accept before his mother declined on behalf of them both. Travers bowed sharply before taking his leave. The moment the door shut, Cynthia's back straightened. She fixed her eyes on Sanquain's. "Let's talk business."

The captain clasped his hands together, "Very well, we shall be direct."

He hoped by the time Simon and his mother left the chambers that day; they would all be in agreement about what should happen next.

The upper classes were a tricky lot, and easily displeased. Sanquain would need to ensure Simon understood exactly what was expected of him, if their plan was to succeed. If it failed, he risked the animosity not only of the Black Zone, but the aristocracy as well.

"I'm offering you the chance to make the Le Faye shipping company the most profitable, not only in the city, but in Soussan. All I ask from you is your support in the matter of bringing the Renard Accords to the general council after your investment. I am confident once the subject arises, Briage and Mahan will both come to heel immediately," The captain leaned forward, "and the others will not take long to come around."

Simon seemed hesitant. "What about Orrell?"

The captain waved a hand, dismissing any concerns. "I wouldn't worry about Franklin Orrell."

Cynthia shuffled forward on her chair, pressing both hands into the top of the walking stick. "I have begun the process of meeting with those inclined to speak favourably with regards Simon's appointment on the council. Lord Ferris and the Bonviers have both declared their approval in the public forums."

Had he not been better at disguising his expressions, Sanquain would have looked impressed. There was certainly no dust beneath the old woman's feet. Chances were she had started spreading the rumours of her son's investiture on the general council as soon as Sanquain left her home on his previous visit.

"When do they meet?" Simon asked.

"The councilmen will arrive in a few days time," Sanquain sat back, drawing his hands together. "We shall know before the month is out whether or not our efforts have been in vain. I trust you are inclined to take the position should it be offered?" He deliberately kept his gaze averted from Cynthia. He wanted to hear Simon's position on the matter.

"My mother believes it would be a great advantage to us."

It was a good enough answer. Simon Le Faye did not appear to be an overly ambitious man but he did have one overriding desire – the need to keep his mother happy. He, like many other young men of his status, wanted to simply enjoy his good fortune and not have to do any more work to maintain or increase it than was absolutely necessary. Cynthia tapped one finger impatiently against her stick.

"Shall we discuss the contracts?" The old woman was certainly not one to dance around.

At her time of life, Sanquain supposed there was little need for delicately approaching the talk of business. Simon reached out, touching her arm. "Mother, there will be time for that."

Shaking his head, Sanquain gave a smile. "No, no, Lady Le Faye is right, you are both doing a great service to our city and we should all be fully appraised of the opportunity that lies before us," he indicated to a box on the desk, "please."

Seemingly uncertain, Simon hesitated. Cynthia, keen to see what was before them, clipped the side of her son's ankle with the stick. Sanquain did not say anything. He did, however, make a mental note that in future he should try to limit his dealings with young men who apparently could not escape the unrelenting shackles of their elderly mothers.

Taking the box in both hands, Simon unclasped the lock. Sitting against a black velvet cushion was an exquisitely crafted pistol. Sanquain could see from the way Simon's eyes flashed, he was passionate about firearms.

"A gift," Sanquain announced. "Given in gratitude for your loyalty. What do you think?"

Plucking it from the box, Simon drew in a sharp breath and then tried to pretend he had not.

It was too late, Sanquain had him. The captain knew it, and judging by the narrowing of her eyes so did Cynthia. Sanquain needed the old woman, but it was important she too understood her place in their arrangement.

"This is a fine piece," Simon held it up, feeling the weight and admiring the artistry. "I've not seen anything like it this side of the Amidian Channel. Imported?"

The captain nodded. "A sample sent from the Yiscjan ahead of a larger shipment of weapons to arrive soon. My broker has procured further prototypes which I expect to take delivery of by Friday."

Cynthia's face squared. "So it is to be arms?"

Sanquain pressed one hand against the desk. "The first full cargo will be ready for collection within the month. The contracts I have negotiated with the Yiscjan will provide our guards with more advanced firearms. We will have powder and weaponry enough to supply the entire Red Badge army, as well as providing ample support to our counterparts in the other cities."

"And when would our ships be permitted to leave?" Cynthia had an edge to her tone.

Sanquain did not appreciate it and ensured his expression told her so. For once, the old woman shut her mouth.

Simon placed the pistol back in the box. "I believe what my mother means to say is – with our yards closed, it will take time to assemble an appropriately discreet and reliable crew."

Sanquain lifted his chin. "I believe enough time has passed that we can see our way to reopening the Le Faye yards, after all, we are in this together, are we not?"

"And the debts?" Cynthia was quick to take up her mantle once again.

The captain paused for a few seconds. "We shall consider them void."

Plan in place, they spoke a little more of the details. Sanquain offered them both brandy which this time, Cynthia allowed Simon to accept. The

captain called the clerk, who poured them each a measure of liquor from a decanter.

Simon took the glass.

The captain waited until he took a sip, noting the look of approval on the younger Le Faye's face. At a cost of nearly six month's wages for the average person per bottle, it was the sort of drink certain men would covet. "So we are all in agreement then? We are in business?"

Le Faye's eyes gave away everything he was thinking. Sanquain could see his mind turning, thinking not of the potential pitfalls but only of the clattering of coins into a bank vault. Cynthia might have been the one turning the wheels, but both society and the line of succession said it was Simon who was master of the Le Faye Empire.

"There is one more thing," Lady Le Faye was apparently not as easily pleased as her son. "The matter of the crime lords? As of this morning, Hector Mandego has replaced Sambray and I want to know what your plans are for dealing with this. Sambray was controllable. Mandego is not."

For a woman who spent her whole life in the Golden Quarter ballrooms and parlours, Cynthia showed remarkable knowledge of the Black Zone inner workings.

The issue was one Sanquain had already considered. It was not ideal. Mandego was by far the more ambitious and therefore most troubling of the three remaining players in that part of the city. He was also not a fan of Felix Sanquain and made no bones about the fact.

Still, he could prove to be useful. Sooner or later, Sanquain would need to orchestrate the expansion of one crime lord's territory so that it might encapsulate all others. It was just good business. One crime lord was easier to manage than three. Sanquain had it on good authority Adrian Pincer had already begun taking steps to place one of his bastard sons into his seat in the Tanners. The captain felt that, if that were the case, it might be better to bide his time.

Cynthia was waiting for a reply.

"We shall ensure a Red Badge guard is assigned to secure any Le Faye assets. Otherwise, Hector Mandego is a bridge we shall cross when the time comes."

Cynthia went to speak. Leaning forward, Simon interrupted her. "I agree, let us see what happens in the coming weeks. Our first priority is to ensure my admission to the council and the enactment of the accords."

The captain nodded. "Very well. We shall not meet again until after your seat has been confirmed." Sanquain took up the decanter and refilled their glasses, lifting his upwards. Simon, clearly buoyed by the confidence that came with knowing he was about to become an even richer man, followed suit. A cold smile spread across Sanquain's face, the dark colours of his banners hanging behind him. "Mr Le Faye I believe we may toast to a very happy future for us all."

Following the departure of his guests, Sanquain spent some time alone in his chambers. With one hand, he rubbed away the tic in his right eye. It was an annoyance, something that happened when he became too tired.

It had been a long and exhausting several months. Still, it would all be worth it in the end. The council would convene soon in the city hall. Sanquain was confident he had done everything he could to assure they would make the right decision when electing Christian's successor.

Lady Le Faye would do her part in making certain the upper classes would support her son. Simon would ensure the subject of the Renard Accords would be one of the first things considered upon his installation. And Sanquain, with his great army, cache of arms and unprecedented record as a pragmatic leader, would face little opposition.

A noise from outside the chambers caught his attention. The sound of raised voices filtered under the door. One of them he recognised as Travers, the other Durbin. Casting his eyes to the ceiling, Sanquain cursed his misfortune at being surrounded by pencil-pushers and social climbers.

The captain went to the door and opened it. Durbin and Travers were glaring at each across the clerk's desk. They spoke to each other through gritted jaws, a thin veneer of polite civility straining through the cracks in their teeth like curdled milk.

Travers looked up. "Captain, I hope we didn't disturb you. I was just telling Mr Durbin that he does not appear to have an appointment..."

Durbin's moustache twitched. "And I was telling *you*, I have to speak to the Captain immediately."

Sanquain raised a hand, silencing them. "Thank you, Travers." Gesturing to Durbin that he should enter the chambers, the captain allowed him to pass and shut the door. "What is it?"

Clearly something was wrong. Durbin's control over his facial features was minimal at best. Sanquain hoped he was not a poker player.

“You assured me the Leersac boy would be out of the way,” Durbin was having trouble keeping his voice level. Any other time and Sanquain would have found the level of disrespect in his tone an offence worthy of correction.

The meeting, however, had left the captain feeling unusually equable. Besides, he had yet to find anyone else who could do the job Durbin had. Officious men with exacting standards were not exactly common amongst the ranks of the Red Badges. Durbin’s back stiffened. “He was at the house.”

“Were any of your men injured?”

“No, Captain.”

“Then I cannot see what your concern is?”

“My concern is he saw me, he knows it was me,” Durbin was agitated, with good reason. The moment Tarryn realised his mother was to be taken from him, the boy would have thought of taking revenge. The captain anticipated this. In fact, he was depending on it.

“All is in hand,” Sanquain reassured him. “Tarryn Leersac will go where I need him to go and do exactly what I expect him to do. Everything is as it should be.”

Durbin did not look convinced.

Perhaps, Sanquain mused, it would be reasonable to offer the man a little of what he craved. He had done the job required and loyalty was a trait hard bought. Sometimes it paid to use the carrot rather than the stick.

“And in recognition of your great efforts in recent weeks, I believe the time has come to make official your position,” he held out one hand. “Congratulations, Adjutant Durbin.”

Durbin's mood swiftly changed. Demeanour much improved, he took his leave, no doubt stopping on the way to regale Mr Travers with the good news of his promotion. Ranks and titles were important to some men. Sanquain resumed his seat and took a sip of the brandy.

The captain was different. He did not covet notoriety for his own self-importance. Titles and monikers meant little. It was what you did with them that made history, shaped the future. It was all coming together. There was very little that could stop him now.

Still, some titles did have quite a ring to them.

Felix Sanquain, Master of War.

He rather liked the sound of that.

Ruin

‘Ignorance is bliss’. That’s what they said.

In the past, Vanguard was never sure what people meant by that. Knowing what he knew following their visit to the Hook, he understood the phrase a little better.

He might not have found bliss during his time with Vince, but it had certainly given him some measure of peace. Now he was in possession of information that, were he to share it, would put everything he had found in jeopardy. Maybe the adage ought to have been ‘knowledge is burden’.

Vanguard was accustomed to knowing things other men did not. That never troubled him before. This time it weighed upon him.

He deliberated long and hard about what he might do with the revelation of Tarryn’s return. In truth, he thought of nothing else. Sleep became a memory as he whiled away hours imagining what might happen if he were to share the news with Vince and his comrades. He pictured what the boy might do to them and how many of them would die before a single scratch fell upon him. It would be like throwing mice to a lion. They would not win. They would not survive. But Vince would not care. Vanguard could not tell him.

He could not tell anyone.

In the Cousins, and even within Vince’s family, Vanguard might have found the embrace of brotherhood, but in this he was alone. He had failed Ludnor and the girls all those months ago; he would not fail Vince and Beth now – rules and codes be damned.

Making his way through the Tanners towards the furthest edge of the neighbourhood, Vanguard followed an abandoned path to a place he had not been for a very long time. A lone man stood beneath the curved stone wall of an underpass, a large black dog at his feet. On hearing approaching footsteps, the creature pricked its ears and issued a cautioning growl.

Its owner glanced up. "This here's Ruin," he warned. "Show yourself now or you'll see how he got the name." Loosening his grip on the rope around the dog's neck, the man stood firm. Emerging from the shadows, Vanguard held his hands up in submission. The man's face relaxed. "Hello, John. It's been a while."

Ruin leant forward, nose twitching as he took stock of the new arrival. His owner placed one hand on the creature's head and eased it. A great, vicious looking hound, it stood at nearly half the height of his handler.

Vanguard came to a stop a few paces from the dog. "What happened to Malady?"

"She got old, sick. Had to put a bullet in her."

Vanguard shook his head. Time could be a bastard. "Shame. She was a good dog."

"This one does me just as well," The man patted Ruin on the side of his neck. "I take it this isn't a social visit? So, what can I do for you today?"

"I need Ku'Rin paste,"

The man shook his head. "Not something I've been asked for in a long while. A little outside your usual wheelhouse, isn't it?"

"Things are different this time."

"I see," Letting go of the rope that kept the dog tethered to him, the man snapped his fingers. As it dropped, the dog stood and padded across the underpass. Driving its head into a small bush, it re-emerged a moment later with what looked like a physician's bag, strap held in his mouth. Ruin brought it over and dropped it at his master's feet.

"Good dog," the man turned to Vanguard. "You remember how to use it?"

"You don't forget that kind of thing."

"I guess not."

Doubling over, the man brought one hand to his mouth and let rip a harsh, hacking cough. Ruin glanced up, ears falling back and a soft whine escaping his throat. Catching his breath, the man recovered, letting one hand fall to his side. Vanguard noted the droplets of blood on his palm. "How will you be paying?"

Vanguard reached into his own bag. Pulling out a small pouch, he felt the weight of it and realised it was a little wanting.

The man took it and pursed his lips. "John, you know there's no such thing as friendship where business is concerned, I don't give discounts."

“That’s all I’ve got”

“Then you’ll have to come back when you can do better,” he snapped his fingers again, at which Ruin stepped forward, placing himself between Vanguard and the products on offer. The dog’s lips curled back, bearing a set of impressive teeth.

There were two things a man could never have enough of – time and money. Vanguard had neither. But he did have one thing, even though his heart ached to give it up.

The man took the pocket watch and turned it over in his hand. “It’s broken.”

“The metal is still good.”

He wrinkled his face. “Alright,” he finally conceded, “for old time’s sake.” Leaning down, he carefully retrieved a small jar filled with a thick, black paste from his stock. He handed it to Vanguard who took possession of it with equal care. “Don’t let it touch anything you don’t want it to touch.”

Vanguard didn’t intend to. Tarryn Leersac might have been younger, fitter and potentially more dangerous, but Vanguard would take every advantage he could get. The underpass echoed with the sounds of more coughing. Looking around at the damp conditions in which the man was plying his trade, Vanguard shook his head. “You know you don’t have to live like this, Michel.”

Taking up the rope around Ruin’s neck once more, the man’s face contorted. “I’ve told you, no names. I don’t need one no more.”

“There are people who can help you.”

The man threw his head back and laughed. “You mean the Cousins?” He shook his head. “No thanks. This isn’t my war. I was a soldier long enough. I did my time.”

With little more to say, Vanguard wished his old comrade good fortune and meant it sincerely. Everyone had their own path to carve from the past to the future. He turned back towards the Tanners and left Michel with Ruin.

Several hours passed before Vanguard returned to the Hook. As he walked the Black Zone he looked periodically over his shoulder.

Vince was standing at the end of the path leading to the house when Vanguard finally approached the gate. There was a strange look on his face. Vanguard couldn't quite work out what it meant, only that he got the feeling something very important had happened in his absence.

"Where have you been?" Vince enquired.

"I went to see an old friend."

"That's a coincidence." Vince flicked a thumb over his shoulder. "You're never going to believe what's sitting in my kitchen."

Walking into the house with a due sense of apprehension, Vanguard felt unprepared for what he was going to see waiting for him, and even less so for what she would say next.

Carmen sat at the table, a mug of tea curling steam into the air as Beth chivvied the children out from under her feet. She looked up as he walked into the room. Vanguard stood stock still, unsure as to the appropriate reaction for such a moment. Carmen blinked twice. "What," she said slowly, "did you do to your hair?"

Entirely Satisfactory

Mrs Brown was upstairs packing her belongings. Tarryn sat and listened to the sound of stamping around the bedroom. She seemed in a hurry to leave. He couldn't blame her. She had been betrayed as much as he. Now they were both out of a job, bereft of purpose and had no reason to stay there any longer.

Tarryn peered into the hallway. The clock face was still broken. Somehow he had never gotten around to fixing it. There was a crash from upstairs. Mrs Brown stopped still for a moment, presumably waiting to see if he would appear.

