



SHADOW AND FORTUNE

A HARROWING STORY

CHAPTER ONE

*Blood on the Streets
Glory in Death
Down to the Bearded Lady*

- I -

The Butcher Blades had hung the Jackdaw from a rusted marlinspike through his jawbone and left him for the quayside scavengers. This was the seventeenth murdered ganger the hooded man had seen tonight.

A slow night by Bilgewater's standards.

At least since the Corsair King had fallen.

Red-fanged wharf rats had already eaten most of the hanged man's feet and were perched on stacked keels to tear at the soft meat of his calves.

The hooded man kept on walking.

"Help. Me."

The words were wet, squeezed up through a throat clogged with blood. The hooded man spun, hands reaching towards the weapons slung on his wide belt.

Incredibly, the Jackdaw was still alive on the bone-handled spike. The Hooks stuck it deep into the wooden frame of a loading crane. No way to get the Jackdaw down without tearing his skull to splinters.

"Help. Me," he said again.

The hooded man paused, considering the Jackdaw's request.

"What for?" he said at last. "Even if I get you down from there, you will be dead by morning."

The Jackdaw carefully lifted his hand to a concealed pocket in his patchwork jerkin and removed a golden Kraken. Even in the dim light, the hooded man saw it was genuine.

- 2 -

The scavengers hissed and raised their hackles as he approached. Wharf rats weren't large, but meat as warm as this wasn't a prize to be surrendered lightly. They bared long, needle-like fangs, spitting diseased gobbets of saliva.

He kicked one rat out over the water. He crushed a second underfoot. They snapped and bit, but nimble footwork kept any from tasting his flesh, his every movement smooth and precise. He killed another three before the rest scattered to the shadows, sullen eyes glaring red in the darkness.

The hooded man stood beside the Jackdaw. His features were hidden, but the light of a rogue's moon suggested a face that no longer smiled.

"Death is here for you," he said. "Embrace it, safe in the knowledge I will ensure it is final."

He reached into his coat and withdrew a glittering spike of silver. Two handspans long and engraved with curling symbols spiraling along its length, it resembled an ornate, leather-worker's awl. He placed the tip under the dying man's chin.

The man's eyes widened and his hand scrabbled at the hooded man's sleeve as he looked out over the vast expanse of ocean. The sea was a black mirror shimmering with the glow of myriad candles, quayside braziers and lamplight warped through salvaged glass from a thousand cliffside-hulks.

"You know what lurks over the horizon," he said. "You know the horror it brings. And yet you tear at each other like rabid beasts. It makes no sense to me."

He turned and hammered the heel of his palm against the flattened haft of the awl, driving the spike up into the man's brain. A last corpse rattle and the Jackdaw's pain ended. The gold coin fell from the dead man's fingers and rolled into the ocean with a soft splash.

The man withdrew the spike and wiped it clean on the Jackdaw's ragged shirt. He returned it to the sheath inside his coat and removed a golden needle and a length of silver thread dipped in waters drawn from an Ionian spring.

Working with the skill of one who had performed this service many times before, he sewed the man's eyes and lips shut. As he worked, he spoke words taught to him a lifetime ago, words first ill-spoken by a long dead king.

“Now the dead cannot claim you,” he said as he finished his work and replaced his implements.

“Maybe not, but we ain't leaving empty-handed, sure we ain't,” said a voice behind the hooded man.

He turned and pulled back his hood to reveal skin the color and texture of aged mahogany, cheekbones that were angular and patrician. His dark hair was bound in a long scalp-lock and eyes that had seen horror beyond measure surveyed the newcomers.

Six men. Dressed in aprons of blood-stiffened leather cut to display limbs of corded muscle wrapped with tattooed thorns. Each carried a serrated hook and wore belts hung with a variety of meat-workers' knives. Petty thugs made bold by the fall of the tyrant who'd ruled Bilgewater with an iron fist. With him gone, the city was in chaos as rival gangs sought to carve out fresh territories.

Their approach hadn't been stealthy. Hobnailed boots, offal-stench and muttered curses had announced their presence long before they'd revealed themselves.

“I don't mind a coin going to the Bearded Lady, sure I don't,” said the biggest of the Butchers, a man with a gut so prodigious it was a wonder he could get close enough to a carcass to gut it at all. “But one of ours killed Old Knock John there, fair and square, sure they did. So that gold serpent there was ours.”

“Do you want to die here?” asked the man.

The fat man laughed.

“You know who you're talking to?”

“No. Do you?”

“Go on then, tell me so I can carve it on the rock I'll use to sink your bones.”

“My name is Lucian,” he said, whipping back his long frock coat and drawing a pair of pistols wrought of knapped stone and burnished metals unknown to even the most reckless alchemists of Zaun. A bolt of coruscating light punched the fat Butcher from his feet with a scorched hole where his grotesquely swollen heart had been.

Lucian's second pistol was smaller, more finely crafted, and fired a searing line of yellow fire that cut another of the Butchers in half from collarbone to groin.

Like the wharf rats before, they fled, but Lucian picked them off one by one. Each burst of light was a killing shot. In the blink of an eye all six Butchers lay dead.

He sheathed his pistols and pulled the coat back around him. Others would be drawn by the sound and fury of his work, and he had no time to save these men's souls from what was coming.

Lucian sighed. It had been a mistake to stop for the Jackdaw, but perhaps the man he had once been was not entirely lost. A memory threatened to surface and he shook his head.

"I cannot be him again," said Lucian.

He isn't strong enough to kill the Chain Warden.

- II -

Olaf's frostscales hauberk was covered in blood and viscera. He grunted as he swung his axe one-handed. Bone sheared and muscle parted before the weapon, its blade quenched on a bed of True Ice deep in the farthest reaches of the Freljord.

Bearing a spitting torch in one hand, he waded through the dripping innards of the Krakenwurm, hewing deeper with every swing. It had taken him three hours to reach this far; cleaving through its enormous glistening organs and dense bones.

True, the beast was already dead, skewered a week ago after a month's long chase down from the north. Over thirty harpoons cast by strong arms and broad backs from the deck of Winter's Kiss pierced its scaled hide, but it had been Olaf's spear that finally ended its fight.

Killing the beast in the heart of a churning storm outside Bilgewater had been exhilarating, and for one brief moment — as the ship heeled over and almost tossed him into the beast's maw — he'd thought this might be the moment he would achieve the glorious death he sought.

But then Svarfell the helmsman, curse his mighty shoulder, centered the rudder to right the ship.

And, sadly, Olaf had lived. Another day closer to the terror of dying peacefully in his bed as a greybearded ancient.

They'd berthed in Bilgewater, hoping to sell the carcass and strip it of battle trophies; vast teeth, black blood that burned like oil, and titanic rib-bones fit to roof his mother's hall.

His fellow tribesmen, exhausted from the hunt, were sleeping aboard Winter's Kiss, but Olaf, ever impatient, could not rest. Instead, he took up his glittering axe and set to work in dismembering the colossal monster.

Finally he saw the beast's inner maw, a ribbed gullet large enough to swallow a clan whole or crush a thirty-oar Longreaver in a single bite. Its teeth were chiseled fangs like obsidian boulders.

Olaf nodded. "Yah. Fit to ring a hearth circle of the wind-walkers and the readers of bones and ash."

He jammed the spiked base of the torch into the meat of the Krakenwurm's flesh and set to work, hacking at the jawbone until a tooth came loose. Hooking the axe to his belt, Olaf lifted it clear and set it upon his shoulder, grunting at the enormous weight.

"Like a Frost Troll gathering ice for his lair," he said, making his way out of the beast's innards, wading knee-deep in blood and caustic digestive juices.

Eventually he emerged from the giant wound in the Krakenwurm's rear and drew in a lungful of slightly fresher air. Even after the innards of the beast, Bilgewater was a rank soup of smoke and sweat and dead things. Its air was heavy with the smell of too many people living packed together like swine in a midden.