He had given much thought to cutting the housekeeper open, even before the news came her time in his service was at an end. There were not many people he didn't imagine splitting in two, just to see how they felt about it.

But it would not solve anything. All it would prove was that Sanquain was right. Tarryn could not control himself. That he was beyond restraint. The captain was quite wrong about that. Besides, Mrs Brown had cared for his mother admirably. He saw no reason that such diligence should go unrewarded.

Rising from the chair, Tarryn left the sitting room and walked up the stairs. He found Mrs Brown stood, bent over a bed onto which she had tipped great piles of clothes. She was hurriedly stuffing them into a holdall. On hearing the creak of the floorboards the housekeeper stopped.

"I didn't know anything about the order to take your mother," Mrs Brown began. Turning, she startled at the realisation Tarryn now stood mere inches away. His breath unsettled the loose hairs around her face.

In an attempt to maintain some decorum, the housekeeper lifted her chin. Tarryn noticed Mrs Brown's hands were shaking. She smelt like soap and rat poison.

With quick, fluid movements, he reached into a pocket and drew something forth. Mrs Brown flinched. After a second the housekeeper opened her eyes. She seemed perplexed. "What's that?"

Tarryn didn't see what was so confusing about it. "A reference, of course," he stepped back, "I have found your service entirely satisfactory."

Mrs Brown seemed to be frozen. It didn't matter; he wasn't expecting any thanks. By the time Tarryn got to the bottom of the stairs, the last of her possessions were packed. The front door opened and closed. He watched from the window as the housekeeper hurried down the road, still clutching the letter of recommendation in one hand, and the holdall in the other.

Briefly, Tarryn wondered where she might go next and if future employers would be equally gracious. And then he proceeded to never again give Mrs Brown, or anything that might happen to her, a single thought.

Instead he turned to other, more important matters. Firstly, Tarryn considered the final words of George Sambray and whatever the man had been speaking of when he confessed to the arrangement made with Sanquain. It was clear the captain was playing a game of his own. For a while, Tarryn allowed himself to become a pawn. That time was over now.

The second matter Tarryn needed to give some thought to were final words of another sort. Those ones took a little more time to muster. So he sat for a while in the dark, until he could gather them. Finally, Tarryn Leersac put on his dovetailed coat, stepped out into the night and made for the rooftops.

In a place such as D'Orsee, where it seemed danger lurked around every corner, people would almost certainly have been shocked to learn the leading cause of demise in their city was not via foul means, but something far more innocuous.

The most prevalent cause of death in the capital was the same as it was in any place.

For this reason, it was not the dying itself Tarryn learnt to fear. It was the fading.

The slow decline of the years, the irrevocable and relentless changes that ravaged the body, greying skin that was once bright, muting the colours of the world as the eyes gradually weakened and the bones buckled and warped. Tarryn saw it all around him, lived in it. People thought he was evil, but fact was, time killed more men than he ever put the knife to.

Standing in the shadows of the hospital corridor, Tarryn watched people walking in and out of the building in varying degrees of decay – some healthy, some not healthy, and some clearly in the throes of what would be their last weeks in the world. They went in search of remedies and potions, miraculous elixirs that would extend their stay far beyond its natural limits, all in the hopes of giving themselves more of the one thing that was truly killing them.

Tarryn would have found it laughable, were it not for the fact he found it so abominably offensive. Unlike those around him, Tarryn knew what it was to be stuck in a lingering moment that seemed it would not end.

Perhaps that was why he could not bring himself to walk to the end of the corridor.

Sam Wick stood beside him, unusually quiet. Tarryn had at this point, grown accustomed to his presence. All around, he heard the sound of muffled conversation, creaking doors opening and closing along the halls. They stood and watched two guards leaning against the wall outside a room from which a doctor had moments ago appeared.

Tarryn knew what lay on the other side of the door, and part of him knew he ought to care about it. That he ought to love it. But another part of him knew that time was over now.

Tarryn often thought about his mother's death. Sometimes he imagined being the cause of it, how it would feel to bring about her end. Madeline's demise long ago stopped being merely an idea. It had been an absolute, inevitable.

But death was not dying, and as much as Tarryn had come to accept that one day she would be dead, he had never allowed himself to think how it might feel to witness her actually dying. Now there was nothing but a wall between him and the reality of it, Tarryn found he could not bring himself to do much at all.

You're afraid.

Tarryn nodded.

I understand.

Drawing in a breath, Tarryn stepped out of the shadows and walked towards the door of his mother's room. The guards on either side looked straight ahead. Even as he drew level and stood between them, they did not see him. They did not move. It was as though Tarryn had stopped time itself. One of the guards coughed. Another picked at his nose. Movements imperceptible, Tarryn drew his blade across their throats. The two men clutched at the wounds, folding to the floor.

Both hands placed on the flat of the door, Tarryn leant his head against the wood. He remained still and quiet for a moment. This was their time to be together. They were at long last just the two of them, in the same place. It was the place that existed between the precipice and the fall, the dark and unknown, only found in the letting go of all things. The boatman nodded.

It's time.

Lady Leersac lay quiet and still, her breath shallow. Long, silver hair spread about her head against the pillow, in a way that should have been ethereal but was somehow just drab and lifeless. Tarryn leaned over and looked at the sore spots around her lips. There was a pot of cream on the night stand. He dipped one of his fingers into it, before pressing it against her face as she slept. There was nothing, no stirring or movement.

Finally he spoke.

"I've know you probably expect I've come to save you," Tarryn stood at the edge of the bed. "But I've been trying to do that my whole life." He lifted one hand and looked at the droplets of blood beneath his nails in the harsh light.

His mother did not move.

"You know, for the longest time, after I'd left him in the water, dead and bloated, I thought I'd saved us both," Tarryn reached out, one finger trailing across her arm. "I've done terrible things, evil things. Perhaps I am what they say I am. But I see the truth now. I could not save you, but you did not save me either."

He looked away, taking a breath before the words came. Tarryn knew they would be the last ones they would ever speak to one another. It was important that they were perfect, honest.

"I was your child, and you let them make a monster out of me. But it's alright." Leaning over, Tarryn pressed his lips against his mother's cheek as Madeline drifted in the void. "Because I forgive you."

Stepping back, he took one last look at the shell of the woman who birthed him.

There was the slightest click from somewhere in the room. Tarryn glanced up. He must have imagined it.

When he made his way through the corridors to the ward, he had been certain nobody saw him enter. Something prickled on the back of his neck. He should have realised it was too easy – too quiet. Sanquain ought to have tripled the guards anywhere he may have been, knowing as he surely did that sooner or later Tarryn would be coming. Listening, he strained for the sounds of footsteps outside, pistols cocking and ready.

Then he heard it - the faint hiss of something seeping into the room. Lifting his head, Tarryn sniffed. The second he realised what was happening, it became too late. From outside, the door locked. Sprinting over, Tarryn yanked at the handle. He had been too stupid to see the trap. Behind the door he heard the shuffling of feet. “No, no, *no!*”

Spinning, Tarryn listened for anything that might tell him where the vapours could be coming from. There was something poisoning the air, filling up the room. Tarryn searched for a valve, hoping to find it before he lost his senses and slipped into unconsciousness. Every second he felt his lungs growing tighter.

Vision swimming, he clattered towards his mother’s hospital bed, feet slipping from under him as he went. Grappling at the covers, Tarryn felt his mind becoming number, foggier.

“Help me,” Tarryn cried out in a hoarse whisper, begging her to rouse. His mother did not help him. She would not come to his rescue, or give him comfort. “Please.”

This was not the way it would end; Tarryn Leersac sedated like an animal, waking to find himself bound to a bed with leather straps. Staggering towards the door, he felt his way around the room until he touched the frame. Throwing his weight against it, he slammed into the wood.

From outside he heard voices preparing themselves. Again, he came at the door. This time he felt the lock give. Head splitting and eyes burning, Tarryn put everything he had left in him into the next shove. Wood twisted and cracked, the hinges of the door exploded into shards.

Several Red Badges ran at the chasm in the wall created by Tarryn’s exit, bayonets pointed in every direction, hopeful that one might

incapacitate the boy. A number of orderlies stood, ready with their restraints. Ducking and sweeping, Tarryn drove the blade of the knife through first one chest and then another.

Even with a lungful of gas and every muscle tapered and muted, he was still spectacular. By the time he left the hospital some several minutes later, he had made it unequivocally clear the days of Tarryn Leersac being kept in a cage were done.

Later that evening, newly-appointed Adjutant Heracles Durbin turned the corner onto the ward leading to the doors of Madeline Leersac's room. He stepped forward and felt something crush beneath his foot. Lifting the sole of his boot, he looked down at the ear. "Fuck."

First Love

Long before Henriette, before Sanquain, Bellitreaux, even the Ninth, there had been Lucy. Vanguard had run from many things in his life. In a lot of ways he was, and always had been, a coward. Not in the sense he was afraid to die, that was always a given. Vanguard lived on borrowed time, snatched from fate each and every time he survived a battle, or a prison cell or a shadowy corner on a dark night. He was entirely at terms with his own mortality.

What he was not so at ease with was the bit that came before. The living part - he wasn't very good at that.

Vanguard didn't think about what he would eat, what he would wear or how he would live. He never worried about what tomorrow might bring or where the world might take him.

Nobody taught him how to make a friend, how to be a husband or part of a family. But if any person ever came close to teaching him those things, it was Lucy Favreau.

Vanguard tried to love her back, in his own way. But it became obvious soon after they met he would never be able to give her what she needed. At least, it had been obvious to everyone but Lucy. Vanguard knew it and chose not to tell her. Instead enjoying the way she felt, the way she made him feel about himself.

After years of being unwanted, the attentions of a beautiful, innocent girl flooded his veins like a drug. Her father objected of course. Any good father would have done.

Lucy was not even twenty, a sweet creature with a gentle nature and excellent prospects. When he learned of their affair and went to confront Vanguard, Lucy followed him to hear what they might say. Vanguard knew then he ought to have broken her heart cleanly.

Instead, he professed his love for her. He told the old man nothing could tear them apart; he'd walk to the ends of the earth for her, even die for her.

Lucy hadn't stood a chance. When her father beat Vanguard's face so hard it was black and blue for a week, it served only to make him more the hero in her eyes.

She left her family. Lucy gave up everything to follow him like a lamb, sleeping in tents and hovels, scrubbing uniforms and doing all manner of pleasant things to him by night.

He was the first, because in her heart, she believed he would be the last.

She was young and full of life; he was her everything and Vanguard basked in it like a snake in the sun. Of course, those days he had been on the right side of attractive and the type of dangerous that intoxicated young girls. Lucy's infatuation was addictive and Vanguard had been high on himself.

He should have at least done her the kindness of marrying her. But he was a coward in that too. Every time Lucy broached the subject he would caress her cheek, whisper sweet things and kiss her until the matter was forgotten. Then Arnauld came along and the Ninth. Someone to accept him for what he truly was. Vanguard found something to fill the hole in his life where a family ought to have been and, after a while, there was no longer room for Lucy.

Orders came; Vanguard packed his things and never thought to tell her where he was going. The further away he got, the more Vanguard came to realise he did not care to turn around. He was not the man she thought he was, and never would be.

At the time he told himself it was a kindness, to leave her there. Sometimes he wondered how long she sat and waited for him. Of all the things he had done, dark and terrible, Vanguard never thought of himself as a cruel person. Older now, wiser, and full of memories he could never forget; he knew that what he did to Lucy had been exactly that.

"You mean you just left her? A poor young girl, all alone?" Beth didn't try to disguise the revulsion in her voice. She stood, hands on hips with a face on her that could have cooled boiling water.

Vanguard felt the sting of shame creeping across his skin. He looked down, unable to meet her eyes. Beth held the sort of power all mothers held – the kind that could reduce a grown man to childish contrition with no more than an icy glower.

“I didn’t say I was proud of it.”

Beth swung her arm. The slap stung. Vanguard hadn’t expected it, though he could concede he did deserve it and probably worse. Beth glared as though channelling the ire of every scorned woman throughout the ages. When it looked like she might go for a second strike, Vanguard didn’t stop her. After all she had done for him; he could hardly begrudge her a few slaps as proxy for a wronged girl.

Vince, however, took hold of her wrist. “Steady on woman, we didn’t save him just for you to slap him to death. Make us a cup of tea will you?” He kissed her hand. “Please?”

Beth pulled away. “You deserve worse.”

Vanguard looked at the floor. “I’m not denying it.”

She folded her arms. “Are you having tea as well?”

“Yes please.”

Carmen, who was being uncharacteristically quiet, kept sliding glances towards Vanguard. He couldn’t tell if she was pleased to see him or not.

The funny thing was he wasn’t entirely sure she knew either. Beth set out four mugs, slamming the last one onto the table. Vanguard felt as though he suddenly understood Vince’s unshakeable fidelity a little better.

“So who is this Lucy?” Vince asked. “And why is she so important?”

Vanguard’s eyes slid across the table. There was a short answer to that question and a long one. Who Lucy Favreau was and what she was were two very different things. After he finished explaining, a hush descended over the kitchen.

“You mean *the* Alexander Reuban?” Vince didn’t seem to believe such a thing could be true, “as in, second in command of the entire army, Alexander Reuban?”

Vanguard nodded.

“And your ex-girlfriend married *him*?”

Vanguard had not expected that to be the part of the story Vince focused on. The subject not only of Lucy’s return, but of Reuban’s possible survival, was something none of them ever expected to contemplate. But there it was, and now there were decisions to make about what they might do next.

Wrapping both hands around his mug, Vince fixed his gaze on Carmen. "What I want to know is how the hell did you get past the guards at the city gates?" He tipped his head towards the cup and sniffed. "Is there sugar in this?" Beth reassured him there was.

Carmen glanced up. "I had an invitation." The three other people around the table stopped what they were doing to look at her with raised brows.

"That is, the person I was travelling with had an invitation and well, they didn't really need it any more." She did not elaborate on the particulars. "I had two sets of documents, so I stopped a little way outside the gates and persuaded some old man to drive me in. It wasn't really that difficult to be honest."

"Who was the old man?"

She shrugged. "Some drunk. He didn't ask any questions. When the guards checked the paperwork, I held my breath the whole time. I think they were more excited to see the wagon than they were concerned about who was driving it."

There was a shift to the atmosphere in the room as one by one they all came to realise what lay before them. Vince was thinking. That worried Vanguard because he knew what it was Vince was thinking about.

"You're certain you saw what you think you saw?" There was an air to Vince's voice laden with ambition. Vanguard knew how much that ammunition would have meant to Vince and his comrades. Now it would likely be the death of some of them.

"I know what guns look like," Carmen said, almost irritably. "I checked the crates as soon as I got chance. Most of them were brandy, but there were several full of powder and boxes with bullets. There were ten pistols, ten rifles. I counted."

"Sample pieces," Vanguard offered.

"And you just drove them into the city?" Beth shook her head.

"I didn't have any choice," Carmen looked regretful. "I would never take something like that through the gates, knowing where it would end up but I knew the guards would check the cargo."

Vanguard couldn't imagine what Carmen must have gone through to get from Cooke to where she sat. He got the feeling there was more to the story than she was willing to divulge at that moment. "It was the right thing to do," he tried to look reassuring, "Vince's people will get a message to Cooke."

“What if it’s too late?”

He had considered that. If it was too late, there was nothing to do about it now. Carmen did not need that on her conscience though, so Vanguard kept such thoughts to himself. As well as any he might have about the rest of Cooke’s family and certain people in particular.

“If these were, like you suggest, only the samples, where the hell is the rest of the cargo?” Vince stood up, took three paces, turned around and sat down again. His foot tapped at the floor, fingers drumming on the table.

At a guess, Vanguard would have thought it was halfway across the Amidian channel or at the very least, being prepared for transportation. “So now we know why those shipping documents were so valuable.”

None of them really knew what to do. It was a lot to take in. There were many paths in front of them and Vanguard could not help but worry they all led to the same inevitable ending.

Carmen opened her mouth, but closed it again. The wind caught the gate outside, causing it to creak as it swung. Vanguard looked at a knot in the wood on the table. It looked like a bird, from the right kind of angle.

In the end, Beth was first to speak. “I think you should go,” she said quietly, “Weapons or no weapons, without Reuban, Cooke will never be able to stand up to Sanquain. One way or another this has to come to an end. If we can find a way to get you out of the city – you should go.”