He spat a rank mouthful and said, "The sooner I am in the north the better."

The air of the Freljord was so sharp it could cut you to the bone. Every breath here tasted of rancid milk and spoiled meat.

"Hey!" shouted a voice over the water.

Olaf squinted through the gloom, seeing a lone fisherman rowing out to sea beyond a line of floating water markers hung with dead birds and bells.

"That beast just shit you out?" shouted the fisherman.

Olaf nodded and said, "I had no gold to pay passage on a ship, so I let it swallow me in the Freljord and bear me south."

The fisherman grinned and drank from a cracked bottle of blue glass. "I'd sit and listen to that tall tale, right enough!"

"Come to the Winter's Kiss and ask for Olaf," he shouted. "We'll share a keg of Gravöl and honor the beast with songs of doom."

- III -

The air around the White Wharf usually smelled of gull-crap and rotten fish. Today it tasted of scorched meat and woodsmoke, a flavor with which Miss Fortune was coming to associate with ever more of Gangplank's men dying. Ash darkened the sky and reeking fumes drifted westwards from burning vats of rendered leviathan blubber on the Slaughter Docks. Miss Fortune's mouth felt greasy, and she spat onto the crooked timbers of the wharf. The water below was scummed with residue expelled by the thousands of corpses sunk beneath the water over the years.

"You and your men had a busy night," she said, nodding toward the smoke rising from the western cliffs.

"Aye, that we did," agreed Rafen. "Plenty more of Gangplank's men going under today."

"How many did you get?" asked Miss Fortune.

"Another ten of his Cragside lads," said Rafen. "And the Boneyard Scallys won't be bothering us again."

Miss Fortune nodded in approval and turned to look at the ornate bronze cannon laid on the quayside.

Jackknife Byrne lay inside the barrel, finally dead from the gutshot he'd taken on the day everything changed; the day the Dead Pool exploded in full view of Bilgewater.

A gunshot meant for her.

Now it was time for Byrne to go down among the dead men and she owed it to him to be there to see him go under. Around two hundred men and women had come to pay their respects; her own lieutenants, Byrne's old gang members, and strangers she thought might be former crewmen or curious gawkers hoping to see the woman who'd brought down Gangplank.

Byrne said he'd once run his own ship, a two-masted brigantine that was the terror of the Noxian coast, but she only had his word for that. Maybe that was true, maybe it wasn't, but in Bilgewater, more often than not the truth was far stranger than any tale spun by the city's many chanty-men.

"I see you got them fighting each other out on the Slaughter Docks as well," said Miss Fortune, brushing particles of ash from her lapels. Long red hair spilled from beneath a tricorn hat and gathered on the shoulders of her formal frock coat.

"Yeah, wasn't hard to turn the Rat Town Dogs and Wharf Kings against each other," said Rafen. "Ven Gallar's always had his eye on that patch. Says Travyn's boys took it from his old man a decade ago."

"That true?"

"Who knows?" said Rafen. "Don't matter, no-how. Gallar would say anything to get control of that part of the docks. I just helped him along."

"Not much left to control over there now."

"No," agreed Rafen with a grin. "They pretty much killed the hell out of each other. Don't reckon we'll get trouble from either of them gangs any time soon."

"Another week like this and there won't be any of Gangplank's people left alive."

Rafen gave her a strange look and Miss Fortune pretended not to notice.

"Come on, let's get Byrne sunk," said Miss Fortune.

They walked over to the cannon, ready to roll it into the sea. A forest of wooden markers dotted the scummed surface of the water, ranging from simple wooden discs to elaborate sculptures of sea wyrms.

"Anyone want to say anything?" said Miss Fortune.

Nobody did, and she nodded to Rafen, but before they could tip the cannon into the water, a booming voice echoed over the wharf.

“I bring words for him.”

Miss Fortune turned to see a giant of a woman clad in colorful robes and acres of fabric striding down the docks towards them. A posse of tattooed menfolk accompanied her; a dozen youths armed with tooth-bladed spears, wide-mouthed pistols and hooked clubs. They swaggered like the cocksure gangers they were, standing with their priestess like they owned the docks.

“Seven hells, what's she doing here?”

“Did Illaoi know Byrne?”

“No. She knows me,” said Miss Fortune. “I heard that her and Gangplank used to...you know?”

“Really?”

“So the scuttlebutt goes.”

“By the Bearded Lady, no wonder Okao's men have been giving us such a hard time these last few weeks.”

Illaoi carried a heavy stone sphere that looked as if it weighed about as much as the Syren's anchor. The towering priestess carried it everywhere she went, and Miss Fortune assumed it was some kind of totem. What everyone else called the Bearded Lady, they called something virtually unpronounceable.

Illaoi produced a peeled mango from somewhere and took a bite. She noisily chewed the fruit with her mouth open and looked down the barrel of the cannon.

“A Bilgewater man deserves a blessing of Nagakabouros, yes?”

“Why not?” said Miss Fortune. “He's going down to meet the goddess, after all.”

“Nagakabouros doesn't live in the depths,” said Illaoi. “Only foolish paylangi think that. Nagakabouros is in everything we do that moves us along our path.”

“Yeah, how stupid of me,” said Miss Fortune.

Illaoi spat the fibrous mango pit into the water and swung the stone idol around like a giant cannonball, holding it up in front of Miss Fortune.

“You're not stupid, Sarah,” said Illaoi with a laugh. “But you don't even know what you are, what you've done.”

“Why are you really here, Illaoi? Is this about him?”

“Ha! Not even a little bit,” snorted Illaoi. “My life is for Nagakabouros. A god or a man? What choice is that?”

“None at all,” said Miss Fortune. “Bad luck for Gangplank.”

Illaoi grinned, exposing a mouthful of pulped mango.

“You're not wrong,” she said with a slow nod, “but you still don't hear. You let a razor-eel off the hook and you ought to stamp on its neck and walk away before it sinks its fangs into you. Then your motion will be gone forever.”

“What does that mean?”

“Come and see me when you figure it out,” said Illaoi, holding out her hand. Nestled in her palm was a pendant of pink coral arranged in a series of curves radiating from a central hub like a single, unblinking eye.

“Take it,” said Illaoi.

“What is it?”

“A token of Nagakabouros to guide you when you're lost.”

“What is it really?”

“Nothing more than I say.”

Miss Fortune hesitated, but too many people were gathered for her to openly offend a priestess of the Bearded Lady by refusing her gift. She took the pendant and removed her tricorn to loop the leather thong around her neck.

Illaoi leaned in to whisper.

“I don't think you're stupid,” she said. “Prove me right.”

“Why do I care what you think?” said Miss Fortune.

“Because a storm is coming,” said Illaoi, nodding at something over Miss Fortune's shoulder. “You know the one, so you best be ready to turn your prow into the waves.”

She turned and kicked Byrne's cannon from the dock. It splashed down hard and sank in a froth of bubbles before the fatty surface residue reformed, leaving only its bobbing marker cross to indicate who was below.

The priestess of the Bearded Lady marched back the way she had come, towards her temple in the cliff-crater, and Miss Fortune turned her gaze out to sea.

A storm was brewing way out in the deep ocean, but that wasn't where Illaoi had been looking.

She'd been looking towards the Shadow Isles.

- IV -

Nobody ever fished Bilgewater Bay at night.

Piet knew why, of course; he'd known these waters all his life. The currents were treacherous, hull-splitting rocks lurked just below the surface, and the seabed was littered with the wrecks of ships whose captains had not accorded the sea its proper respect. But, more importantly, everyone knew the spirits of those drowned at sea were lonely and wanted others to join them.

Piet knew all this, but still needed to feed his family.