Nodding, Vince straightened. “Beth is right, you need to go. The faster you can get to Reuban, the faster we can get Cooke his army and we’re going to need every man we can get. Let us worry about the shipments,”

“You know it won’t just be Sanquain you’ll be up against; once those ships arrive, every crime lord and black market bastard in the city will be onto them,” Vanguard didn’t need to tell them the magnitude of the obstacles in their way, but somebody had to say it.

Maybe he needed to hear it.

“This is the way it has to be,” Vince leaned over and placed a kiss on his wife’s head. “Some things aren’t really choices. Now, question is – how the fuck do we get you out of this city?”

Carmen lifted her chin. “I think I have an idea about that,” If ever there was a foreshadowing of doom, this was it. Vanguard twisted in his seat. Carmen held his gaze. “Do you trust me?”

There were few people in the world to which Vanguard could answer that question in the affirmative. He nodded, and Carmen smiled.

“Good.”

Exhausted from the trials of the morning, Beth retired behind the curtain. Vanguard was not sure but he thought he heard muffled sobs. He sat awkwardly with Carmen and Vince, until Vince picked up whichever of his errant children was crawling around on the floor and went to lie down next to his wife.

Carmen stared intently at the bottom of her mug like it contained answers instead of wet leaves. Eventually, she announced she had something very important to do and would have to leave for a while. Vanguard did not ask where she was going. He had tasks of his own to complete. He reached down and touched the bag, reassuring himself of the contents.

If John Vanguard was going to leave D’Orsee, he was going to ensure one final monster was taken from her streets before he did.

Tasty Little Biscuit

Mandego was well aware of the problems D'Orsee was facing. Usually, he was the cause of a lot of them. Surprisingly, on that particular day, he could provide the solution to one.

The Hook had proven a lucrative, not to mention, deliciously entertaining acquisition. He sat back on his seat. It was a new sort of chair, wooden framed with a canvas hammock hung between the legs. Mandego was adamant they were going to catch on. Especially now he had found a whole shed full of them.

Taking a sip from a glass of a rather robust port – another benefit of his recent expansion into shipping – he cast his eyes towards the water. “Alright, that’s enough. Bring him up.”

Sometimes being a criminal mastermind was a tedious affair. The opportunity to freshen his interrogation tactics was a welcome change. Three men at the water’s edge nodded in response. Hauling away at the chain they held, they brought the length of it back up until a pair of feet broke the surface of the water. Mandego leaned over and plucked a discarded red jacket from the ground beside him.

Running a finger over the buttons, he held the garment up in admiration “I’ve got to admit, once you get rid of the streak of shit inside, the coat doesn’t actually look half bad. Got a proper, official feel to it doesn’t it?”

The man on the end of the chain was still hacking up water. Mandego grimaced. He couldn’t imagine it was particularly pleasant, nor for that matter, hygienic down there. He tipped the glass towards the water. “Put him back in.”

There were the strangled sounds of protest, followed by a splash. Mandego looked at the bottle. He would need to get some more of the stuff. The men standing on the dock shuffled their feet, trying to get a better stance. The part of the chain protruding above the water was quivering. Mandego looked up at the sun. It was quite a nice morning as it went. The

shuddering began to lessen, until the chain became almost still. Mandego curled two fingers, indicating they should retrieve him once more. This time he didn't cough. "Give the bastard a slap."

One of the men relinquished his grip on the chains and gave the Red Badge a swift smack around the face. The guard arched up, back leaving the floor and rib cage expanding. Rolling onto his side, he spat out a mouthful of grainy silt.

Heaving himself out of the chair in a manner that was actually quite dignified giving its proximity to the ground, Mandego straightened his coat. Marching over to the man lying on the ground, Hector pressed the toe of his boot to the side of his face. "You are making a mess of my dock."

Instructing the Red Badge be put in a position more suitable for conversation, Mandego crouched low to the ground. Reaching out, he plucked a stray weed from the guard's face with two fingers. "Now, you and I both know you aren't walking away from this. So the issue becomes one of comfort and liberty of fucking choice." The captive made a hacking sound. Mandego requested a cup of fresh water.

"So let's have a chat and then maybe, if I'm feeling particularly munificent, I'll give you the bullet as opposed to a very long, uncomfortable bath." Gently tipping the guard's head back, Mandego helped him drink.

Snivelling, the Red Badge croaked. "No more."

Mandego handed the cup back to the sentry. "I want to know why Felix Sanquain had poor old Sambray murdered. Not that I'm saying it was a bad idea. I'm just the curious sort."

"He wanted the Black Zone destabilising; he thought if you were all warring amongst each other nobody would put up a fight when..."

Mandego leaned closer. "When what? What's the sneaky little fucker up to?"

The Red licked his lips. "The Renard accords. Martial law." The words came in short bursts. "It's all coming."

Lifting his head, Mandego let out a throaty chuckle. So that was it. Sanquain was a crafty son-of-a-bitch, always had been. It was a clever but dangerous game he played, stoking fires with one hand and dousing them with the other. All the while ensuring the masses saw only what he wanted them to see. Mandego knew D'Orsee had never been big enough for Sanquain. That mad bastard was out to take hold of the entire country and

they were just going to hand it to him on a platter - their stalwart champion steering them into a war of his own making.

“How marvellous,” Mandego turned to his men. They noted his expectant expression and laughed obediently. “Thing is, Sambray is dead and I’m here – so how does that factor in the grand plan?” He reached out and pressed one finger against the Red Badge’s nose. “Because I happen to be very stable.”

The man’s shoulders slumped. A shiver rolled down his spine. “I want that bullet.”

“Excellent choice. Now explain yourself. I’m a busy man with things to do.”

The prisoner opened his mouth. He closed it again abruptly, confusion settling over his face. Mandego frowned.

A voice sounded from behind him. “Boss?”

“Not now.” Mandego hated being interrupted in the middle of a flow.

“Boss. You’ve got a visitor.”

“I said, not now.”

A small, skinny shadow cast across the dock. Hector’s smiled widened. Turning back to the guard he offered an apologetic twist of the head. “Give me a minute will you?”

Carmen stood, looking down her nose at Hector and his guest. Mandego rose to his feet, walking around her in a slow circle and scratching his crotch with the butt of a pistol. “Well, well, aren’t you quite the tasty little biscuit?”

She followed him with her eyes. “You should be careful with that, don’t want to go and blow your balls off.”

“I think of the two of us, you’d be the expert in that particular field.” Mandego turned and glared at the sentries who had indulged in an unauthorised snigger. “Last I heard you rode off into the sunset with arse-crack Cooke.”

“Argent.”

“That’s what I said.” Mandego sniffed. “So what can I do for you this morning, Biscuit?”

The guard, who was still dripping all over the dock, looked up at the new arrival with hopeful eyes. There might have been a part of Carmen that was curious as to why this particular man was being treated to an

unceremonious dunking. But if there was, she didn't ask. "I need to talk to you about Vanguard."

Mandego launched into a theatrical display of exasperation. "Why oh *why* does everybody always seem to want to find that leathery-faced wanker? Can't you lot find anyone new to solve your problems? Maybe he doesn't want to see you; did you ever think of that?"

"I'm not looking to find him," Carmen stood firm. "You're going to help me smuggle him out of the city," For such a little thing she was supremely confident.

Mandego liked it. "Why would I do that? Bastard owes me blood; I'm hardly going to be inclined to help him go on his merry way elsewhere am I?"

"You wouldn't be helping him, you'd be helping me."

Mandego scratched his head with the barrel of the gun. "Forgive me, but I don't see as to how that's beneficial to me. Unless I'm missing something?"

Carmen rolled her eyes. On second thoughts, Mandego mused, she was getting a little too confident. She lifted her chin and rose up on her toes. Leaning in close, she whispered in his ear. The offer she made was not one he could imagine John Vanguard would approve of. That alone made it tempting.

Pulling away, Hector stopped; nose mere inches from her face. He remained there for several seconds. Carmen did not flinch, did not cower. He held her gaze, waiting to see it. Then it was there.

Deep in the darkest parts of the irises, something he knew as well as the back of his hand and welcomed like an old friend. Chaos caged, a wolf pacing behind the bars of a pen. Slowly, a dark smile spread across Mandego's face.

He swept into a bow. "The terms are agreeable. Once Vanguard is ready to make his departure, I shall convey his fine person upon one of these magnificent vessels to wherever the fuck he might want to go."

Carmen folded her arms. "Has anybody ever told you that you talk a lot of shit?"

Mandego took a step back, holding his hand to his chest in mock offence. "You've changed since you went away. I liked you better before, you were nicer then."

In a last bid to improve his chances of survival, the Red Badge cried out. Mandego had almost forgotten about him. Perhaps he was trying to appeal to Carmen's feminine sensibilities. "Help me, please; he's going to kill me."

Looking at the Red, then back at Carmen, Mandego shrugged. "It's true. I am."

Carmen took a few paces towards the man sprawled on the dock. The sentries tensed, banding tighter to prevent her getting too close. Mandego bade them stand down with a flick of his hand. He wanted to see which way this was going to go. The little biscuit was fast on her way to becoming of great interest.

She crouched down, skirts mounding up around her like a puff ball. The Red Badge looked at her, pleading and sorrowful. Carmen leaned in. "To be perfectly honest with you, I'm not sure I give a shit."

She didn't stick around long enough to see Mandego fire the shot. The Red Badge howled, lurching forward and grasping at his leg. The bullet was lodged in there, somewhere just above his left knee. Mandego blew on the end of the barrel, for effect.

Realising the conditions of their bargain were not made appropriately clear, the man rolled his head back and sobbed. Mandego tucked the pistol back into his trousers. "Right then, in he goes."

There was a loud splash, followed by the sound of a long chain dragging at high speed across the concrete. Another splash. The sentries watched the water for a couple of minutes before determining the job was complete. Settling back into his chair, Mandego resumed sipping his drink. It was turning out to be quite a day.

Parasite

Cyrus was under no illusion he would ever see his daughter again. It was his only real regret. He would have liked the chance to hold her one last time. To tell her everything would be alright. After months in the Hole, he had come to accept this would never happen.

Moving slightly, he nudged the man to his right. There was no movement. Cyrus was pretty sure he was dead, or near enough to it nothing would make a difference anyway. He stretched out his arms as far as it was possible. Room to breathe was a precious commodity. The chance to stretch was luxury.

They were crammed in like fish in a barrel. Most were men, a handful of women and one adolescent boy whose mother was trying to rouse him as his head perpetually flopped towards his chest. The mother seemed neither distraught nor mournful. She just kept lifting his head up over and over as though she had grown so used to doing it she no longer thought to do anything else. The man to his left groaned. Emil had taken a significant blow to the head, gifted to him by the butt of a Red Badge rifle. The bloody mark above his left eye had begun to crust. It would be infected by the end of the day.

Cyrus shifted his foot as much as he could and kicked out. “Eyes open shit-for-brains, you’re not dying yet.”

Emil let out a grunt. “I was dreaming, not dying.”

“What the fuck have you got to dream about?”

“Your sister.”

“I haven’t got a sister.”

“You have in my dreams,” Emil made a face, as though still enjoying the image, “and in them, I’m always fat, happy and sated.”

“You’re already fat. That bit’s real.”

They both looked down at Emil’s shrinking waist. You could lose a good few pounds on the D’Orsee diet. Emil smacked his lips as if he were

remembering the taste of good food. Cyrus wasn't sure he even could.

There was a noise from outside. Glancing up, Cyrus felt Emil tense as they both steeled themselves for the next selection. They had survived this far, but others had not been so lucky. Durbin conducted his interrogations in another cell down the hall. Nobody knew what took place in the other room, but they heard the screams.

A number of guards walked in. The prisoners were pulled to their feet one by one. The young boy with the black hair staggered forward, leaning upon his mother for balance. Cyrus saw his eyes open and the cloudy white of his irises. In this situation, perhaps it was a mercy the boy was blind. It meant he could not see whatever fate was about to befall him.

One of the guards walked around the cell, peering at each prisoner. He came to a stop. Cyrus felt his heart falter; knowing this time it was his turn to see the other room.

"These two,"

They led Cyrus from the cell first. He would never get to see his family again. Not-Marianne would grow up without a father. All he could do now was remain steadfast.

Emil and Cyrus were taken down a long corridor. As they approached the other end, two guards dragged a lifeless figure through a door by the feet. Cyrus heard Emil swallow. They entered into a sparse cell. Escorted to a set of wooden stools, set several feet apart, Cyrus found himself placed on one and Emil the other.

"You know who I am?" Durbin stepped forward.

Cyrus spat at the floor. "Unfortunately."

"Then you know why you are here," Durbin strode back and forth between them. "And that you have options. Captain Sanquain has entrusted me with conducting his investigations into the leaders of the so-called revolutionary movement. If you share with me what you know, our time here will be brief."

"And if we don't say shit?" Cyrus held his head high.

"Then it will not be brief."

Cyrus gave his reply in the form of more saliva aimed at Durbin's boot. Emil said nothing, head hanging low. Cyrus worried about him. Every man had his limit for enduring pain. Durbin made a habit of picking out those who were weaker, both in mind and body.

Durbin stopped behind Cyrus, bringing a hand to rest on his shoulder. "I shall begin now."

As it transpired, Cyrus need not have worried about Emil's capacity for pain, only his own. Several times, as his skin turned black and blue, he thought he might break. Then he would see his daughter's face, and find the capacity to endure a little more. Durbin continued his assault, asking questions but receiving no answers. Emil began to shake, his shoulders shuddering. Cyrus knew he was waiting for Durbin to turn to him, and feared he may not withstand such punishment.

"Keep your mouth shut," he warned. "Don't say anything."

A moment later, Cyrus felt something wet on his lap. He recognised the faint odour of linseed oil. Durbin glanced down, and Cyrus followed the trail of his gaze.

It was then he realised the stool that Emil sat upon was charred and blackened around the legs, as too, presumably, was the one upon which he sat. Durbin struck a match. Cyrus gave Emil one final look, and shook his head. It really didn't matter who bore the pain. Either way, sooner or later, one of them would talk.

Durbin strode into Sanquain's study with a great deal of confidence. The captain stood bent over a desk, several clerks around him taking instruction for the coming hours. He preferred not to leave the chambers at such times, but given the errors made in securing Tarryn Leersac and the importance of the day, he felt it best to work from his own home.

Durbin came to a halt, offering a salute. "We've broken them," he announced, "they're finally talking."

Dismissing his clerks, Sanquain did not look up. Durbin's lack of discretion around such matters was tactless. There were things for the ears of soldiers and things for the ears of administrators. "You've found Monroe?"

Seeming to deflate a little, Durbin shook his head. "Not yet, but we are close. We have the location of a safe house. It won't be long before the

Cousins are broken. I have men prepared for a raid on the address.”

“I hoped you would be bringing me better news, given your men’s failure to carry out the simple task of apprehending one man in a room out of which he should not have been able to break free,” the captain picked up a letter and scanned the contents. “Perhaps I was too hasty in making your position official.”

Durbin clicked his heels together, standing smartly. “It won’t happen again, Captain. I’ve put men on the townhouse and increased the guard at the hospital.”

Nodding, Sanquain mused over his plans. There was much to think about. The first of the councilmen had already begun making their way to the city hall. “Good, I don’t want anything interfering with my work,” he placed one hand on the desk.

“How would you like us to handle the safe house?”

“Move on it, of course.” Sanquain looked up, surprised his expectations were not abundantly clear. “Scour it clean.”

Tarryn was unsurprised to find the chambers in the tower empty. The captain was no coward, but he was no fool either. Walking around the desk, Tarryn ran his fingers along the padding until reaching the chair. He sat back against the soft, dark cushions. Sanquain had a good view from his seat. The chambers, wide and imposing, stretched out before the desk, meaning whoever entered had the longest distance to walk to reach him. That was how Sanquain liked it.

A distance kept between him and those he deemed lesser. If they wanted his attention, his favour, the people would have to come for it, the captain welcoming them into his fold like a spider welcomes flies into a web. Tarryn wondered how many people had crawled on their hands and knees towards that seat.

He ran his hands down the armrests, felt the polished brass studs that adorned them. This could have been his chair. Tarryn realised his fingers were digging so hard into the leather they left behind little marks. He

glanced up. The moon was bright, like a spotlight over the room. It illuminated everything.

You're playing a dangerous game.

Sam Wick was full of sage warnings that evening. Tarryn ignored him.

Rising from the chair, he began trying the drawers of the desk. It seemed an obvious place to start. The thing was so full of levers and compartments you could have quite easily hidden a man's whole life in it.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand."

Tarryn thought once more how ridiculous it was to converse with his own madness. But Sam was there and he had nobody else to talk to about anything. He slipped across the room, opening up the cupboard against the wall. It was empty.

Tarryn stalked about. After a while he began to feel perhaps he had been wrong. Sanquain had nothing in the chambers that would be of any use to him. Pressing his thumbs to his temples, he couldn't shake the feeling he was in the right place. Sambray's documents had to be there somewhere.

Tarryn glanced at the hearth. The coat of arms hung above it, several feet high. Walking across to it, Tarryn reached up and bore the great weight of the cherry wood until it lifted. The stone wall behind it was solid. Lowering the plaque back into place, disappointed, Tarryn stepped back. Then he heard it – the softest creak.

Pushing his weight down on his right foot, Tarryn felt the board beneath him give a little. Kneeling, he pulled back the rug that lay at the edge of the fireplace. There was a small brass loop attached to one of the planks. Tarryn hooked a finger around it and pulled. Nothing happened. Furrowing his brow, Tarryn tried again. It did not lift. After a second, he tried sliding it.

The board pressed down, there was a click and it slipped with ease to the left. Eyes narrowed, Tarryn stared into a hole in the floor. He reached in and felt something soft and smooth. Pulling it out, Tarryn carried what he had found to the window and took up Sanquain's chair once more.

It was a diary – hand-stitched, high quality. At first, Tarryn thought perhaps it might have been the journal of Felix Sanquain, but he knew the captain's hand and the inscription inside told him the book belonged to another man. The first few pages were of little interest. They told of medical procedures, surgeons notes. It was not until the fifth page something caught his eye.

As Tarryn sat in the dark, barely able to make out each word, he felt his heart begin to beat slower in his chest. Everything around him seemed to come to a halt.

The entries spoke of men who walked in shadows and slipped from sight. By the glow of the moon, Tarryn tore through the next several weeks worth of pages - investigations into sightings, interviews with countless subjects, cryptic notes and codes that meant nothing but told him everything. Flicking back to the first one, he saw the date marked. The information collated in the journal had first been transcribed when Tarryn was merely a boy.

The book slipped from his hands. Tarryn felt his lungs ache with each slow, laden breath. He looked up. Wick stood in front of him, face lit by the moon. Since the first time he had materialised, Tarryn had often wondered why of all the people he had killed; it was Sam Wick who came to him.

After much consideration, he had come to the conclusion that madness was as madness was and there was no rhyme or reason to it. Tarryn knew better now. This was no disease, no hallucination. It was something else entirely.

So now you see.

Tarryn glanced out of the window. To some, memories were precious things. For people like him, they were parasites. They dug in and latched on until they were so deep you could never be rid of them. They were forever.

Tarryn smiled. So, there was to be an ending after all. A feeling of stillness rushed through his veins and Tarryn finally understood why it was, that despite all they had done to each other, he had not been able to bring himself to kill John Vanguard.

“You two get the boxes,” an unfamiliar voice came from outside. Thoughts broken, Tarryn slipped over to the door and peered through the crack. Several Red Badges were making their way up the stairs. The first of them took position by the clerk’s desk. Tarryn stood back, melting into the shadows.

“What’s going on?” The taller of the two who entered took one end of a large wooden crate. “Where are these meant to be going?”

“That’s need to know,” the first one spoke from beyond the door. “We’ll get the address from Durbin when we get back to the meeting point. Make sure you get all of them. Durbin wants us ready to move at first light.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Monroe won’t be getting out of this one.”

Tarryn watched with interest. Something was happening. In his bones he felt the thundering onslaught of a moment coming to its crescendo. The first guard turned on his heels, clicking his fingers to indicate the remaining men should follow him. Tarryn almost allowed himself a smile. So, Durbin had somehow managed to find the Cousins. Now there would be a battle. Sanquain’s guards would take their guns and blades to the good people of the Black Zone and there would be blood.

What was it that Tarryn heard someone say once? ‘You don’t need to know where a man is to find him, only where he is going’.

It was good advice. Tarryn would not need to find John Vanguard.
John Vanguard would come to him.

The Best Way to Subdue an Irate Mare

Henriette was a woman with an impressive constitution. You had to be to do what she did. One look at Lucy, standing in the midst of the unwashed laundry of Kotic the Undefeated, told Henriette her new companion was not built with similar staunchness. They had barely been there five minutes and already Henriette longed to breathe fresh air.

Her stomach was tying in knots, the smell of body odour and old food doing nothing to abate the morning sickness from which she had only just recovered. Still, her companion did not need to know that. Lucy might have won the better hand in the game of life, but Henriette was winning the game of not being sick first, which wasn't something she'd normally be proud of, but right then was all she had.

"It smells like somebody died in here," Lucy brought one hand to cover her mouth, looking about for some sort of bag to put the belongings into. Bending down, Henriette fished beneath the cot and produced a case.

"Let's get whatever we can fit in here," she heaved it onto the mattress and undid the clasps. "You fold, I'll pack."

There was a creaking from outside as Kotic carried a large trunk into the room. He dropped it as Lucy plucked a vest from the floor between two fingers, rather like one would hold a scorpion. The two women both turned to look at him. Kotic shrugged. "It is comfortable."

Lucy dropped the vest back onto the floor. Henriette kicked it away. "You want to burn it, never mind pack it."

"I am sorry I am not rich man with many vests," Kotic began gathering up his own clothes, a little flush to the side of his neck.

Henriette turned and surveyed the room. Her new companion smiled, setting about finding Demetrio's books.

As much as she would have liked to dislike her, Henriette had to admit she could find nothing about Lucy to suggest she was anything other than a

decent, kind sort of woman - a little flimsy around the edges perhaps, but not at all bad.

Together they quickly went about collecting up anything the party might require on their travels, though Henriette did elect to leave several socks behind that could have easily made their way out of the apartment of their own accord. Koscic leaned against the back wall.

Henriette frowned. "Remind me again, why are we packing *your* things?"

"You pack, I lift – team work."

Lucy let out a yelp as the pile of garments next to her foot moved. "What was that?" She stepped back, lifting her skirt a fraction.

"Just a rat," Koscic nodded towards a hole in the wall. "There are three of them."

Henriette allowed herself to feel a little smug as Lucy turned a ghostly shade. They picked up the pace; both of them keen to return to the rest of the group as soon as possible. Pushing down the last of the items into the bulging trunk, Henriette cursed as it refused to close. A thin pair of arms entwined with hers and gave enough extra push to allow the two women to snap it shut together. Koscic took the first trunk as if it weighed nothing, lifting it up and sweeping out of the room.

"You must think I'm dreadfully feeble," Lucy sat on the mattress, bringing both hands to her lap. She looked curiously troubled by the thought.

Heaving herself down, Henriette took a seat. "Why should you care what I think?"

"I don't know, but I do." Lucy turned to face her and Henriette hated how old it made her feel.

The woman didn't even have the decency to have any lines around her eyes, even though there weren't many years between them. Henriette felt movement beneath her corset, and this time it was not the sickness.

Lucy smiled. "Do you want a boy or a girl?"

"I suppose I shan't have any choice in the matter."

"I had two boys," Lucy's face twitched. "They were funny little things. So perfect. They both died. A weakness in their hearts, inherited from my father's side. He was lucky though, managed to get all the way to forty-five," she stopped abruptly. "I'm sorry; I don't know why I said any of that."

Henriette didn't know either. But she began to suspect perhaps Lucy Reuban was made of stronger stuff on the inside than she was on the outside. After all, a fortuitous birth did not guarantee a life without pain.

There were few times in Henriette's life that she had found solidarity with another woman.

Henriette did not allow herself to feel sympathy for her gender. She could not afford to. The world was as it was and though Henriette always tried to do right by the women around her, she had for all intents and purposes survived by living off their flesh. Sometimes, in moments of glaring honesty and self-reflection, Henriette hated herself for what she had become.

"The sickness is terrible," She was glad to be able to say it. "Is it always this bad? I always thought it went away after a while."

Lucy nodded. "Oh yes, I was awful for it, all day every day for five months almost."

Henriette found it comforting to know it was not unusual. The truth was she had no idea what was normal. Babies were far from her field of expertise. There was little she couldn't tell someone about avoiding them, but everything else was alien territory.

"It's his, isn't it?" Lucy was careful not say his name. Whether that was due to her not being confident in her assessment, or some underlying yet-to-be-resolved opinions of the matter, Henriette could not be sure.

Henriette felt her shoulders square. Her thoughts might have allowed for a little insecurity to creep in, but her body was conditioned to mask any such feelings from the world. "Who told you?"

"Carmen, just before she left."

"Of course she did." Henriette was unsurprised by the betrayal.

"I don't think she meant to cause trouble between us."

"Carmen never means to cause trouble, but she is preternaturally good at it." Henriette found herself frowning at the thought, and then worrying about where Carmen might be at that moment and what could have become of her.

There was the smallest hint of a smile to Lucy's lips. It was the sort of smile that came from a memory lived with far longer than the thing remembered. "Well, you seem like you'd know what you're doing. I can tell that about people."

Without thinking about it, Henriette crossed the gap between them and let her hand come to rest on Lucy's for a fraction of a second. They were not rivals. They were not friends or enemies. They were simply two people sharing a moment of clarity.

There were footsteps on the stairs. Kosic would be back at any moment and Henriette did not intend on allowing him to see her sitting around feeling sorry for herself. Kosic did not appear.

There was however, the sound of someone listening outside. On hearing heavy breathing, Henriette stood. Lucy opened her mouth to speak.

One hand shooting to her lips, Henriette hushed her. Luckily for them both, Henriette's survival instincts were well honed so when two hundred pounds of snarling thug came bursting through the door, she had already taken the bag by the handle. Henriette heaved it across the room towards the door. It glanced off their attacker's chin, which made for an exceptionally prominent target. He staggered back, dazed but still on his feet. Clearly he had not anticipated any resistance.

Scrambling out from behind the bed, Lucy crawled on her hands and knees towards the dresser.

"You bitch," The thug swung forward, knife intended for Henriette's chest. It did not meet its target, the weapon instead becoming embedded in the mattress as Henriette darted from its path. He growled, tugging at it, the blade caught in the springs. Realising it was coming loose, Henriette cried out. "Hit the bastard!"

An ornamental clock smashed against the wall directly behind the bed. The man turned, still snarling. Lucy's eyes widened. "Oh!"

The contents of the dresser became projectile weapons. A dish, a hairbrush, anything that was within arms reach catapulted across the apartment. Lucy's aim was poor. Clearly having lost patience, the man abandoned his attempts to retrieve the blade and leapt towards Lucy, fingers primed to take her about the neck.

There was a sudden crack as another figure appeared behind their attacker. The thug staggered sideways.

Before he had time to regain his senses, Abel hit him again. The thug's lip curled, both eyes rolled back and he fell unconscious to the floor. Abel dropped the bat.

As Henriette managed to right herself, Kosic appeared in the doorway, mouth dropping open.

“Where the hell were you?” Henriette scowled.

“I was with horses?”

“Much bloody good you are out there.”

Abel peered at the figure on the floor. “I knew you lot were going to cause trouble.”

Lucy tapped him with her foot. “Is he dead?”

The man was still breathing, though Henriette guessed he was going to have a hell of a headache when he regained consciousness.

The landlord grunted. “Right, one of you better come with me to find some of the boys from downstairs, we can’t leave him lying there.”

“I’ll come,” Lucy offered, taking Abel by the arm. They left in search of strong hands to help remove the felled assailant. As they went, Henriette could hear Lucy advising him of a wonderful haberdasher that she would be glad to procure some trinkets from to replace those broken.

“Are you alright?” Kasic looked at Henriette.

She wasn’t sure.

Physically, despite the unprecedented gymnastics that had taken place, she was unscathed. The baby was less than impressed with said turn of events and was making its thoughts about the matter quite plainly known.

“No,” she said finally. “I don’t think I am.”

She didn’t blame Kasic for standing there, unsure as to what he ought to say or do. Despite popular opinion, Henriette had never been very good at talking to men.

Fighting she could do. Berating she was even better at, but not this sort of thing.

“I can leave if you want,” he took a step back. “Or I can stay, it is up to you. Do you want me to go?”

Sitting on the bed, Henriette wiped her eyes. “You can stay.”

Moving across the room, Kasic eased himself down next to her. There was a noticeable curve to the mattress as it sank lower. That did make her feel a bit better. It wasn’t entirely unpleasant, having someone to sit next to.

The fact was, though, it wasn’t Kasic she wished to keep company with in that moment and they both knew it.

Neither of them had particularly expended any effort into understanding one another any more than they already did in all the time they had been together. So it was a little awkward. The links she had found with Argent and Carmen did not exist between Henriette and Kasic. The truth was

Henriette found she had little in common with most of the world. Vanguard had been the exception.

"I'm think I'm done," she sighed, feeling the ease of the words finally coming. Kasic tried to look comforting. He still seemed wary of getting close to Henriette. That was her fault.

He leaned in, "It will be alright, I am back now. Nothing will happen to you."

"I don't mean for today."

"If this is about the baby," Kasic started, "we will all look after it. We can help. Where I come from we do it all the time."

"You, me, Carmen, Demetrio and Cooke?" Henriette wasn't sure if the idea was terrifying or laughable. She shook her head. "No, it's not that."

Kasic seemed confused. She understood. For all her being direct any other time, even she knew she was dancing the long way around a very obvious point.

"I'm getting older, Kasic, there's the truth of it. No, when I say I'm done I mean with all of this. Do you know, I'm afraid one day I'll wake up and see it on my face? All the terrible things I've done, all the people I've hurt to survive." Henriette felt as though she sat in the presence of a confessor. "That's why me and John are the way we are you see? Because he and I, we both know what it is to only know how to be alone, but we could always be alone together," she drew in a sharp breath. "Well, now I'm not alone any more am I? That's why I have to go," a shudder racked her shoulders. "That's why I'm done."

Every person had their limit for how much life they could live before it began to wear on them. Henriette had fought her way through the world for more than forty years and she was tired of it all. There came a time, when they each had to put down the sword and walk away. Henriette had reached hers, and she felt glad to freely say it.

If Kasic was surprised or horrified by her admission, he did not show it. In fact, he did not move or say anything at all, which was perfect for Henriette. Instead, she sat quietly and allowed herself time to finally feel what she felt without running or hiding or fighting. After a while, she leaned down and without saying a word, let her head come to rest on his great shoulder.

By the time Lucy and Abel returned, normal service had resumed. As if by magic, Abel seemed to have forgotten about any charges for the damaged ornaments. Unfortunately his good-nature as far as Lucy was concerned, did not extend to Kotic.

“There’s a horse outside got loose from somewhere,” he gestured back towards the stairs. “Running about the street causing havoc, I reckon it must have belonged to that other fella. And I ain’t dealing with it.”

Keen to make amends for his failure to protect both the women and Abel’s furniture, Kotic made for the door. Hurrying downstairs, Henriette and he stepped out of the boarding house and into the street to find a number of people gathered around, arguing over the best way to subdue an irate mare. They had it boxed in, cutting off any potential escape that might lead it onto the main road and into the path of oncoming carriages. It stamped at the cobblestones, head swaying back and forth. A young man tried to approach from the flank, reaching out with a scarf intended to cover the creature’s eyes. Kotic grabbed at his coat. “What are you doing?”

The man looked irritated. “Who asked you? What makes you a bloody expert?”

Ignoring him, Kotic lifted both arms and began to make soothing noises. The horse glared at him, backing up several paces. Holding out one hand, Kotic attempted to take the reins. “You are a good horse, yes you are.”

Tentatively, the mare took a step forward and allowed Kotic to place his palm flat against her nose. “Who’s a good horse then?”

She huffed in response.

Stepping forward, Kotic looped a hand around the reins and the beast came to a gentle halt. There was an audible sigh of disappointment from the crowd that the entertainment was over.

As they dispersed, Kotic frowned. The mare seemed happy enough as he brushed back the animal’s fringe. “I know this horse.”

Henriette looked at them both. “What do you mean you know a horse?”