With Captain Jerimiad's ship burned to cinders in the crossfire between Gangplank and Miss Fortune, Piet had no work and no coin to pay for food.

He'd drunk half a bottle of Scuttler's Scrumpy just to pluck up the courage to push his boat out onto the water tonight, and the prospect of sharing a drink with the giant Freljordan helped steady his nerves.

Piet took another slug from the bottle, tugging the scruff of hair on his chin, then pouring a measure over the side to honor the Bearded Lady.

Warmed and numbed by the liquor, Piet rowed past the warning buoys and their dead birds until he came to a stretch of ocean where he'd had some luck the previous night. Jeremiad

always said he had a nose for where the fish were biting, and he had a feeling they'd be gathering where the remains of the Dead Pool had drifted.

Piet pulled in the oars and stowed them before finishing off the Scrumpy. Then, making sure to leave a last mouthful in the bottle, he tossed it out to sea. With tired, drink-addled fingers he baited his hooks with grubs he'd scooped from a dead man's eye and tied his lines to the gunwale cleats.

He closed his eyes and bent over the side of the boat, placing both hands in the water.

"Nagakabouros," he said, hoping that using the natives' name for the Bearded Lady might grant him a bit of luck, "I ain't asking for much. Please help this poor fisherman and spare him a few morsels from your larder. Watch over me and keep me safe. And if I die in your embrace, keep me down among the dead men."

Piet opened his eyes.

A pale face stared back at him, wavering just below the surface. It shimmered with cold, lifeless light.

He cried out and jerked back into his boat as, one by one, his fishing lines were pulled taut. They spun his boat around as thin coils of mist rose from the water. The mist thickened swiftly and soon the light from Bilgewater's cliffs was lost to the death knights as coal-dark fog rolled in from the sea.

A cacophony of once-dead birds squawked from the warning markers, followed by the clamor of bells as their convulsing bodies swung the buoys back and forth.

The black mist...

Piet scrambled for his oars, fumbling in terror to fit them to the rowlocks. The mist was numbingly cold, and lines of necrotic black threaded his skin at its touch. He wept as the grave's chill frosted his spine.

"Bearded Lady, Mother Below, Nagakabouros," he sobbed. "Please guide me home. Please, this I beg of-"

Piet never finished his plea.

A pair of hook-headed chains erupted from his chest, droplets of vividly red blood streaming from their tips. A third hook punched through his belly, another his throat. A fifth and sixth gouged his palms and pulled them down hard, pinning Piet to his boat.

Agony surged through him and he screamed as a figure of purest malice emerged from the black mist. Emerald fire haloed its horned skull, and sockets gouged by vengeful spirits burned as they savored his pain.

The dead spirit was robed in ancient black vestments, and rusted keys scraped at its side. A chained corpse-lantern moaned and swayed with monstrous appetite from its clenched fist.

The glass of the infernal lantern opened to receive him, and Piet felt his spirit tear loose from the warmth of his flesh. The wails of tortured souls shrieked from its depths, maddened by their unending purgatory. Piet fought to keep his spirit within his body, but a spectral blade scythed and his time in the world was ended as the glass of the lantern snapped shut.

“A wretched soul you are,” said the reaper of his life, its voice like gravel on a tombstone. “But only the first to be claimed by Thresh this night.”

The black mist rippled, and the silhouettes of malefic spirits, howling wraiths and ghostly horsemen swelled within.

The darkness boiled across the sea and swept onto land.

And the lights in Bilgewater started to go out.

CHAPTER TWO

Something Stupid
The Red Shroud
The Shadow of War

- I -

Miss Fortune snapped the barrels of her pistols shut and laid them down on the table next to her short-bladed sword. Scores of frantic bells and shouts of alarm echoed from the panicked city below; she knew well what they signified.

The Harrowing.

In defiance of the incoming storm, she'd kept the shuttered windows of her newly-acquired villa open, daring the dead to come for her. Muttering winds carried their hunger and a cold that settled bone-deep.

Perched high on Bilgewater's eastern cliffs, the villa had once belonged to a hated gang leader. In the chaos of Gangplank's fall, he'd been dragged from his bed and had his brains bashed out on the cobbles.

Now it belonged to Miss Fortune, and she'd be damned if she'd go the same way. She reached up and ran a fingertip around the curves of the pendant Illaoi had given her at Byrne's sinking. The coral was warm to the touch, and though she didn't truly believe in what it represented, it was a pretty enough bauble.

The door to her chamber opened and she let the pendant drop.

She knew who was behind her without turning. Only one man would dare enter without knocking.

"What are you doing?" asked Rafen.

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Like you’re about to do something damned stupid.”

“Stupid?” said Miss Fortune, placing her hands on the table. “We shed blood and lost good people to bring down Gangplank. I’m not going to let the Harrowing just-”

“Just what?”

“Take this place from me,” she snapped lifting her pistols and jamming them into their custom tooled hip-scabbards. “And you’re not going to stop me.”

“We’re not here to stop you.”

Miss Fortune turned to see Rafen at the threshold of her chambers. A score of her best fighters waited in the vestibule beyond, armed to the teeth with a mixture of muskets, wheel-lock pistols, clanking bundles of clay splinter-bombs and cutlasses that looked like they’d been looted from a museum.

“Looks like you’re about to do something damned stupid as well,” she said.

“Aye,” agreed Rafen, walking over to the open window and slamming the shutters closed. “You really think we’d let our captain go out to face that alone?”

“I almost died bringing Gangplank down, and I’m not done yet. I don’t expect you to go with me, not tonight,” said Miss Fortune coming to stand before her men and resting her hands on the carved walnut grips of her guns. “This isn’t your fight.”

“Course it bloody is,” said Rafen.

Miss Fortune took a breath and nodded.

“There’s every chance we won’t live to see morning,” she said, unable to keep the hint of a smile tugging at her lip.

“This ain’t our first Harrowing together, Captain,” said Rafen, tapping the skull pommel of his sword. “And I’ll be damned if it’s our last.”

- II -

Olaf was in sight of the Winter's Kiss when he heard the screams. He ignored them at first — screams were nothing new in Bilgewater — but then he saw men and women running from the quayside in terror, and his interest was piqued.

They scrambled from their boats and fled for the crooked streets as fast as they could. They didn't look back and they didn't stop, not even when a shipmate tripped or fell into the water.

Olaf had seen men run from battle, but this was something else. This was naked terror, the kind he'd only ever seen etched on the frozen corpses spat out by glaciers where the Ice Witch was said to dwell.

Shutters were slamming shut all across the wharf and the strange symbols he'd seen on every door were frantically being dusted with white powder. Enormous winches were lifting timber structures formed from bolted-together hulls of ships high up the cliffs.

He recognized a tavern-keeper who ran a drinking den where the beer was only slightly stronger than troll piss and waved to him.

"What's going on?" shouted Olaf.

The tavern-keeper shook his head and pointed to the ocean before slamming his door. Olaf set the Krakenwurm's tooth on the stone wharf and turned to see what all the fuss was about.

At first he thought a storm was coming in, but it was just thick black sea fog, albeit fog that approached with unnatural speed and fluid motion.

"Ah, now," he said, unhooking his axe from his belt. "This looks promising."

The feel of the weapon's battle-worn leather grip was pleasing in his callused palm as he passed it from hand to hand, rolling his shoulders to loosen the muscles.

The black mist swept over the farthest ships and Olaf's eyes widened as he saw spirits plucked from the blackest nightmares writhing in the mist. A towering dreadknight, a monstrous chimera of warhorse and man, led them alongside a black-clad reaper limned in green fire. These lords of the dead left the spirit host to their sport on the quayside as they flew into Bilgewater proper with predatory speed.

Olaf had heard the natives speak in hushed whispers of something called the Harrowing, a time of doom and darkness, but hadn't expected to be lucky enough to face it axe in hand.

The host of the dead tore into the wallowing galleys, merchantmen, and corsair ships with claw and fang, ripping them apart like an ursine with its snout in a fresh kill. Sailcloth tore and rigging lines snapped as easily as rotten sinew. Heavy masts splintered as boats were tossed into one another and smashed to kindling.

A host of screaming wraiths flew into the Winter's Kiss and Olaf roared in anger as the Longreaver's keel heaved and split, its timbers freezing solid in a heartbeat. The boat sank as swiftly as if its hold were filled with rocks, and Olaf saw his fellow Freljordians dragged below the water by creatures with cadaverous limbs and fish-hooked mouths.

"Olaf will make you wish you had stayed dead!" he yelled as he charged along the wharf.

Spirits boiled up from the ocean, icy claws slashing towards him. Olaf's axe sang out, cleaving a glittering arc through the host. The dead screeched as his blade sundered them, its True Ice edge more lethal than any enchantment.

They howled as they died a second time and Olaf sang the song he'd written for the moment of his death with lusty vigor. The words were simple, but the equal of any saga told by the wandering poets of the ice. How long had he waited to sing these words? How often had he feared he might never get the chance?

A shimmering mist of snapping jaws swarmed him, specters and things of mist. Webs of frost patterned his hauberk and the deathly touch of voracious spirits burned his skin.

But Olaf's heart was mighty and it fired his blood to heights of fury unknown to all but the berserker. He shrugged off the pain of the wraith touch, feeling reason recede and fury build.

Crimson froth built at the corners of his mouth as he bit the inside of his cheeks raw. He roared and swung his axe like a madman, caring nothing for pain, only that he slew his enemies.

That they were dead already meant nothing to him.

Olaf drew his axe back, ready to strike another blow, when a deafening crash of splintering columns and roof beams erupted behind him. He spun to face this new foe as a blizzard of smashed wood and stone cascaded onto the quayside. Bladed shards sliced his face and fist-sized

chunks of stone pummeled his arms raw. Rendered fats and animal fluids fell in a rank drizzle as a horrendous groaning issued from the black mist.

Then he saw it.

The spirit of the Krakenwurm arose from the remains of the Slaughter Dock. Titanic and filled with fury, its ghostly tentacles lifted into the air and smashed down like thunderbolts hurled by a wrathful god. An entire street was smashed to ruin in the blink of an eye and Olaf's berserker fury surged as he finally beheld a foe worthy of claiming his life.

Olaf raised his axe in salute of his killer.

"Ya beauty!" he yelled and charged to his doom.

- III -

The woman was beautiful, with wide, almond shaped eyes, full lips and the high cheekbones common to Demacia. The portrait in the locket was a miniature masterpiece, but it failed to capture the depth of Senna's strength and determination.

He rarely looked at her picture, knowing that to carry his grief too close to his heart made him weak. Grief was a chink in his armor. Lucian could not allow himself to truly feel her loss, so he snapped the locket shut. He knew he should bury it in the sand of this cave beneath the cliffs, but could not put her memory below the earth as he had her body.

He would shut the grief away until Thresh was destroyed and Senna's death avenged.

Then, and only then, would Lucian mourn his lost wife with tears and offerings to the Veiled Lady.

How long had it been since that terrible night?

He felt the bottomless abyss of sorrow lurking in ambush and viciously suppressed it as he had so many times before. He drew on the teachings of his order, repeating the mantras he and Senna had been taught to close themselves off from emotion. Only then could he reach a place of equilibrium that would allow him to face deathly horrors beyond imagining.

The grief ebbed slowly, but it remained.

He'd opened the locket only reluctantly, feeling a growing distance between himself and Senna's memory. He found he could no longer recall the exact sweep of her jawline, the smoothness of her skin or the precise color of her eyes.

The longer his hunt went on, the further away she felt.

Lucian lifted his head, letting the breath ease from his lungs, forcing his heartbeat to slow.

The walls of the cave were pale limestone, gouged from the cliffs upon which Bilgewater was built. The motion of water and the stone picks of the natives had crafted a labyrinth beneath the city few knew of or even suspected existed. The pale rock walls were etched with looping spirals, rippling waves and things that might have been unblinking eyes.

He'd learned these were symbols of the native religion, but whoever had carved them had not visited this place in many years. He'd found it by following the secret symbols of his own order, symbols that would guide him to places of refuge and succor in any city of Valoran.

Only dim reflections of light shimmered on the roof of the cave, but as his eyes followed the spiral of carvings, a shimmering radiance spread from his palm.

Let me be your shield.

Lucian looked down, the memory of her words as clear as though she stood next to him.

The locket glistened with lambent green flame.

He looped the chain of the locket around his neck and swept up his twin relic pistols.

"Thresh," he whispered.

- IV -

Bilgewater's streets were deserted. The bells from the ocean were still ringing and cries of terror echoed from below. Rat Town was completely covered by the Black Mist, and howling storms raged over Port Mourn's desolation. Fires burned all along Butcher's Bridge and a shimmering fog clung to the cliffs above the Grey Harbor.

The people in the upper reaches of the city hid in their homes and prayed to the Bearded Lady that the Harrowing would pass them by, that grief would fall upon some other poor unfortunate.

Warding candles of ambergris burned in every window, shimmering through bottle green sea-glass. Burning roots of Empress of the Dark Forest hung from doors, shutters and nailed up planks.

“People really believe in the Empress?” asked Miss Fortune.

Rafen shrugged, his mouth a thin line and the creases around his eyes pulled tight as he searched the gathering mist for threats. He pulled out a smoldering length of identical root from beneath his shirt.

“It’s all about where you place your faith, isn’t it?”

Miss Fortune drew her pistols.

“I have faith in these and in us,” she said. “What else are you carrying?”

“This cutlass has kept me safe through six Harrowings,” he said, tapping its pommel again. “I offered up a bottle of ten year old rum to the Bearded Lady and this knife here was sold to me by a man who swore its edge was purest sunsteel.”

Miss Fortune glanced at the scabbarded knife, certain without even seeing the blade that Rafen had been swindled. The workmanship around the quillons was too poor to be Demacian, but she wasn’t about to tell him that.

“What about you?” he asked.

Miss Fortune patted her pouch of pistol shot.

“Every one’s been dipped in Myron’s Dark,” she said, loud enough for every one of her thirty-strong company to hear. “If the dead want a fight, we’ll meet them with spirits of our own.”

The oppressive gloom made it hard to laugh, but she saw a few smiles and that was about as much as she could expect on a night like this.

She turned and pushed down into Bilgewater, descending crooked stairs cut into the rock of the cliffs, crossing secret bridges of half-rotted rope and threading forgotten alleys that hadn’t known the tread of feet in years.

She brought them out into a wide square on one of the floating wharf-shanties, where swaying dwellings leaned together as though their twisted eaves whispered to one another. Every façade was a mishmash of driftwood, and patterns of frost clung to the skewed timbers.

Frozen winds blew through the patchwork dwellings, freighted with sobs and screams from afar. Flaming braziers hung from hundreds of mast-lines strung between buildings, smoking with strange herbs. Pools of water rippled with reflections of things that weren't there.

Most days this was a thriving marketplace, packed to the gunwales with stalls, rattling meat-vendors, drink-hawkers, merchants, pirates, bounty hunters and surly flotsam washed in from every corner of the world. Just about everywhere in Bilgewater had a view of this place, which was just how Miss Fortune wanted it.

Mist clung to every outcropping of timber.

Discarded figureheads wept frozen tears.

Mist and shadows gathered.

"Cutpurse Square?" said Rafen. "How did we get here? I ran this place as a wharf-snipe. Thought I knew every way in and out like any good little thief."

"Not every way," said Miss Fortune.

The counting houses on either side were silent and dark, and she resisted the impulse to look through the torn sheets of flapping canvas nailed over porthole windows.