With a grim expression, Kotic turned back, hands still gripping the bridle. “I’ve seen it before, in Javier’s stables.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. What would one of Javier’s horses be doing here?” Lucy was clearly not used to this sort of thing. Henriette watched as the realisation slowly dawned on her and Lucy’s face twisted. “Oh no.”

Moving quickly, Kasic handed the reigns over to Henriette who took them before she remembered there was a horse on the other end of them. With that, he began running – or at least, as close to an approximation of running Kasic could manage - towards the alley at the side of the building.

“Where are you going?” Henriette yelled.

“To find Demetrio.”

She looked down at the leather straps in her hand. The horse stood on the pavement, tail flicking idly at its backside. “What the hell am I meant to do with this?”

Green Fields and Blue Skies

Argent and Javier sat in tight-lipped silence as the carriage navigated its way through the streets. Each man kept his eyes fixed ahead. Soon they would reach the edge of city and from there it would be a short journey until they found country roads. That was where they would meet Javier's man, and learn of the news from D'Orsee.

"You look tense, Argent," Javier sat back against the plush velvet backboard of the cabin. "Everything is prepared. This time tomorrow you'll be on your way."

Cooke wished he could be as certain. Yet again, he could not see the path before him. There were so many things they did not know, so many ways in which fate could turn against them. He felt the enormity of the journey ahead. His forces, rather than expanding were dwindling before his eyes. Outside the capital, far from the people who carried the cause on their shoulders, Argent felt the distance all the more.

"I'm sorry we couldn't spend more time together," Javier tapped the floor of the carriage, indicating to the driver they ought to be setting a more hastened pace. "I wish things could have been different."

The carriage veered to the right. Cooke scanned the side of the road from the window. They were reaching the part of the city where traffic began to thin, allowing the horses to speed up to a steady gait. Javier repositioned himself.

Cooke eyed him. "Something wrong?"

Shaking his head, Javier grinned. "Nothing, I'm just anxious to reach our destination. It's rather exciting all this running about in the middle of the night."

Leaning back, Argent felt his heart getting heavier with each moment that brought them closer to their rendezvous point.

Javier leaned forward and peered outside. "We're almost there," his voice lowered, as though he were talking to himself more than Cooke. The atmosphere in the carriage shifted.

Immediately, Argent slid one hand beneath his cloak to the pistol at his side. Seeing this Javier mimicked the action, drawing his hand up to touch the gun beneath his own coat. Locking eyes with his cousin, Cooke felt remorse weighing on him. Until that moment, he had not wanted to believe it was true. Javier moved fast, but Argent was faster. "Javier, what did you do?"

The carriage continued on its journey, brown fields on either side of them, until they neared the small patch of woodland where Gabriel was due to be waiting. The vehicle swerved as they left the road and took the dirt track towards the tree line.

"What did I do?" Javier's face was set like stone. "You, Argent. You did this. Did you really think I'd let you mar everything our name has come to stand for? Let you throw away all our money? On what? Whores and foreigners?"

Cooke might have felt sadness at Javier's betrayal before, but now it was replaced by something else.

Looking at him, sitting in his fine carriage with his face twisted in disgust, Cooke felt nothing but pity for the man. From outside they heard the carriage driver bring the horses to a stop.

Javier looked back, smug satisfaction across his face. "I'm sorry but you forced my hand. I did you a favour having Gabriel bring the guards here. At least this way it can be private."

Still holding the pistol, Cooke let his head hang. Footsteps approaching suggested there were at least two people waiting for them. Hearing them stop outside the door, Cooke felt regret he had not seen this coming sooner. Hindsight was a wonderful thing.

There was a click. The carriage door swung open. Javier's face dropped. Illuminated by the glow of the lantern light, two faces stared back at him. Neither of which belonged to that of the Lycian guard. A large, tattooed arm reached in and removed Javier's pistol from beneath his coat.

Cooke sat back, holstering his weapon. "It's a shame," he lamented, "with all your education, all your travels, you have yet to learn the value of whores and foreigners."

"Get out please," Kasic instructed.

Javier found himself removed from the vehicle. Standing at the side of the road, he glanced up. The driver lifted his hood to reveal a man with dark hair and a solemn grimace.

Stepping out, Cooke nodded towards the stranger. "Zaab, I presume?"

The man tapped a finger to his forehead in acknowledgement.

"Thank you. I realise this is not your business to be mixed up in."

Zaab looked at each man in turn. "When Kasic the Undefeated asks for your help, you do not refuse." His eyes travelled to Javier, looking him up and down. "Besides, what sort of man betrays his family?"

With his part in the exchange over for the time being, Zaab suggested he might take a leisurely walk through the woods. Argent accepted his offer graciously. He did not relish what he was about to do, and preferred a smaller audience.

Having begun to understand the gravity of the situation, Javier's stance was significantly less confident. Kasic cracked the knuckles on his uninjured hand. Stepping forward Demetrio lowered his head. "Where shall we do this?"

Musing for a moment, Cooke glanced at Javier. "I'm not like you; blood still means something to me. So I shall give you a choice. Either you and I return to the carriage and have a conversation, or..."

"Or your Amidian takes me into the trees?" Javier growled. "And does what? Prove my point? You associate with thugs and criminals."

At that Demetrio clenched his fist. Kasic stepped forward and let a hand come to rest on his friend's shoulder. Cooke gave them both a nod to put them at ease. Removing his jacket, Argent handed it to Kasic. Then, slowly, began to roll his sleeves up.

"That's the difference between you and I," Cooke turned back to Javier. "I would never ask a man to betray his conscience so that I could pretend my hands were clean. So, what is your decision? Do we sit in comfort, or do we take a walk?"

Javier had spent his whole life in comfort, so Cooke did not think it a hard choice. They sat together in the cabin. Unarmed and unable to escape from either door, Javier showed no remorse for his actions.

"Why would you do it?" Cooke couldn't quite believe the words were coming out of his mouth.

They seemed something someone would say in a bad stage play. He steadied his voice. He could not let Javier see the hurt his disloyalty had

brought. This was war, and there was no room for sentiment.

Javier looked surprised. "Why? I should have thought it was obvious. Your revolution has painted our name black. Half our associates have withdrawn in support of Felix Sanquain. The fortune we built is dying."

"We have never built anything," Cooke reminded him. It was always strange to hear those born into privilege say such things. All they had was harvested at the hands of others. Better men, smarter men. Yet they sat and took credit simply for the circumstance in which they found themselves. Argent Cooke did not intend to stand on the shoulders of others.

"You're naïve, always were," Javier snorted.

He was stalling for time. No doubt if he was not returned home by a particular hour, his employees were under instructions to come looking for them.

"What did your man take in that cargo?"

"Prototypes," Javier's tone was cold. "Yiscjan weaponry is beyond compare to anything we have in any of the six cities. The occupation and withdrawal of Yiscjan forces from the Amidian heartlands has crippled them financially. They cannot afford to war any more."

The shuffling and shifting outside became suddenly still. Cooke felt the anguish of the two men standing on the other side of the carriage door. It was one thing to know your country was finally at peace, another to know it only came about because one side was running out of bullets. "So they provide Sanquain with arms, and Sanquain funds their withdrawal?"

Javier nodded. "It will take years for the Yiscjan to recover," His face darkened again, "So you see there is no way for you to stand against Sanquain now. The terms of contract state the Yiscjan will not trade with any other city. Not that any of them could afford to," he shrugged. "Now Sanquain has control of the greatest city, the largest army and distribution of the arms that will gun your people down," Javier pitched forward. "Will you really risk so many lives for your great cause?"

Cooke thought about it for a moment. "It's not my decision to make."

There were other questions. More pains and betrayals revealed, until finally, Cooke came to the last one still unanswered. When Kotic discovered Javier's betrayal, he and Demetrio had spent some time extracting information from Lucy and Henriette's attacker. Cooke did not ask them how they went about it. He was a man of his word, and did not expect anyone to do anything that might be contrary to their conscience.

Sometimes it was better not to know the full extent of the truth. Gabriel never arrived to meet Javier at the meeting point. The wagon never returned from D'Orsee.

Cooke knew the answer to his next question would determine whether or not he would leave Lycroix with blood on his hands. "The girl, Carmen, did you instruct your man to kill her?"

The seconds that passed felt like hours.

"No," Javier let his shoulders fall, "I don't know what happened but his orders were to deliver her to the guards at the city gates on arrival. I'm a business man, not a murderer."

Javier Pollier might have been many things, but Cooke believed that much was true. He had to believe it. Cooke gave him one last lingering look.

He considered saying something, a parting gift to prey on his conscience. But he doubted Javier had one left to prey on. "I hope for your sake that is true."

"Will you kill me?"

Cooke shook his head. "No, because I am not a murderer either," moving to exit the cabin, Argent pursed his lips and paused. "Perhaps we should both hope the day never comes when neither of us will be able to claim as much any longer."

Cooke left Javier to contemplate his choices alone in the woods. With a great swing, Kasic shut Javier's carriage door with such force it buckled. Warped and splintered, it would not open again without some force. He would get out eventually, but it would give them some time. Removing Javier's horse from its tack, Kasic led the young colt back to their cart. Demetrio stood waiting with the wagon. Zaab sat in the driver's seat, hands curled around the reins.

"I've been very stupid," Cooke had no problems admitting it. "I let my ambition blind me to what was real."

Demetrio shrugged. "In my experience, stupid comes in degrees," he nodded towards the road. "I believe it may be time to go," with that he climbed up next to the driver's seat. Kasic heaved himself into the wagon and held out a hand.

They were right, it was time. Now they would make their way across the country to a place where they may find friends, but no power. Still, that would have to do. They had burned their bridges with the general council,

and their invitation to remain in the city of Lycroix had most certainly just been revoked.

There was a fair breeze gathering on the outskirts of Lycroix. The rain that fell in the early hours dampened the soil, so when Cooke stood at the roadside, the world felt somehow clean.

Demetrio secured the last of the bags as Henriette stood with Lucy on the side of the road. Cooke noted how they seemed more comfortable in one another's company at last. Perhaps they all knew each other a little better now.

"I think it's going to rain again," Demetrio cast a glance upwards. The sky was overcast, but with any luck they would be well on the way before it began. Cooke walked over to the carriage and opened the door. They had agreed Demetrio would drive the wagon with their effects, while Cooke himself would take charge of the carriage conveying the ladies. He quite looked forward to the challenge of driving it himself. Lucy gave Henriette a smile, before walking over to Cooke. Once she was secured in her seat, Cooke turned back to the crossroads.

From a little further down the road, he saw a third vehicle hove into view. There were two people sat atop it, a man and woman.

Cooke was not sure how he might go about saying goodbye to Kotic. There were not words to express how he felt - the great sadness, the pride and the hope they might meet again under better circumstances. To his surprise, they did not need to be said at all.

"Are you ready?" Zaab called out cheerfully.

Henriette hitched a bag over her shoulder. She walked across the road and stood for a moment, face to face with Argent. Her lips pursed, then curved, then flattened. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

Cooke grinned. "Of all the things I never thought I'd see, you're leaving us then?"

She nodded. "It's for the best."

"What will you do?"

"Oh, I don't know yet but I'll think of something."

Cooke admired her tenacity. It was an attribute so rarely found in people who lived as she did. He wished she did not have to leave, but very much admired the fact that she would.

Henriette allowed him to kiss her hand. "I've things to do and so do you. No doubt we'll meet again. I find few enough people can hold a decent conversation as it is."

"Quite true," Cooke stepped back to allow her to take Della's outstretched hand. Henriette climbed somewhat ungracefully onto the wagon. He leaned in, fingers grasping the wooden panels. "I shall take that as a compliment."

"You should," Henriette considered him for a moment. "May I give you a piece of advice before I leave? It may be the last you get for a while."

"Of course."

"The time for talking will soon be over," Henriette's eyes bore into his. "So you must ask yourself – when the war does come, what will you do? What can you live with? I've yet to meet a man who sought power who was the same man once it was found as he was when he began. It is a wonderful thing, to imagine the world as you do, but you must also see it as it is. You may come to find beautiful words and ugly actions are difficult bedfellows."

Cooke inhaled slowly. "Is this your advice or an observation?"

She smiled and withdrew her hand. "Call it a reminder that roses must have thorns."

"You ought to have that inscribed on a locket," Cooke stepped back, "Goodbye, Miss Marten."

"Goodbye Argent Cooke. Never forget why you came here or who the people were that brought you this far."

"I don't suppose I shall have the chance."

Zaab nodded and cracked the reins. The wagon moved forward. And just like that, their group lost another to the wide open roads.

Cooke could not feel sad about it, only happy that those who finally had the choice to do so were able to pick their own paths. After all, it was part of the reason they were there. Cooke did not know where Henriette would end up, or what would happen to her. He could only feel glad that in the end, the decision had been hers to make.

Kosic walked up and stood alongside him. Cooke looked up and noted the expression on his face. He supposed Kosic had just realised what it was

he had sacrificed. And could not fathom how hard it must be for him to know the chance might never come again. “Why did you do it?”

Kosic squinted in the morning sun as Zaab’s vehicle disappeared from view. “In the end, it was not a difficult decision to make. All children should get to be born in a place with green fields and blue sky,” he looked down and smiled, “even if they cannot stay there.”

With that, he made his way over to Demetrio and began to help with the horses. Cooke listened as they argued back and forth. Kosic was not impressed with Demetrio’s reluctance to hand the reigns back. “I always drive.”

“Drive the other one.”

“It’s my horse.”

Cooke watched the two of them. Anyone would think they were nothing more than travellers on a long journey. Demetrio was still arguing his case as Kosic led the horse into the middle of the road.

Argent could concede to him and Kosic being allies, even comrades. But the truth was, they were from two different worlds and he would never presume to call him friend.

In that moment, he would have been proud to call Kosic the Undefeated friend. Cooke hoped he knew how greatly his sacrifice would come to be appreciated by Henriette’s unborn child and their allies. For all so many of them had given their blood, sweat and sometimes even their lives for his cause, it was perhaps Kosic that had made the highest sacrifice of all.

It was one thing to lay down the life you had, it was another to let go of the chance to live it.

“Are you coming or not?” Demetrio shouted, clearly impatient to get moving.

“Yes,” Cooke said as he stepped from the crossroads. “Let’s be on the way.”

Henriette never looked back. It wasn’t in her nature. She might not have been sure where she was going, but she was moving forward and that was something.

“Kosic was going to bunk with the younger men, so I’m afraid there isn’t a private cabin available,” Della was explaining. “You’ll have to share with Maman.”

“Good luck with that,” Zaab jibed, earning a smack from his wife.

Henriette thanked them. She had no issues sharing a space with a strange woman. She had been doing it all her life. The only difference was now the space was not hers to dictate and that would take a little getting used to. Still, she was nothing if not adaptable. Reaching into her bag, Henriette retrieved her shawl. It was a little colder than expected on the road.

As she did, something fell out and hit the floor between her feet.

“I’ll get it,” Della dove down and fumbled around. After a moment she sat up, holding a thin card between her fingers. “What’s this?”

Henriette took it and ran her fingers across the edge of the envelope. She recognised Carmen’s scrawled handwriting, though what she might have to say for herself was anyone’s guess. Henriette ripped it open and took out the paper. There was no message, no scribbled thanks or secrets divulged. Just a battered sketch of a battered face that held no remarkable features, other than a scarred jaw and the slightest hint of what seemed a weary smile.

Della leaned over. “It’s a good picture.”

“It isn’t a picture,” Henriette said, fixing her stare on the road ahead and wondering if, somehow, Carmen had known all along how things would be. “It’s a goodbye.”

Tea

Vanguard was not at the safe house. Tarryn felt a little disappointed. It was long past dawn and Durbin was still organising his men. The warehouse and surrounding yards were yet to descend into chaos.

If anything, everything was eerily quiet. There were a few people lingering about, keeping watch. An old man and boy sat on wooden stools next to a hut, periodically glancing at the horses.

Looking back over one shoulder, Tarryn saw no sign of Red Badges. Shifting on his feet, he tried to temper the frustration he felt at everyone making him wait. By now they should have been ankle deep in bits of Cousin. Durbin alone ought to have been food for mice. His fingers twitched. Tarryn took in a breath, focused his mind.

He's not coming.

"He'll be here," Tarryn was not about to let Sam Wick spoil the moment for him. "He'll come, I know it."

Nothing was going to convince Tarryn otherwise. Vanguard would appear and they would have their time together. It was too important for him not to. Vanguard had let him down before, but not this time.