"How do you know these routes and I don't?"

"Lady Bilgewater and I are two of a kind," said Miss Fortune, her gaze narrowing as black mist seeped into the square. "She whispers her secrets to me like an old friend, so I know her every hidden wynd and jitty like you never will."

Rafen grunted as they spread into the empty square.

"What next?"

"We wait," said Miss Fortune as they reached the center of the square, feeling terribly exposed.

The black mist twitched with things moving in its depths.

A disembodied skull of ghostly light stretched from the darkness, empty-eyed and with sharpened teeth. Its jaw stretched wider than any natural bone structure would allow and a keening wail built in its gullet.

Miss Fortune's bullets punched through each of its eye-sockets and the skull vanished with a shriek of frustration. She twisted the wheel-lock on each pistol and ingenious mechanisms within reloaded each one.

For a moment, all was silent.

Then the black mist erupted in a screeching howl as the spirits of the dead surged into the square.

- V -

For the second time this evening, Olaf cut his way inside the dead Krakenwurm. He wielded his axe like a crazed woodsman, hewing left and right with gleeful abandon. The beast's vast limbs were insubstantial as mist, yet the ice of his blade clove them like flesh.

Tentacles flailed and slammed down on the stone of the wharf, but Olaf was fast for a big man. Slow warriors didn't survive in the Freljord. He rolled and slashed with his axe, severing a suckered length of limb that faded from existence as it was parted from the monster's body.

Even in the grip of the red shroud, Olaf saw the creature's skull in the thrashing chaos of phantom limbs surrounding him.

Its eyes were afire with the enraged spirit of its life.

A moment of sublime connection passed between them.

The beast's soul knew him.

Olaf laughed with joy.

"You see the taker of your life and we are now bonded in death!" he roared. "Mayhap if you kill me, we shall battle forever in the realms beyond mortal ken."

The prospect of eternal war against so mighty a foe poured fresh strength into Olaf's aching muscles. He charged towards the creature's maw, caring nothing for his pain as each brush with the Krakenwurm's tentacles burned his skin worse than the splinter-winds of the Lokfar coast.

He leapt into the air, axe aloft.

He looked glorious death in the face.

A tentacle whipped out and lashed around his thigh.

It swung him around in a dizzying arc, lifting him high into the air.

“Come then!” bellowed Olaf, punching his axe skyward in salute of their shared destiny.

“Unto death!”

- VI -

A wraith-creature with grasping talons and a mouth of icy fangs lunged from the swirling mass of spirits. Miss Fortune put a bullet through its face and it vanished like smoke in a gale.

A second shot and another spirit vanished.

She grinned through her fear as she spun into cover behind a weather-worn stone bollard of the River King to reload. On impulse, she leaned over and gave his toothy grin a kiss.

It’s all about where you place your faith.

Gods, bullets or her own skill?

The grin fell from her face as one of the pistols jammed with a grinding crunch of metal. Her mother’s admonishing words arose from the dark recesses of memory.

“That’s what you get when someone else mixes your powder, Sarah,” she said, holstering the gun and sliding her sword from its sheath. She’d looted it from the captain of a Demacian galiot running north up the Shuriman rust-coast, and it was as fine an example of the artificer’s art as any she’d seen.

Miss Fortune spun from cover, firing her loaded pistol and slashing her sword through the mist creatures. Her shot plucked another specter from the air and her sword’s edge bit as if cutting flesh and bone. Did the spirits of the dead have a physical component to them that could be hurt? It seemed unlikely, but she was wounding something inside them.

She didn’t have time to think too hard on the matter and suspected that whatever power she’d tapped into would be undone if she did.

Men and women screamed as the howling storm of dead spirits filled Cutpurse Square, slashing with claws that froze their blood or reached into chests and sundered hearts with terror.

Seven were dead, maybe more, their souls wrenched from their fallen corpses to turn on their comrades. Her heroic band fought with blades and muskets, shouting the name of the Bearded Lady, their loved ones, and even heathen gods of faraway lands.

Whatever works, thought Miss Fortune.

Rafen was down on one knee, his face ashen, breathing like a wharfside doxy after a long shift. Scraps of mist clung to him like cobwebs and the smoldering root around his neck burned with a fierce cherry red glow.

“On your feet, this fight isn’t done!” she said.

“Don’t tell me the fight’s not done,” he snapped, pushing himself to his feet. “I’ve been through more Harrowings than you could wrap a dead rat’s tail around.”

Before Miss Fortune could ask exactly what that meant, he leaned to the side and fired his pistol at something behind her. A conjoined spirit of wolf and bat screeched as it was banished, and Miss Fortune returned the favor as a spirit form of grasping hooks and snapping fangs lunged at her second in command.

“Everyone down!” shouted Miss Fortune, plucking a pair of splinter bombs from her belt and lobbing them into the howling mist.

They detonated in a deafening explosion of fire and smoke. Wood splinters and fragments of stone ricocheted. Broken glass fell in a glittering rain of daggers. Acrid fog filled the square, but it was man-made and entirely bereft of spirits.

Rafen shook his head and worked a finger in his ear.

“What was in that bomb?”

“Black Powder mixed with essence of copal and rue,” said Miss Fortune. “One from my special stash.”

“And stuff like that works against the dead?”

“My mother believed in it,” she said.

“Good enough for me,” said Rafen. “You know, we might just make it through-”

“Don’t say it,” warned Miss Fortune.

The mist began coalescing throughout the square, first in thin tendrils and wisps, then in glowing outlines of monsters; things with conjoined legs, fang-filled jaws, and arms that ended in hooks or pincers. The spirits they thought they'd killed.

Reforming, returning.

What was it folk said about plans and the contents of a privy?

"Turns out the dead are pretty hard to kill," said Miss Fortune, trying not to let her fear show.

She'd been naïve to think petty trinkets and blind faith were enough to face the spirits of the dead. She'd wanted to show the people of Bilgewater they didn't need Gangplank, that they could forge their own destiny.

Instead, she was going to get herself killed and leave the city to be torn apart.

A bass rumble rolled through the square. Then another.

Percussive thunder strikes, rising in a stalking storm.

It grew to become pounding hammerblows upon an anvil. Faster and louder until the ground shook with its violence.

"What in the nine deeps is that?" said Rafen.

"I don't know," said Miss Fortune as the outline of a spectral horseman in midnight plate emerged from the mist. He sat atop a strangely proportioned warhorse and his helm was worked in the form of a snarling demon.

"A dread knight," said Miss Fortune.

Rafen shook his head, his face drained of color.

"That's no knight," he said. "That's the Shadow of War..."

CHAPTER THREE

*The Purifier
City of the Dead
Sanctuary*

- I -

Paralyzing terror rippled through Miss Fortune's company at the mention of this eternal nightmare of killing rage and endless fury.

The Shadow of War.

His name was once Hecarim, but no one knew if that were true or some ancient tale teller's invention. Only fools dared recite his dark legend around the hearthfire, and even then only after enough rum to sink a Noxian war-barque.

As the Shadow of War emerged further from the mist, Miss Fortune saw he was no mere horseman. Cold dread settled upon her like a shroud at the sight of the monstrous creature.

Perhaps Hecarim had once been a knight, man and horse separate entities. But rider and mount were now one, a single, towering behemoth whose only purpose was destruction.

"They're all around us," said a voice.

Miss Fortune risked looking away from the armored centaur to see a whole host of ghostly knights, their outlines lambent with pellucid green radiance. They leveled lances or drew swords of dark radiance. Hecarim swept out a hooked and terrible glaive, its killing edge erupting with green fire.

"You know any secret ways out of here?" asked Rafen.

"No," said Miss Fortune. "I want to fight that bastard."

"You want to fight the Shadow of War?"