The vision of the boatman shook his head. *What is it you think you are to him?*

Tarryn was not sure he could answer that question. Perhaps there was no word for it. All he knew was that after that night, it did not matter what he was; only what he would be.

He might kill you.

"That's true," Tarryn could admit that. Vanguard would not be an easy mark to fell. But the chances were small. Tarryn was far better, more efficient. "But it doesn't really matter anymore, does it?"

I suppose we shall find out.

A heavy scraping brought his attention back to the warehouse door. He stood atop the brick wall surrounding the old factories and watched as a man and slight woman stepped out of the building together. They smiled, seemingly in good spirits. A strange sensation rolled down Tarryn's spine. This was something he had never seen before, something Tarryn had not known or could comprehend existed.

The doorman from the whore house stood several feet below. He was alive. Tarryn couldn't quite place the girl, although there was something familiar about her. He stepped with light foot above them, compelled by something he could not fight. Call it curiosity, fascination. Tarryn was witnessing something very special. He felt consumed by the need to see what became of the man who survived him. Where did the dead go when they came back to life?

It turned out the answer was rather dull. Like most people, the doorman seemed to have satisfied himself with mundane banality.

He and the girl arrived at a house. It had a gate and a door and a path, all of them achingly normal. Tarryn wasn't sure what he expected to see. Maybe some gratitude? Some appreciation for the great gift that had been given?

No, the man who cheated death chose to have brown curtains and a barrel full of rainwater in a yard. These were the things that filled his world and he seemed, strangely, content.

Tarryn did not understand.

As he crouched low in the shadows outside the house, Tarryn was torn. Part of him wanted to stay and watch. Another part of him was unwilling to miss the chance to split Heracles Durbin from nostril to navel. After a few minutes, Tarryn made up his mind. He would return to the safe house. The doorman could wait.

As he turned away, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Tarryn glanced back. He watched as the breeze caught the curtain and lifted it. Several figures sat around a table, as if it were perfectly normal to be doing such a thing at such an important time.

A feeling of revulsion crept into his gut and twisted there, a fist grasping at his insides. Bile burnt in his throat.

Tarryn watched, his body giving over to a sort of numbness that kept him from doing anything. Consumed by something so dark and festering he could barely breathe.

John Vanguard was drinking tea. Tarryn saw as he picked the cup up, took a sip and put it back down.

He wasn't in pain. He didn't look angry or mournful or raging. Not consumed by spite and bitterness. Vanguard was not out looking for Tarryn, tearing the city apart in vengeful wrath. In fact, he did not seem to be any of the things Tarryn imagined every time he thought of him.

Vanguard should have been where he belonged, pacing amongst the shadows, his only desire to find Tarryn Leersac and exact bloody justice upon him. No. He was drinking tea.

A blonde woman with a round face offered him a biscuit. Tarryn's teeth clenched so hard he did not feel it when he bit his own tongue. Mouth filled with blood, Tarryn let it choke him.

Vanguard didn't care.

There might have been a time long ago when Tarryn Leersac would have liked to have known love. But that was not to be. He had made peace with that. But it hurt to know that after all he had done for him and all they had been through together, John Vanguard could not even find it in his heart to hate Tarryn the way Tarryn hated him.

He felt something on his cheek. Lifting one finger to his face, he pressed it against the skin. He was surprised to see the tear. It was so small. Tarryn hadn't even remembered he could do that.

Master of War

Months of planning, manipulations and deceptions, every sacrifice – they all culminated at a single point. Everything he had been driving towards lay at the end of a corridor with tiled floors and carved marble pillars. The captain walked the floor with purpose. Two guards stood at the door to the City Hall’s private meeting room. When they opened, Sanquain would rise to the next level. He would become a part of history.

The collected members of the general council stood as he entered, Simon Le Faye at his father’s chair. The decision had been unanimous. Cynthia had done a good job of applying pressure in all the right places. Now Sanquain would see his plan meet its fruition.

He walked across the room, keeping a slow even pace, until reaching the head of the table. There was a murmur of greeting and the exchanging of pleasantries.

Leopold Couret silenced them.

Addressing the room, the councilman spoke loud and clear, “It is unusual, for a new initiate to put forward any considerations to the group so soon after their taking place,” he gave Le Faye a nod of recognition. “However, we are in unusual times. So we must give this proposal adequate thought. Captain Sanquain, we invite you to take the floor.”

Sanquain stood; arms outstretched and let his hands come to rest on the table. The council resumed their seats, each ready to hear his plan put forward.

“Gentlemen, years ago, my predecessor and your city leaders made a catastrophic error. They refused to recognise the rebellion of the lower classes and led us into a war they could not end. Once again, war has become inevitable. We cannot repeat their mistakes. The time to act is now,” Sanquain paused to allow them time to understand the gravity of such a plan, “We must enact the Renard Accords.”

A hush fell across the room.

Ferriday, councilman from Mahan, blustered. "I never heard such nonsense. Mahan is far from a state of war, yet you would drive us right into one. D'Orsee is troubled, let the capital quell their own disorder."

Sanquain narrowed his eyes. "Perhaps I am mistaken then, in my understanding there have been attacks on the streets of your city, blockades and strikes?"

The councilman rankled. "We have the situation under control."

"No," Sanquain shook his head. "Control is slipping and I for one shall not be as blind as the men who once sat at this table and allowed their power to be weathered away by the slow machinations of an unruly mob."

Couret stroked the thin grey hairs on his chin. Sanquain knew that he of all the men gathered in the room remembered the beginning days of the last war well, having sat on the council in that very room during that time. The old man bore witness to the chaos and discordance, the arguments and ill-advised grabs for power.

"The accords are not something to take lightly," Couret said finally. "Soussan has always existed as individual states with their own forces. To give one man power over all military decisions would come with both benefits and obstacles."

Sanquain drew to full height. "May I remind you all, it was I who brought the last revolution to a conclusion? It is by *my* city's trade that yours prosper and by our example, others have risen."

The representative for Vhaan did not take kindly to the reminder that his city had many times come to the capital for aid.

The councilman's voice dripped with indignation. "Can we remind you, *Captain*, it was under your watch Argent Cooke managed to set fire to a good portion of your own city – an act from which he escaped, something you were unable to prevent."

Sanquain kept his face even. Let them throw their stones. "Argent Cooke is merely one supposed leader of the uprising. Several are rumoured to be hiding under your own nose." He turned to stare at the man who seemed to buckle under his gaze. "If you wish to compare war records, Mr Boone, feel free."

Couret waved a hand. "Nobody is here to deny your past service."

The councilmen turned to talk amongst themselves. This was not going to be as clear cut as the captain would like. Couret and Le Faye would vote

in his favour. Ferriday and Boone would likely oppose. That left the representatives for Mayeaux and Lycroix. In Sanquain's experience, Lycroix always followed the most lucrative path. Sanquain let his eyes slide over to Le Faye. The young councilman gave the slightest nod. Casting a hand across the table towards the door, the captain snapped his fingers.

"Gentlemen, war brings change and we need a steady hand to guide that change. I can be that hand. In fact, I shall prove it," the doors opened. "I have taken the liberty of negotiating certain contracts. Ones that will allow access to resources that will be of great value to all of us."

Travers entered on cue. He brought with him several guards carrying boxes. Sanquain made a note to have something nice sent to Travers' home. He'd more than earned himself a new carriage clock with his due diligence over recent months. There was a sudden shift in the atmosphere. The mood had changed.

Now Ferriday was almost licking his lips with anticipation. "What sort of resources?"

"I am talking, councilmen, of weapons." With that Sanquain gave the guards leave to open the boxes. The men rose from their seats, clamouring to see what was inside. Sometimes, it wasn't so much about knowing what you wanted, but knowing what everyone else wanted. What they craved.

"I've never seen this kind of crafting before." Couret breathed.

"These are but a few examples of the sort of technology I could put at your disposal," Sanquain watched as each councilman thought about what they might do with such power in their hands. "I could have this war won in a matter of months."

The captain had piqued their interest, now he needed their compliance. "My contacts in the Yiscjan Peninsular have procured shipments of the highest quality weapons, soon to be on their way across the channel to our docks. The Red Badges put down the last rebellion in its final months. Now they have become the largest and best equipped force, outnumbering any of your own armies. Your power is your own and shall remain so. All I ask is that you give me leave to apprehend and retaliate against those rising against you. I have no wish to unseat any of you; we are best served when united."

Leopold Couret thought for a moment. "I believe we may be open to such an accord, providing of course," his eyes gleamed at the weapons laid on the table, "such discourse would be agreeable to all parties." Rising from

his seat, the councilman bowed smartly. “Captain, if you would be so good as to step outside for a few moments?”

“Of course,” the captain had expected nothing less. In the marble hall, he stood behind the closed doors as the council decided their fates. Several minutes passed before Sanquain was invited to return to the table. A hush descended over the representatives.

Couret stood, casting a glance at the assembled council. There was a nod from each man. “We have come to an agreement. Your proposal is acceptable. We retain authority over our laws, trade, and policies; however, we hereby declare Felix Sanquain to have military authority in all regions.” Couret smiled. “Congratulations, Commander Sanquain.”

No Glad Tidings

“What do you think our chances are?” Vince stuck one hand in a pocket, fishing around. Biting his tongue, he concentrated for a second before retrieving a small paper bag.

A slight breeze caught it as he pulled out the contents. He scowled, half the tobacco ending up on the ground.

Vanguard leant against the gate, watching the quiet comings and goings of the neighbourhood by the afternoon light. Inside the house, Beth was measuring Carmen for a new dress and neither Vince nor Vanguard had anything useful to input on the subject. Carmen, on the other hand, seemed to have plenty of opinions about it. Vince rolled a thin cigarette and passed it over.

“Of us getting our hands on those shipments?” Vanguard searched for some matches. “Me finding Reuban? Or Beth getting Carmen into a lavender day dress?”

Holding out a light, Vince shrugged, “Any of it. All of it.”

Inhaling, Vanguard thought. “Slim, unlikely, never going to happen. In that order.”

A small boy ran past the gate, the peeling soles of his shoes slapping against the cobbles. His face was bright with exertion. A bag of apples bounced against his knees, gripped in grubby fists. A few minutes later a shopkeeper brandishing a rolled up newspaper appeared, puffing and wheezing. Vince and Vanguard watched as the man bent double, hands to knees. After a moment, the vendor waved a dismissive hand and gave up the chase. Vince let out a snort. They both smoked their cigarettes and for a while did not talk.

“Reuban was the one that started the Ninth Company, right?” Vince dubbed the butt out on the path. There was a yell from inside the house. Rolling his eyes, he bent down, picked it up and threw it over the gate.

“In a manner of speaking,” Vanguard took his time with his smoke, seeing as how he only did it now and again. “Stephan Arnauld was our commanding officer, but Reuban was the brains behind the idea. Back then there were no Reds, everything was owned by the nobles. You could buy a soldier for less than a horse in those days. I guess they wanted something different.”

“You never thought to ask why?”

Vanguard hadn’t. He learnt early in life that musing over the schemes of other men generally led to knowing things you wished you didn’t.

“Soldiers don’t ask questions.”

“Well, if you find him you can ask him now.”

The door of the house burst open. Carmen stalked out. She came to a stop at the end of the path. The entirety of her body up to the neck and down to the ankle was covered in fabric swatches, ribbons and patches.

“How’s it going?” Vanguard was almost sure he wasn’t looking at the final result, but then again, he didn’t know anything about clothes.

Carmen’s voice was flat and devoid of emotion, “There is talk of tulle.”

Vince’s brow furrowed. “Tulle? What in the hell is that? More to the point, where does she think she’s getting it from? Actually, never mind,” he shook his head. Stalking back towards the house, Vince hollered through the open door, “what are you talking about bloody tulle, woman?” It slammed shut behind him.

Carmen shivered.

She was definitely inappropriately dressed for the weather. To be fair, she was inappropriately dressed for most things. Every time the breeze caught her dress, the swatches of material would lift, creating a sort of ripple. She looked like a patchwork doll, made up of a hundred different pieces. Standing next to Vanguard, she gazed out over the brick houses, the puddles and the creaking fences. “You’re hiding something.”

“So are you,” he said.

She didn’t deny it. “Did you miss me?”

Vanguard nodded. “Sometimes.”

“I thought about you.”

“That’s nice. Glad someone did.”

Carmen pulled a thread from her shoulder. “Every time I saw a scabby old alley cat, it made me think of you and I’d wonder what you were doing at that very moment.”

“Probably not as well as the cat,” He had been compared to worse things.

Somewhere in the distance a bell rang out. Vanguard creased his brow. Something was happening. No bell rang in the Black Zone because there were glad tidings to share.

Turning, Vanguard twisted his body so they stood face to face. He studied Carmen intently, taking it in, learning every new movement and detail of her that had not been there before. “Why did you come back?”

She shrugged. “Someone had to come and give you Cooke’s message.”

He shook his head. “No, there’s another reason.”

Whatever had happened between the time she left D’Orsee and then, Vanguard knew it had done something to irrevocably change Carmen. It was difficult to put into words, but there was a way in which she held herself now. Almost as though she knew herself better than she had before, and because of that Vanguard knew her less.

Taking a step towards the gate, Carmen reached out and curled her fingers around the rails. “Do you remember,” she said, “I once asked you how you got your scars? And you said, you’d tell me one day?”

Vanguard did remember.

“Well, when you tell me how you got those, I’ll tell you why I came back.”

It seemed a fair deal.

Squinting down the road, Carmen’s face wrinkled. Following her gaze, Vanguard saw a figure staggering towards the gate. He recognised it as the boy who sat in the stable at the safe house. Lowering his voice, Vanguard spoke under his breath, “fetch Vince.”

As the boy reached the house he called out, “Monroe!” His voice cracked. “Monroe, are you here?”

“Shut your damn mouth,” Vanguard pulled him through the gates. The boy crashed into him, limbs flailing. His face was flushed red, smeared with blood and powder. “Get in the house.” Vanguard took the lad by the arms, half-dragging him towards the door.

Beth was already waiting with water and dressings by the time they crossed the threshold. The young stable hand’s eyes rolled in his head. It was a miracle he could still put one foot in front of the other. The boy’s brains were probably scrambled like eggs.

Kneeling at the chair upon which they sat him, Vince laid a hand on his leg. "What happened?" The boy's head fell forward.

Vince shook him. "Tell me!"

"Durbin," the lad's voice was weak. "He brought the Reds, they had guns, lots of 'em. They've killed Josiah. I only just got away."

Eyes darkening, Vince leaned in. "What happened to everyone else?"

"Dead, or taken prisoner," tears welled in the boys eyes, "they're going to shoot them all. I tried to help but," his voice cracked. "I hid. I was scared. I'm sorry, Monroe. I could hear them, inside... I heard and I couldn't move. I just lay there..." he could not finish.

Vince was already on his feet. Carmen reached out and steadied Beth, who had stumbled towards the table, face ghostly white.

"Vince," Beth pleaded. "Vince, don't go, please."

Reaching out, Vince drew her close and kissed her. "You know I have to," he kissed her again. "I'll be back. We both will," he glanced over at Vanguard who already had the bag over his shoulder.

Without warning, Beth let out a cry, bringing one hand to her face. "Oliver!"

Vince's expression grew heavier still, "What about him?"

"He's been going every morning to feed that cat," Beth was wrestling to get the words out, her whole body frozen with fear.

Vince swallowed and turned to the boy in the chair who shook his head. "He wasn't there, I didn't see him. Someone said they took a load of the boys on down at the docks for the day, maybe he was with them?"

Carmen slipped towards the door, still in her unfinished dress. "I'll find him."

Hands shaking, Beth nodded. There were footsteps on the path outside. Darting to the edge of the door frame, Vince curled his hand into a fist and readied himself. Vanguard prepared for whatever might come through the door next.

Violet walked in, a basket of fabric samples on her arm. "Dad?" She stood stock still, taking in the scene before her.

Stepping away from the door, Vince let his hand unfurl. "Everything's alright. Stay here with your mother; help her with the babies," Vince reached under the cot beneath the window and retrieved a club. He tested the weight against his palm. Tucking it into the waistband of his trousers, he nodded towards Vanguard. "You best be ready to earn your keep."

With that, Vince left the house, Violet and Beth trailing him all the way to the end of the path. Vanguard stepped forward. As he did, the wounded boy reached out. "You have to help him," he begged, "we never saw it coming," his eyes rolled back and his voice became slurred, "We never saw it."

Vanguard felt his stomach lurch. He sprinted out of the house and after Vince.

They ran, twisting and turning through the alleys and underpasses until they reached the safe house. The morning they walked there, it had taken them an hour.

Vanguard made it in thirty-five minutes. Vince must have made it in thirty.

The yard was a mess. The door to the old factory hung from its hinges. Through the gap, Vanguard could make out the flash of red uniforms walking around the building. Ducking, Vince sank to his haunches. There was a quiet groan from somewhere beyond a broken wall. Keeping low, Vince moved forward. Vanguard followed, scrambling over the crumbling brick.

On the otherside, a man lay on the ground, legs bent beneath him. Vince reached over. Taking his hand, he urged the old man to try and get up, "Right, Dougal, let's get you off your arse."

The old man moaned, grasping at the air. His hand left a bloody imprint on the side of Vince's head. "Come on now, you old bastard, you can't stay here like this."

Glancing up, Vanguard saw two Reds escorting a number of men through the door of the building and towards the stables. The captives were miserable, dirty, feet dragging in the gravel and hands upon their heads. Dougal wasn't going anywhere. Vanguard knew it. Vince knew it too. There was a crack of gunfire. Vanguard did not know how many were dead already, or what they would find by the stables but he did know he was faced with a choice. If he left Vince, there was no telling what might

emerge from that house. But he could not leave Vince's allies to the guns. Rubbing a hand over his head, Vanguard wished he knew what to do.

Eyes fixed on the safe house, he saw the Reds bring out the next group. His heart sank. Daisy trailed behind the men, face stained with tears. "Vince, look."

Still holding Dougal's hand, Vince nodded. "Go, we'll be alright."

Taking his blade, Vanguard sprinted. As he did, he felt the familiar sensation of melting away. Creeping through the broken machinery, Vanguard slipped between the shadows until he saw them. Six men and Daisy stood against the wall of the stable. At their feet, the men escorted a few moments ago still lay where they fell. Vanguard could not save them all. He wished he could have; but there were only so many places the blade could be at once.

Vanguard swept through the closest two guards. He didn't kill them. There was no time to be accurate about it. It was enough for the bullets to go astray. The Reds fell to their knees. There was a scream as one of the prisoners took a shot to the thigh. Another was not as lucky. Some of the remaining guards turned their weapons in defence. The two furthest away, confused by the shots already fired, unloaded the barrels at the wall. Vanguard heard two bodies hit the floor and could not bring himself to look at which ones. After a second, he found enough strength to glance up. Two men and Daisy were already running towards the edge of the plot, stumbling over their own feet. He let out a breath, relieved.

From back in the building, Vanguard heard more shouting, more shots.

Racing across the concrete, he returned to Vince, who was still trying to persuade Dougal the mortal injury he suffered was little more than a flesh wound. The old man wasn't buying it. "I don't know how they found us," the words were coming out fast and urgent, "we were careful, everyone was so careful."

Patting his hand, Vince bent lower. "It doesn't matter now."

Vanguard stood over them. This was not the time or place. He needed to get Vince out of there. Vanguard could stand in a battlefield and go unseen. But Vince was a large target. More than that, he was a valuable one. He looked at Dougal who was fading fast. "You have to leave him."

"I've let you down, Monroe," The old man sobbed, his lungs shaking out the last of the oxygen still in them. "I let you all down."

Vince shook his head. "No, no, you didn't."

“I did, I’m so sorry.”

Vince dropped the old man's hand. “Dougal, what did you tell them?”

The old man closed his eyes. “Everything.”

Leaning forward, Vince took hold of Dougal’s shoulders. “Did you tell them who I am?” Barely clinging to life, Dougal’s lips moved without sound. Vince’s voice strained. “Do they know?”

At that moment one of the guards appeared from inside the house. Vanguard saw his face twist. Turning back, the Red called out to his comrades. Lifting the barrel of a rifle, he swung to point it in Vince’s direction. There was a shot.

“Shit,” Vince pressed himself flat, landing with a crash next to Dougal. He rolled, wincing as several splinters of glass slashed at his stomach.

Vanguard grabbed his arm, pulling Vince to his feet. “Move.”

Vince scrambled a few yards, struggling to find good footing. Barrelling forwards, Vanguard darted across the ground, slicing the knife across the guard’s chest. Several people exploded out of the safe house. Some of them in Red jackets, some of them not. Amidst the stamping feet, a very irate ginger cat hissed and mewled his way through the ruckus. Stopping briefly, it turned and spat at the scene before retreating into the nearby scrub.

All around people did what they could to survive. There was no sense or order to it, only running and fighting. That was all there was. Running and fighting, living or dying. Vince faltered, pace slowing as he grasped at the wounds on his abdomen. The first of the guards caught up to them. He lifted his gun, cursing as he pulled the trigger only to find the chambers empty. There was a gurgling, blade cutting through his jugular, held by an unseen assailant.

“Run!” When Vanguard looked back, Vince had managed to put a slight distance between him and the reinforcements. More cracks fired through the air. Picking up his pace, Vanguard made to catch up with Vince. After a few moments the bullets slowed. The Red Badges were of no concern any more. They were shooting blind, unable to see anything to aim for.

Limping back towards the Hook, Vince lurched with each step. He needed to rest, but Vanguard knew it was pointless to tell him that.

“You’re bleeding.”

Vince gritted his teeth, “Doesn’t matter, they know about me now,” Clutching one hand to his gut, Vince drew short for a minute. Holding out his free hand, he pressed it to Vanguard’s chest. “Carmen said she knew a

way for you to get out of the city,” his eyes were pleading, “You have to take Beth and the babies with you.”

Shaking his head, Vanguard stepped away. “What are you talking about?”

“Take them with you, away from here, anywhere.” Vince was resolute.

“I can’t...”

“Find a way!”

Unwilling to discuss the matter any further, Vince pressed on. He cursed under his breath, grimacing with each painful step. Vanguard knew he was thinking that the sooner he could get back to the house, the sooner they could be gone. The Cousins would find him a new place and with Beth and the children far away, everything would be alright. Vanguard knew it wasn’t him Vince was trying to persuade. Finally they turned the corner onto the street where Vince lived.

Vanguard’s chest tightened. They slowed as they both became aware of the scene before them. A large crowd had gathered outside Vince’s house.

Vince stopped, one hand still pressed to his wounds. The people moved aside, as a man pushed through. Marcel stood at the other end of the road. In that moment, Vanguard knew there was no injury he could sustain, or wound too deep that could stop Vince from running the rest of the way home. Right then, Vince would not feel a thing. “*Beth!*”

Ripping the gate open, Vince darted through his front door. For the next few seconds, the world stood still. The Hook congregated on the open street and held each other. After what seemed like a lifetime, a figure emerged from the doorway.

Monroe

This was a moment John Vanguard had seen over and over. It was a risk, inherent in the lifestyle he lived. Each time it happened, the injustice of it became all the more apparent.

It was the way of the world. Fate was not weighed in favour of the deserving. Good did not always triumph over evil. The young did not always outlive the old.

Yet of all the things he had seen and done, all the lives saved and ended – each dark, bleak crevice and corner of the world Vanguard had borne witness to, he would always remember that the worst of them all, was seeing the way Vince looked in that doorway.

There was a rush of cold air at his back. As the crowd looked at Vince, Vanguard turned and scanned the darkening streets.

Across the way, he saw movement between the cramped buildings. Not a person, but a black dovetailed coat left to hang in the cracks between two worlds. Vanguard saw it and knew it for what it was – an invitation.

Turning back towards the house, he saw Vince walk the path, the silence broken by the sound of his footsteps. Vanguard saw his face and knew. There was nothing he could do. What stood before him was a man stripped bare.

Vince's lips moved. Vanguard did not dare get any closer. He had seen the worst of the worst, killers so brutal and vicious they could make your stomach turn. They had nothing on the darkness that had crept into Vince's eyes and made root there. Vince turned to his neighbours.

"Get the guns."

Nobody moved.

"I SAID GET THE GUNS."

Vanguard stepped back. He was lost to them now. Nothing could bring back the light stripped from Vince's world. All that was left was for

Vanguard to make a decision.

Leave the city and try to save Reuban, the man who might be Cooke's saviour - or stay and try to save Vince, who had been Vanguard's. In the end, there was only one choice he could make. Vince was dead. There was nothing of him left. There was only Monroe now.

And Vanguard could not save Monroe.

Half-Made Girl

Tarryn wanted to be found. The boy was luring Vanguard in, calling out across the city. It was as if his voice carried on the wind.

There was no doubt in Vanguard's mind that he was going the right way. He felt every smack of the ground against his feet, the aching in his shoulder; pain blossoming with each step that took him closer to the water's edge

The dim glow of the lamps along the canal bounced from the water like yellow eyes staring up at him, wild and insatiable. Ahead, he saw the grey shape of the ship in port, towering over everything, throwing shadows across the length of the yard and jetties. Picking up speed, Vanguard gripped the handle of the blade firm and saw nothing but the mark ahead.

Tarryn did not move. Once Vanguard was within a few feet, he turned and glanced over his shoulder. "You're late."

Vanguard stopped. His leg was hurting. His shoulder was hurting. His heart was hurting. But he could not let Tarryn see any of that, certain it would mean death if he did.

Hardening his stance, Vanguard locked eyes with the boy. What he saw now was more than a mark, more than a target. He and Tarryn had become more to each other than anything Vanguard ever imagined. They were enemies now and something about it ran deep in Vanguard's veins. Tarryn seemed disappointed when Vanguard did not answer him.

"You're hurt," he said eventually. "So am I."

The boy straightened.

"They didn't suffer, in case that matters." Eyes on the water, seemingly unaware of the rest of the world around them, Tarryn cocked his head to one side. "It was a kindness really. Surely you see that? They would have suffered more when the Red Badges arrived than they ever would with me. I made it quick, elegant."

Sickness curled in Vanguard's gut. Treading with carefully measured side-steps, Tarryn eyed him as the water splashed against the side of the ship. Vanguard felt the shaking in his hand and prayed the boy would not notice it, would not sense the weakness in him.

“You see them too don’t you? The dead men?” Tarryn half smiled. “You don’t need to tell me, I know you do. I thought it was just me at first. I thought I was going mad. Maybe I still am. But they’re not a part of it. They’re a part of us – you and me, what we are.”

Vanguard spat at the ground. “I don’t know what you are.”

Without warning, the boy rushed forward, his form merging with the night. His fingers curled around Vanguard's wrist and the blade froze between them. For a moment Vanguard thought he felt the hot slicing of metal between his ribs, but then realised it was just his imagination. What he did feel was cold breath on his cheek.

Against his instincts, Vanguard stood firm. Tarryn could have easily slipped the blade into his gut. Why hadn't he?

“Our ghosts,” Tarryn dropped his voice to a whisper. “They’re made of us, our memories – the guilt, the fear, the pain. We create them. We carry them.”

With one swift movement, Vanguard swung his clenched fist and connected it with Tarryn’s face. Crying out in surprise, Tarryn released the hand that held the knife. Vanguard was shocked to see genuine dismay on his face – Tarryn had not expected Vanguard to strike him. As he staggered back, Vanguard wondered what kind of madness could have taken hold of the boy to make him believe such a thing.

Swinging the knife, Vanguard brought his arm around in an arc. Tarryn deftly stepped from the path, his face twisting.

“You’re mad,” Vanguard said gritting his teeth. He struck out again, the two of them stepping around one another. The boy was too fast; he pulled away, twisting so that the distance between them increased.

“And you’re not *listening* to me.”

Vanguard swept forward. Tarryn lashed out getting momentarily within arms length. Vanguard saw an opportunity, slashing at Tarryn’s arm as the boy made to move again. The knife missed by mere millimetres. Tarryn took another step back, face contorted in disgust.

“I thought perhaps I had done enough already.” The boy seemed almost sad. “Paulette, the whores. It *should* have been enough. But then I saw you with Monroe and I had to kill them. I had to make you hate me more than anyone you’ve ever hated before. It was the only way.” Tarryn’s voice cracked and split. “Now it’s just the two of us. No matter which one of us dies, we shall never be rid of each other.” He drew in a deep breath. Wiping

his face roughly, Tarryn composed himself. His eyes grew dark and empty. "Shall we kill each other then?"

Sweeping forward, Tarryn lunged. Vanguard twisted, pre-empting where the boy would strike and feeling the sharp cut of metal against his chest. Focusing his mind, Vanguard twisted at the torso, slashing out across the air. Tarryn's leg caught him on his shin. Vanguard buckled, driving the knife upwards to meet with Tarryn's blade as it came down towards him.

Forcing Tarryn backwards, Vanguard felt himself struggling to keep a grip on his weapon. He planted his feet against the floor and drove his good shoulder into Tarryn's chest. Vanguard cried out, feeling the crunch of an elbow against his back. The two of them moved back and forth next to the water, Tarryn seething and spitting, Vanguard feeling every pain and screaming muscle.

Tarryn leaned forward and sank his teeth into Vanguard's other shoulder. Crying out, Vanguard pulled away. The muscles in his arm popped and twitched. The damn thing was useless now.

"Come on," Tarryn screamed. "You're not trying! Why aren't you trying?"

Slashing the air, Tarryn made several strides forward, Vanguard stepping back with each movement in tandem. The knife criss-crossed in front of him with wanton, untamed strikes that did not care what part of the body they met. Tarryn spat. "Try!"

Everything dropped away. Just as Vanguard and Tarryn had both become invisible to the world so many times, so did the world become invisible to them. There was nothing save for the two of them, together. Tarryn drew his blade. Vanguard drew his. The water moved. The ship groaned and the chains clanked against the metal. And finally, in a blur of flesh and blood and bone and blade, Tarryn Leersac and John Vanguard came together and the world shuddered.

Tarryn rolled across the ground. Reaching out to brace himself, he felt the grit tear into the skin of his palms. Shaking his head, he blinked a few times. Glancing over, he saw John Vanguard lying against the docks. Bile

rushed to his mouth. Pushing up, Tarryn staggered to his feet. Limping across the path, he drew closer to watch the life ebbing from Vanguard's eyes. After everything they had been through, Tarryn could not let him die alone.

As he got to within a few paces, Tarryn saw the slow rise and fall of his chest. Tarryn ached when he saw it. He had wanted so badly for it to be over. Vanguard reached up and pulled the blade from his shoulder. With great effort, he tossed it aside. Tarryn went to say something.

Instead he felt a tingling in his cheek. Reaching up, he touched the side of his face. There was something damp there. Lifting his fingers to his eyes, Tarryn saw the blood. He rubbed them together, wondering at it.

Slowly, Vanguard got to his feet. He was battered and bruised, bleeding, but still alive. Tarryn did not know what he was supposed to do next. Standing in the quiet eye of the storm, the world rushed around him.

Yet he did not feel a thing.

Eyeing his enemy, Tarryn watched as Vanguard lifted his one good arm. The knife in his hand shone in the gaslight. Tarryn's brow creased as he considered the slick, viscous black substance that covered the blade.

"Is that me?" he asked.

Vanguard nodded.

Tarryn's face felt heavy, the numbness taking hold. He took a few steps, not knowing which way to turn. The gravel dug into his skin as he dropped to the knees. There was no pain, only the sense of a great weight. Like his blood was made of lead. Vanguard came to him, catching him in his arms as he fell. Tarryn tried to move his lips, the words sounding muffled to his ears. "Is it bad?"

Vanguard shook his head. "It's just a scratch."

Tarryn nodded. "But it's enough?"

"It's enough."

There were no more words. Tarryn had lost the ability to speak and Vanguard chose not to say anything. Perhaps that was for the best.

The toxin moved quickly. Tarryn could feel it surging through his veins, doing battle with the blackness that coursed through them. It tapered him, sedated him. He felt himself relax into it. There was no more fight.

Tarryn had no sense of being carried to the canal's edge. He did not see the black swirling maw open up to welcome him. Tarryn only felt the world slip further from him, until all he saw was the night above. Briefly, he

worried that perhaps he might find something waiting for him, as he disappeared into the black.

But there was no shining light, no burning fire, no God and no devil. There was nothing, and Tarryn was pleased to see it.

His bridges burned to ashes, Vanguard walked the city not seeing anything of whom or what he passed on the way. All he knew was the fog, thickening around him until the world became distant.