Before Miss Fortune could answer, a hooded figure leapt from the rooftop of a grain store and dropped into the square. He landed gracefully, a storm coat of worn leather splayed behind him. He carried two pistols, but they were like no weapons Miss Fortune had ever seen on her mother's gun-table; bronzed metalwork braced around hunks of what looked like carved stone.

Light filled the square as he loosed searing bolts from each pistol in a fusillade that put the destruction of the Dead Pool to shame. The man turned in a tight spiral, marking targets and picking them off with whip-fast motion. The mist burned where his bolts struck, and the ghostly wraiths screeched as they were consumed.

The mist withdrew from Cutpurse Square, taking Hecarim and the death knights with it. Something told Miss Fortune this was but a temporary respite.

The man holstered his pistols and turned to look at Miss Fortune, throwing back his hood to reveal darkly handsome features with haunted eyes.

"The thing about shadows," he said. "Bring enough light and they disappear."

- II -

Olaf was not happy with this doom.

He hoped men would speak of his epic battle with the Krakenwurm, not this ignoble fall to his death.

He hoped someone might have seen him charge the sea beast.

He prayed at least one observer had seen him lifted high into the air by its ghostly tentacle, then fled before seeing him hurled away like an unworthy morsel.

Olaf crashed down through the roof of a building bolted to the side of the cliff. Maybe it was a ship's hull? He fell too fast to make it out. Crashing timbers and earthenware tumbled with him in his headlong plunge through the building. He glimpsed astonished, shouting faces flash past him.

Olaf smashed through a floor. A support beam drove the wind from him as he tumbled down Bilgewater's cliffs. He bounced from an outcrop of rock and went headfirst through an open window, crashing out again through yet another floor.

Angry curses followed him down.

He spun out into a trailing forest of ropes and pulleys, flags and pennants. He thrashed as he fell, tangling his limbs and weapon. Fate was mocking him, wrapping him in a folded shroud of canvas sailcloth.

"Not like this, damn it!" he roared. "Not like this!"

- III -

"Who are you and where can I get a pair of guns like those?" said Miss Fortune, offering her hand to the new arrival.

"My name is Lucian," he said, warily taking her hand.

"Damn glad to know you, friend," said Rafen, clapping him on the back as if they were old shipmates. Miss Fortune saw Rafen's familiarity made Lucian acutely uncomfortable, like he'd forgotten how to be around others.

His eyes scanned the edges of the square, his fingers dancing on the grips of his pistols.

"You're a welcome sight, Lucian," said Miss Fortune.

"We should move," he said. "The Shadow of War will return."

"He's right," said Rafen, giving her an imploring look. "It's time to get inside, batten down the hatches."

"No. We came out to fight."

"Look, I get it, Sarah. We won Bilgewater and you need to fight to hold onto it, to show everyone you're better than Gangplank. Well, you've done that. We went out into the Black Mist and we fought the dead. That's more than he ever did. Anyone who risks lookin' out a window is gonna know that. Hell, even the ones who ain't looking will hear about it. What more do you want?"

“To fight for Bilgewater.”

“There’s fighting for Bilgewater and then there’s dying for Bilgewater,” said Rafen. “I’m all up for the first, not so much the second. These men and women followed you down into hell, but now it’s time to climb back out.”

Miss Fortune faced her company of fighters, every ragged, cutthroat one of them. None of them could be trusted not to sell their own mothers for a shiny trinket, but they’d done everything and more she’d asked of them. Venturing out into the Black Mist was just about the bravest thing any of them had ever done and she couldn’t repay that by leading them to their deaths for the sake of her vengeance.

“You’re right,” she said, taking a breath. “We’re done here.”

“Then may fortune follow you,” said Lucian, turning away and drawing his strange pistols once again.

“Wait,” said Miss Fortune. “Come with us.”

Lucian shook his head. “No, there is a mist wraith I need to destroy. The one they call Thresh, the Chain Warden. I owe him a death.”

Miss Fortune saw the lines around Lucian’s eyes deepen and recognized the expression she’d worn ever since her mother’s murder.

“He took someone from you, didn’t he?” she said.

Lucian nodded slowly, and said no more, but his very silence spoke volumes.

“This clearly isn’t your first tussle with the dead,” she said, “but you won’t survive the night if you stay out here alone. I’m guessing that might not mean much to you, but whoever this Thresh took from you, they wouldn’t want you to die here.”

Lucian’s eyes flicked downwards, and Miss Fortune saw a silver locket just visible round his neck. Was it her imagination or a trick of the mist that made it shimmer in the moonlight?

“Come with us,” said Miss Fortune. “Find somewhere safe till morning and you’ll live to do it again.”

“Safe? Where is safe in this city?” said Lucian.

“I think I might know a place,” said Miss Fortune.

- IV -

They left Cutpurse Square and were traveling west up towards the Serpent Bridge when they found the Freljordian. He hung from a crooked spar like a shrouded corpse on a gibbet. Unlike most corpses, however, this one was thrashing like a landed fish.

A splintered pile of debris lay scattered all around him, and Miss Fortune looked up to see how far he'd fallen through the cliffside dwellings.

A long way was the answer, and that he was still alive was nothing short of a miracle.

Lucian leveled his pistols, but she shook her head.

"No, this one's actually on the right side of the grave."

Muffled cries came from within the shroud, curses that would get a man beaten to death in a host of different lands, shouted in a thick, Freljordian accent.

She placed the tip of her sword against the canvas and sliced downwards. Like a newborn sea-calf pulled from a ruptured birth-sac, a hugely bearded man spilled onto the cobbles. The reek of fish guts and offal clung to him.

He climbed unsteadily to his feet, brandishing an axe with a blade like a shard of diamond ice.

"Which way to the Slaughter Docks?" he said, weaving like a drunk. He looked around, confused, his head a mass of lumps and bruises.

"Ordinarily I'd tell you to follow your nose," said Miss Fortune, "but I'd be amazed if you've any sense of smell left."

"I'll kill that Krakenwyrn ten times over if I have to," said the man. "I owe it a death."

"Lot of that going around tonight," said Miss Fortune.

- V -

The Freljordian named himself Olaf, a warrior of the rightful mistress of the ice, and, after shaking off his concussion, declared his intention to join them until he could fight the most dangerous spirit within the Black Mist.

“Do you want to die?” Lucian asked him.

“Of course,” said Olaf, as though the very question was the height of foolishness. “I seek an ending worthy of legend.”

Miss Fortune left the madman to his dreams of death. So long as he swung that axe in the right direction, he was welcome to join them as they pushed onwards.

Three times the mist closed in on them, and each time it took an unlucky soul from their company. Spiteful laughter echoed from the sides of buildings, the sound of a whetstone over rusted steel. Ranks of carrion birds cawed from rooftops in anticipation of a flesh banquet by the light of the moon. Welcoming lights danced in the darkness of the mist, like beguiling corpse-candles over sucking marshland.

“Don’t look at them,” warned Lucian.

His warning came too late for one man and his wife. Miss Fortune didn’t know their names, but knew they had lost a son to ocean-ague less than a year ago. They walked from the cliffs following a vision in the lights only they could see.

Another man took his hooked hand to his throat before his friends could stop him. Another simply vanished into the mist without anyone seeing him go.

By the time they reached Serpent Bridge, their company numbered less than a dozen. Miss Fortune couldn’t feel sorry for them, she’d told them not to come with her. If they’d wanted to live forever, they should be shuttered behind closed doors and protective carvings, clutching spiral talismans of the Bearded Lady and praying to whatever gave them solace.

But against the Harrowing, even that was no guarantee of safety.

They'd passed countless homes smashed open with splintered shutters and doors hanging limply from leather hinges. Miss Fortune kept her eyes fixed forward, but it was impossible not to feel the accusing gazes from the frozen faces within or sense the terror of their last moments.