By the time he found himself on the doorstep of Henriette's house, the city was buzzing with the news the Black Zone had gone to war. Vanguard didn't hear the sounds of gunshot and breaking glass in the distance. He only heard all the sounds missing from the house.

No laughing, no fighting – no life.

Every step he took towards the room at the end of the corridor shook dirt from the walls. The spiders had taken dominion over the cracks and corners. Dust particles danced as they caught beams of light through splintered wooden shutters. His fingers left evidence of his visit trailed along the wallpaper.

Easing himself into the empty tub in the disused bathroom, Vanguard brought his hands to rest on the curved edges and fell back. There he remained for a while.

Vince would mourn his family forever. When his time came, nobody would mourn for Vanguard. They would not cry for the things he had sacrificed – and sacrifice he had.

In the past, these were the times when Arnould would come to him, appearing through the shadows to tell him things he did not wish to hear. Vanguard would have paid any price to have such words whispered to him in that moment.

Instead, he took all of his unheard prayers and poured them out into the tub. Craning his head back, Vanguard cried out. He called for the mother that would never come, the father he had never met, the friends he could not keep and the world that did not care. He sat, and he wept. And nobody heard.

Nobody saw.

“Vanguard?” A voice permeated through the darkness. He wasn’t sure he’d heard anything at first. Vanguard felt a hollow feeling in his gut. “Can you hear me?” The voice came again.

“Leave me alone,” he whispered.

The vision leaned in, image distorted and unclear. He steeled himself. A slight, feminine hand reached out. It poked him in the side of the face. “Vanguard, are you still in there?”

Senses honing, Vanguard’s eyes swam for a moment. A pair of dark eyes with impossibly long lashes were staring at him.

He swallowed, uncertain as to whether he wanted her to be real or not. Sometimes his mind could play tricks on him – make him see things that were not true. As if to prove her existence, she made to poke him again. Vanguard reached up and grabbed her by the wrist. Carmen frowned. “I’m real. You can stop squeezing my arm.”

Releasing his grasp, Vanguard closed his eyes again. He heard her shuffling around, trying to balance on the rim of the tub.

“I went looking for Vince,” she sighed, listlessness to her voice that sounded tired more than anything. “Nobody can find him. Some of the neighbours are still out there looking but most people have already marched on the Quarter. Oliver and Phoebe are with Marcel,” her voice faltered for a moment. “You know, Vince has lost a wife, a daughter and a granddaughter all in the same day. Just like that. Gone, like a match being blown out in the wind.”

Vanguard could not look her in the eye. “I could have stopped it,” he found it surprising how difficult the words were to say. “I should have stopped it.”

“Maybe,” she said truthfully, “but we’ll never know now.” She looked around, frowning when she saw how dirty and desolate the place had become. “This place looks like a mausoleum.”

“That’s the way the whole world looks to me.”

Carmen scrunched her face. “What a perfectly horrific thought.”

Vanguard did not have the energy to say anything about it. Carmen saw the world through eyes that had not yet dulled as his had. Each layer of her the world stripped away only revealed yet more beneath. It didn't matter how far down they went; it was as though she would never end.

Vanguard realised he was jealous. "Why are you like this?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Never mind," he slid his eyes away. "It doesn't matter."

Sitting on the side of the bath, the way she had when they first met, Carmen made a strange expression, as if trying to decide something. She leaned her head back, looking at the ceiling. Long dark hair tumbled around her shoulders. It had grown in the time they had been apart. It looked nice; he thought. Then the unthinkable happened.

She swung one leg over the bath, then another and wriggled down to squeeze in beside him. Vanguard felt himself tense, uncertain as to what the appropriate reaction to such an invasion might be. Nobody had ever been in the tub with him before. Carmen lay on her side, not moving, not really doing anything but existing in that tiny space where he lived. Vanguard felt the ribbons and swatches of her makeshift dress flutter around her until she became still.

There they lay, the shadow man and his half-made girl. One unmade, one unfinished.

"I can see why you like it in here," she said, "It seems quiet." Carmen paused. "I went out and saw a bit of the world. Didn't think much of it," she seemed to be talking to nobody, her thoughts merely finding shape in words and floating up over the rim of the tub. "I thought it might help me figure some things out, but do you know what I discovered?"

Vanguard felt his left arm going numb, though he didn't really mind it. "What?"

"They're all just making it up as they go along."

"That's pretty much it."

A few more moments passed. "Vanguard?"

"Yes?"

She reached up and tucked an errant bit of hair back into place. "I'm going to get out of the tub now and I think you should too. This isn't really where either of us belong."

"What if I just stay here? You said yourself, it's not so bad."

She smiled. "True, but," she rolled in and laid her head on his shoulder. "If you didn't, I should be terribly disappointed in you."

In some ways, Vanguard wished she had never come. She moved slightly and Vanguard became aware of the beat of her heart, a steady pulse against the flat of his chest, warm and alive.

"Vanguard?"

"Yes?"

"Everything will be alright."

He didn't say anything. He couldn't. Anything he could have said was stuck somewhere between his chest and throat. She reached up, kissed him ever so softly on the cheek and sat up. Then she was gone. At some point she must have climbed out of the tub and walked from the room. The front door must have opened and closed behind her. But Vanguard didn't hear any of that.

He only heard a faint heartbeat, and the lingering sound of her words. It took him a while, but eventually, he came to realise that the heartbeat was his own.

Run you Bastard, Run

There had been a plan in place. So much had happened since then, Vanguard was worried he might have gotten mixed up with the details. He was sure she said they should meet at the Crole Street Bridge, near the thin strip of the canal that passed by the only statue of Jules Piven in the Black Zone that hadn't been torn down.

The entire area was deserted. The rest of the neighbourhood had taken up their arms and abandoned their homes. In a matter of only a few hours, the place had become a ghost town.

He found her, standing on the smallest patch of grass. Carmen had her arms crossed against her chest. She kept her eyes closed, head lifted to the sky. Vanguard drew level with her and listened. There were yells and cries, screams of anger and alarm.

"It's chaos out there," Carmen opened her eyes. "The whole city's gone to war." In the distance, there was a cracking of many rifles fired at once.

"I can't see anyone getting out now," Vanguard still had no idea what she had planned. "What are we doing here?" He didn't see any of the Cousins, or anyone or anything else that might help them.

Carmen scratched her arm. "Something very stupid. I told you I had a plan." He didn't like the sound of that. Turning, Carmen put her hands on her hips. "You must promise you won't be angry."

He didn't like the sound of that either.

"You remember you said you would trust me?"

"I did."

She stepped back, "Then please don't fight."

Before Vanguard had time to understand what was happening, two figures rose up out of the darkness. They took him by the arms, gripping him tight. Another came from behind, snaking hands around his waist and holding them in place. Despite her plea, Vanguard bucked and twisted. "What the hell is going on?"

A fourth figure appeared from behind the statue. He stood, peeled a long stretch of skin from a yellow pear with a fruit knife and spoke with his mouthful, "it's about time. I'd almost given up on you, Biscuit."

Hector's voice made Vanguard's blood run as thick as tar. Tensing his legs, he readied himself for the attack. When it did not come, Vanguard was confused. Seeing his expression, Mandego rolled his eyes. "What's wrong with you?"

"Last time we saw each other," Vanguard kept his fists clenched, "you wanted to kill me."

Stepping forward, Mandego lifted a hand and waved towards the water, "that was last week. Turns out you're more valuable to me alive than you are dead."

From out of the darkness, Royce appeared on the water, standing at the head of a row-boat. Behind him, two sentries of the Butchers pulled at the oars. Royce lifted a lamp to his face, the light setting his hard features in a soft orange glow. "Ship's ready."

Carmen took stock of the boat and crew. "You sure this will work?"

Hector looked offended. "Supremely confident," turning to Vanguard, Hector rolled back on his heels and swept one hand to the ground, "your vessel awaits you."

Vanguard tried once again to wrestle free from his captors. "Carmen, what have you done?"

"I'm having you kidnapped," she said, as serious as anything.

"What are you talking about? You can't trust Hector." Vanguard's voice strained, pleading for someone to explain what the hell was going on. Carmen smiled, in a way that said he wasn't going to like what she was about to say.

Vanguard didn't want to go. Suddenly he was overwhelmed with the desperate urge to stay exactly where he was. Cooke could find another way to rescue Reuban. Vanguard needed to be there, Carmen needed him. The city needed him. The thought of being on the other side of the wall filled him with dread and revulsion. No, he had to stay. "I can't leave, not now."

Ignoring Mandego, Carmen stepped forward. Vanguard stopped struggling just long enough for her to reach up and wrap both arms around his neck. Cheek pressed to his face, she whispered. "It's time to go."

With that she pressed both hands against his chest and pushed. Vanguard stumbled backwards, taking a few steps down the bank towards

the boat. Before he had any chance to argue, Royce leaned forward and grasped him, pulling him into the vessel. Vanguard thought about fighting back, about jumping from the row-boat and diving back to the solid ground he knew. But when he saw her standing there, he knew she'd never forgive him if he did. Reaching forward, he held out one hand.

Carmen shook her head. "I'm staying here."

Vanguard's face fell. "I'm not going without you."

Stepping forward, Hector grinned and draped one arm around Carmen's neck. Vanguard saw her top lip curl at his touch, "she stays here with me; we've got a deal we have, me and the young lady."

There was a sudden shift to the air. A familiar feeling crept across Vanguard's chest. One he feared might have been lost to him. As they all stood considering each other, Vanguard came to realise they were not the only ones standing stretched out across the bank. Arnauld and his brothers of the Ninth, cast in pale blue light began to form against the outline of the city. How were they there? Why had they come? Vanguard did not know the answer.

All he knew was once more they were watching him leave them. They stood shoulders square and faces set fast. Arnauld was calling out, but Vanguard could not hear what he was saying. He saw ghostly lips move – the message lost.

Vanguard broke his former mentor's gaze to look to the bank. Standing against the dark back drop of the night, Carmen locked eyes with him. She didn't look afraid. There was surety, concrete and unyielding in her expression. Carmen was where she needed to be right at that moment, and she didn't need him to tell her otherwise. Slowly she lifted her chin and mouthed a silent message; words Vanguard knew were not her own, ones to mirror those of Stephen Arnauld.

Run you bastard, run. Before Vanguard could react, Royce gave the nod and the two sentries pushed the boat from the bank. The canal churned beneath them, and the Black Zone began to fall away.

Had Vanguard been able to comprehend the enormity of what he had just learnt, he might have swum for shore. But he did not have the time. Royce brought a mighty fist down onto John Vanguard's head long before he had time to realise much of anything.

Hell Hath No Fury

As the boat disappeared into the night, Mandego stuck his hands in his pockets and let out a slow whistle. Carmen stood next to him, waiting for whatever nonsense was about to spew from his lips. Hector always made a meal out of everything.

“Well then, Biscuit. You hungry?”

Carmen shook her head.

Hector shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he turned on his heel and looked back towards the Butchers. “When should we prepare the guest rooms for your arrival?”

Keeping her focus fixed on the water, Carmen thought for a moment. “Give me a few days. I have some things to do and then I’ll come.”

Hector let the silence hang in the air. Then he grinned, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “You just make sure you do. Can’t have a little thing like you running about the city all alone, something nasty might happen to you. There are terrible things lurking about in the shadows you know.”

Carmen turned her head. “We *are* the terrible things.” Not caring to see his reaction, she swept away. He did not try to stop her; though she did hear the sound of his voice ringing out into the night.

“I’ll see you soon then.”

She did not need to look back. Mandego did not need to follow. They both knew from the moment Carmen made her choice to stay in D’Orsee, she had become a part of the game. Now the city would wait for the little girl in the rain to show her hand. Carmen left the Hook, and walked back to the Pits.

“All ship shape and according to plan?” Mandego cut vigorously into the slab of meat on his plate. There was music in the Butchers. Someone had started up a tune on Hector’s command, melody punctuated by the sounds of gunfire across the city.

“We got him to the ship,” Royce confirmed. “We’ll see if they make it past the gate.”

“Good,” Mandego pushed a cup towards his counterpart. Royce was looking stony-faced. Nobody liked a miserable party guest. “Have a port.” Royce sat down, easing the massive bulk of his frame onto a rickety wooden chair. He seemed hesitant to take the drink. Mandego frowned. “Oh, come on, it’s a celebration.”

“Don’t see as what we’re celebrating, boss.”

“You worry too much.” Mandego stabbed his fork into a bit of potato and held it out. “Everything is exactly as it should be.”

With drinking and debauchery in full swing in the Butchers, Hector planned on enjoying the evening. Royce was right to be wary; it was part of what made him a good second. The day would come when Hector Mandego would be challenged.

He held half the Black Zone in the palm of his hand. Yanis Ypres was only one of many enemies he had to worry about. Sanquain would have his day, and when he did, it was unlikely any of the crime lords would go untouched. That was fine; let him bring it down upon them. Mandego had weathered many a storm before.

Tomorrow was another day.

Monroe - he was new. Mandego hoped they might come to be friends. In as much as Hector Mandego ever truly had friends. Royce told him what had happened in the Hook. He described the cold, vicious look on Monroe’s face.

“Fuckin’ dead behind the eyes he was,” Royce said dryly. “If that fucker ain’t the most dangerous person in this city right now, I know nothing.”

Mandego leaned back, pressing his hands against the table. It was true, Royce didn’t know anything. Anyone with half a brain in their head ought to have known there was someone out there who was far more dangerous than any of them. Mandego let a smile draw over his face.

Cath would have loved it. As for Hector, well, he always liked women with a little stink of chaos about them.

By the time dawn was approaching, Carmen stood in a narrow street, tall buildings on either side, thin boarded windows and a large set of green doors ahead, the paint faded and cracked. It didn't look like much.

"What you doin' hanging around here?" A few houses down, an old woman stood bent over. She was beating a rug against the side of the door frame. "Ain't the sort of place you wanna be lingerin'."

"Do you know what happened here?" Carmen looked thoughtful.

The woman's face softened. "I know enough, and plenty of stories. Nice girl like you don't want to hear them though. It's a place best forgot." Seemingly satisfied the rug was free of dust, the old woman turned and retreated into her home.

Carmen crossed the road and pressed a hand to the green door. She had expected some resistance but found none. It opened quite easily. Carmen supposed there was little need to stop anyone from walking into a place no sane person wanted to go. She slipped inside, closing the door behind, a cloud of dust falling from the ceiling.

Memories were funny things. They twisted and contorted images, little aspects of your fears and nightmares seeping into reality.

Carmen passed through the vast, decaying room full of old bed frames, thinking how strange it was now she was there. She found the stairs, climbing up and walking to the nursery. Rows of rusted metal cots lined up like dominoes. Beyond that, rooms with tables and trays of bottles, the chemicals long since dried. She ran her finger along the shelves, empty now but once full of journals and studies - the pains of the many captured in black ink. At long last, she found the room she was looking for.

The door hung from the hinges. There was a chair behind the desk, seat ripped and the stuffing bursting out. Carmen sat, and placed her hands on the wood, feeling it. After a minute, she reached over and picked up a small brass plaque, wiping the dirt from it with one finger. Leaning back, she thought of how the place had haunted her for all those years, without her even knowing it, remaining dormant, burrowed into the back of her mind. Carmen took a notepad from the bag she carried. It wasn't unlike

Vanguard's bag, with the exception there was no knife in this one. She didn't need a blade.

With the creaking of the wind against the windows behind her, Carmen proceeded to fill the notepad. Each completed page torn out and cast aside as a new one was begun. She drew faces, maps, diagrams, plans. She drew weapons broken down into pieces and each step of how to put them back together again. She drew the roads and alleys, the curving, creeping sweep of the canal and each building that lay along its path. In that cold, dank room, Carmen reached into the black hole in the back of her head, and drew out every long forgotten memory. Everything she had ever seen. Everything she had ever known.

When there was nothing more to pull from the void, she found herself remembering memories that were not her own - the burning flames of Lycroix in battle, the last horrified look of a woman who knew her death came too soon, the choking, bubbling fear of a man drowned by his own son. She did not stop. Not for food. Not for sleep. Not for anything.

Not even for the images that passed through the walls and materialised in great numbers all around her, each a memory come back to life after years of lying still. Because it was true what they said.

A great many wrongs had been done to the people of D'Orsee. And hell hath no fury like a girl who remembers.