"The Black Mist will have its due," said Rafen as they passed yet another charnel house, the families within cold and dead.

She wanted to be angry at such acceptance of horror, but what good would that do? After all, he was right.

Instead, she focused on the hazed outline of the structure across the bridge. It sat in the center of a gouged crater in the cliff, as if some mighty sea creature had taken a vast bite from the rock. Like most places in Bilgewater it was constructed from the ocean's leavings. Its walls were driftwood and branches from faraway lands, its windows the scavenged remains of ships swept up from the seabed. It had a peculiar quality of possessing not a single straight line anywhere in its construction. The curious angles gave it a sense of being somehow in motion, as if it might one day choose another place to set down temporary roots.

Its spire was likewise crooked, fluted like the horn of a narwhal and topped with the same spiral symbol Miss Fortune wore around her neck. A shimmering light wreathed the icon, and where it shone the darkness was held in abeyance.

"What is that place?" asked Lucian.

"The Temple of the Bearded Lady," she said. "The House of Nagakabouros."

"Is it safe?"

"It's better than staying out here."

Lucian nodded and they set off across the winding length of the bridge. Like the temple it approached, the bridge was an uneven thing, its cobbles undulant like something alive.

Rafen paused at the crumbling parapet and looked down.

"Getting higher every year," he said.

Reluctantly, Miss Fortune joined him and looked over the edge.

The docks and Rat Town were smothered beneath the Black Mist, and even the web of gun'dolas was barely visible. Bilgewater was choking in the grip of the mist, its tendrils seeping

ever deeper into the city. Screams of terror drifted upwards, each one a life ended and a fresh soul for the legion of the dead.

Rafen shrugged. "A few years from now there won't be anywhere in Bilgewater beyond its reach."

"A lot can happen in a few years," said Miss Fortune.

"This happens every year?" asked Olaf, one foot perched on the parapet with a reckless disregard for the dizzying drop.

Miss Fortune nodded.

"Excellent," said the Freljordan. "If I am fated not to die this night, I will return here when the Black Mist rises again."

"It's your funeral," replied Rafen.

"Thank you," said Olaf, slapping an enormous palm on Rafen's back, almost knocking him from the bridge. The Freljordan's eyes widened as a host of ghostly tentacles rose from the mist, uncoiling to smash down on the dwellings of Rat Town.

"The beast!" he cried.

And before anyone could stop him, he vaulted onto the parapet and hurled himself from the edge.

"Mad bastard," said Rafen as Olaf's dwindling form vanished into the mist below.

"All the ice-dwellers are mad," said Miss Fortune. "But he was madder than most I've met."

"Get everyone inside," said Lucian.

She heard the urgency in his voice and turned to see him facing a towering figure in stitched black robes hung with hooked chains. Sickly green light wreathed the specter as it lifted a swaying lantern in one pallid hand. Fear touched Miss Fortune, fear like nothing she'd known since she'd watched her mother die and stared down the barrel of the killer's gun.

Lucian drew his pistols. "Thresh is mine."

"He's all yours," she said, and turned away.

Her gaze was drawn upwards as shadows closed around the temple. The breath caught in her throat as she saw Hecarim and his death knights at the crater's ridge.

The Shadow of War raised his fiery glaive and the ghostly horsemen urged their hell-steeds downward. No mortal rider could make that descent, but these were riders of death.

“Run!” shouted Miss Fortune.

CHAPTER FOUR

*She is not Dead
Strange Bedfellows
In Motion Again*

- I -

The end of the bridge thickened with noxious green light. The Chain Warden hid his corpse features beneath a rotted hood, but the light of his lantern hinted at the remains of ravaged flesh, gaunt and drained of all emotion, save sadistic relish.

He moved softly, like all his kind, Pained moans sighed from his robes as he moved. Thresh lifted his head a fraction, and Lucian saw the glint of too-sharp teeth widen in a grin of anticipation.

“Mortal,” said Thresh, rolling the word around his mouth like a sweetmeat.

Lucian knelt, reciting the mantra of clarity to steel his soul for the battle to come. He had prepared for this moment a thousand times, and now that it was here, his mouth was dry, his palms slick with sweat.

“You murdered Senna,” he said, standing and lifting his head. “The only person I had left in the world.”

“Senna...?” said Thresh, the sound wet and gurgling, as though squeezed from a throat once crushed by a hangman’s noose.

“My wife,” said Lucian, knowing he should not speak, that every word was a weapon the wraith would turn against him. Tears blurred his vision as grief washed away every preparation

and every shred of logic. He lifted the silver locket from around his neck and snapped it open, needing the wraith to understand the depth of all he had lost.

Thresh grinned, his needle teeth glinting as he tapped the glass of the lantern with a yellowed nail.

“I remember her,” he said. “A vital soul. Not yet barren and cold. Ripe for torment. Hope for a new life. It bloomed in her, you know. Fresh, new, like a spring flower. All too easy to pluck and ruin those with dreams.”

Lucian lifted his pistols.

“If you remember her, then you will remember these,” he said.

The toothed grin never faltered beneath the ragged cowl.

“The weapons of light,” he said.

“And light is ever the bane of darkness,” said Lucian, channeling every scrap of hatred into his relic pistols.

“Wait,” said Thresh, but Lucian was done waiting.

He loosed a pair of blinding shots.

A conflagration of purifying fire engulfed the Chain Warden and his howls were music to Lucian’s ears.

Then the howls changed to gurgling laughter.

A nimbus of dark light faded around Thresh, drawn back into his lantern and leaving him utterly untouched by the fire.

Lucian fired again, a storm of radiant bolts, each perfectly aimed, but every one wasted. Each shot dissipated harmlessly against a shimmering haze of dark energy from the lantern.

“Yes, I remember those weapons,” said the wraith. “I tore their secrets from her mind.”

Lucian froze.

“What did you just say?”

Thresh laughed, a wheezing, consumptive rasp.

“You don’t know? After all the reborn order learned of me, you never once suspected?”

Lucian felt cold dread settle in his belly. A horror he had never acknowledged for fear he would go insane.

“She did not die,” continued Thresh, holding up his lantern.

Lucian saw tortured spirits twisting in its depths.

Thresh grinned. “I ripped her soul out and kept it.”

“No...” said Lucian. “I saw her die.”

“She screams still inside my lantern,” said Thresh, drifting closer with every choked-out word. “Her every moment of existence is sweet agony. Listen...can you hear her?”

“No,” sobbed Lucian, his relic pistols falling to the stones of the bridge.

Thresh circled him, chains snaking from his leather belt and slithering over Lucian’s body. The hooks cut into his storm coat, seeking the soft flesh beneath.

“Hope was her weakness. Love her undoing.”

Lucian looked up into Thresh’s ravaged features.

His eyes were voids, dark holes into emptiness.

Whatever Thresh had been in life, nothing now remained. No compassion, no mercy and no humanity.

“All is death and suffering, mortal,” said the Chain Warden, reaching for Lucian’s neck. “No matter where you run, your only true legacy is death. But before then, there is me.”

- II -

The breath hammered in Miss Fortune’s throat as she ran for the temple. Her lungs fought to draw breath, and her veins felt sluggish with ice. Coils of enervating mist reached up to the rock of the temple, drawn by the presence of the two lords of the unliving. Brilliant flashes of light flared behind her, but she didn’t look back. She heard the thunder of hoof beats on rock, seeing sparks above them in the darkness.

She imagined the breath of ghostly steeds on her neck.

The space between her shoulder blades burned hot where she expected the stabbing thrust of a spectral lance.

Wait, how can they make sparks when they're ghosts?

The absurdity of the thought made her laugh, and she was still laughing as she slammed into the warped timber doors of the temple. Rafen and her ragged band were already there, hammering fists and palms against the door.

"In the name of the Bearded Lady, let us in!" he yelled.

He looked up as Miss Fortune joined him.

"The doors are shut," he said.

"I noticed," she gasped, wrenching the pendant Illaoi had given her. She placed her palm flat on door, with the coral pressed hard against the wood.

"Illaoi!" she shouted. "I'm ready to stamp on that damn eel's neck. Now open the bloody door!"

"Eel?" said Rafen. "What eel? What are you talking about?"

"Never mind," she snapped, battering her palm bloody against the wood. "I think it was a metaphor."

The door swung outwards as if it had been unbarred the whole time. Miss Fortune stepped back to allow her fighters inside first, and finally turned around.

Hecarim reared up and swung his fiery glaive for her skull.

A hand grasped her collar and hauled her backward. The tip of the weapon sliced an inch from her throat.

She fell hard on her backside.

Illaoi stood in the doorway, holding her stone idol out before her like a shield. White mist clung to it like corpusant.

"The dead are not welcome here," she said.

Rafen and the others hauled the door shut and dropped a heavy spar of seasoned oak into place on the rusted anchors to either side. A huge impact slammed into the door.

Wood split and splinters flew.

Illaoi turned and walked past Miss Fortune, still sprawled on a mosaic floor of seashells and clay fragments.

“You took your sweet time, girl,” she said as Miss Fortune climbed to her feet. The temple was filled with at least two hundred people, maybe more. She saw a wide cross section of Bilgewater’s denizens: its native population, pirates, traders and assorted sea-scum, together with travellers unlucky or unwise enough to seek a berth so close to the Harrowing.

“Is that door going to hold?” she asked.

“It will or it won’t,” said Illaoi, heading towards a many-tentacled statue at the centre of the temple. Miss Fortune tried to make sense of it, but gave up when her eye kept getting lost in the many spirals and looping curves.

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one I have,” said Illaoi, setting her idol in a concave depression in the statue. She began moving in a circle around the statue, beating a rhythmic pattern on her thighs and chest with her fists. The people in the temple joined her circling, beating palms against bare skin, stamping their feet and speaking in a language she didn’t understand.

“What are they doing?”

“Giving some motion back to the world,” said Illaoi. “But we will need time.”

“You’ll have it,” promised Miss Fortune.

- III -

Lucian felt the spectral hooks bite deep into his flesh, colder than northern ice and twice as painful. The Chain Warden’s hand closed on his throat and his skin burned at the wraith’s touch. He felt his strength drawn from him, the beat of his heart slow.

Thresh lifted him from the ground and held his lantern aloft, ready to receive his soul. The moaning lights within swirled in agitation, ghostly faces and hands pressing against the glass from within.

“Long I have sought your soul, shadow hunter,” said Thresh. “But only now is it ripe for the taking.”

Lucian’s vision greyed at the edges, feeling his soul peel away from his bones. He fought to hold on, but the Chain Warden had been harvesting souls for countless lifetimes and knew his craft better than any.

“Struggle harder,” said Thresh with monstrous appetite. “Your soul burns brighter when you fight.”

Lucian tried to speak, but no words came out, just a soft stream of warm breath that carried his soul.

A glittering scythe floated in the air above Lucian, a murder-soaked reaper of souls. Its blade shivered with anticipation.

Lucian...

That voice. Her voice.

My love...

The murder-edge of Thresh’s blade turned, angled to better part soul from flesh.

Lucian drew back his breath as he saw a face resolve in the glass of the lantern. One among countless thousands, but one with more reason than any to push herself to the fore.

Full lips, wide, almond shaped eyes, imploring him to live.

“Senna...” gasped Lucian.

Let me be your shield.

He knew what she meant in a heartbeat.

The link between them was as strong as it had been when they hunted the creatures of shadow side by side.

With the last of his strength, Lucian reached up and snapped the locket from around his neck. The chain glittered silver in the moonlight.

The Chain Warden saw something was amiss and hissed in anger.

Lucian was faster.

He spun the chain like a slingshot, but instead of loosing a lead bullet, he lashed it around the arm holding the lantern. Before Thresh could shake it off, Lucian drew the silver awl from its sheath in his long coat and plunged it into the specter's wrist.

The Chain Warden screeched in pain, a sensation he had likely not felt in millennia. He dropped Lucian and thrashed in agony as the myriad souls trapped in his lantern suddenly found a means to strike back at their tormentor.

Lucian felt his soul snap back into his body and drew in heaving gulps of air, like a drowning man breaking the surface.

Hurry, my love. He is too strong...

His sight returned, clearer than ever before. Lucian snatched his pistols from the ground. He caught the briefest glimpse of Senna's face in the lantern and etched it on his heart.

Never again would her face grow dim in his memories.

"Thresh," he said, aiming his twin pistols.

The Chain Warden looked up, the voids of his eyes alight with outrage at the defiance of his captive souls. He held Lucian's gaze and extended his lantern, but the rebellious souls had dispelled whatever protection it once offered.

Lucian fired a blistering series of perfect shots.

They burned through the Chain Warden's ghostly robes and ignited his spirit form in a searing inferno of light. Lucian marched towards Thresh, his twin weapons blazing.

Shrieking in agony, the Chain Warden retreated from Lucian's unending barrage, his wraithform now powerless to resist these weapons of ancient power.

"Death is here for you," said Lucian. "Embrace it, safe in the knowledge I will ensure it is final."

Thresh gave one last howl before leaping from the bridge, falling like a burning comet to the city below.

Lucian watched him fall until the Black Mist swallowed him.

He slumped to his knees.

"Thank you, my love," said Lucian. "My light."

- IV -

The temple walls shook with the violence of the assault. Black mist oozed between ill-fitting planks and through cracks in the scavenged glass of the windows. The door shuddered in its frame. Grasping claws of mist tore at the wood. Screams echoed as a howling gale battered the mismatched timbers of the roof.

“Over there!” shouted Miss Fortune as a host of mist-creatures with burning red eyes poured through a broken section of wall that had once been a series of tea-chests from Ionia.

She leapt into the midst of the wraiths. It felt like jumping naked into an ice hole cut in a glacier. Even the lightest touch of the dead leeched warmth and life.

The coral pendant burned hot against her skin.

She slashed her looted sword through the creatures and felt the same bite she’d felt before. Her bullets might be useless against the dead, but this Demacian blade hurt them. They fell back from her, screeching and hissing.

Could the dead know fear?

It seemed they could, for they fled the sword’s glittering edge. She didn’t let them go, stabbing and slashing the mist wherever it poured in.

“That’s it! Run!” she yelled.

A child screamed and Miss Fortune sprinted over as the mist reached to claim him. She dived and snatched the boy in her arms before rolling to safety. Chill claws plunged into her back, and Miss Fortune gasped as numbing cold spread through her limbs.

She stabbed behind her and something dead howled.

A woman sheltering behind an overturned pew reached for the boy and Miss Fortune let him squirm to safety. She pushed herself to her feet, weakness spreading through her body like a raging infection.

Everywhere was gunfire and clashing steel, deathly howls and screams of terror.

“Sarah!” shouted Rafen.

She looked up to see the oaken locking bar securing the door split along its length. Rafen and a dozen men had their backs braced against the bludgeoning assault, but the doors were bulging inwards. Cracks spread and grasping hands of mist reached inside. A man was snatched backwards and his piteous screams were abruptly cut off as he vanished into the mist.

Another had his arm ripped off as he reached to help him.

Rafen spun and rammed his dagger through the gap.

Clawed hands tore the useless weapon from his hand.

A howling body pushed itself in through the disintegrating door and plunged its hands into Rafen's chest. Her second in command roared in pain, his face draining of color.

She staggered over to him, her strength all but gone. Her blade hacked through spectral arms, and the creature shrieked as it vanished. Rafen fell into her, and they collapsed back into the nave together.

Rafen gasped for breath, his features as slack as hers.

"Don't you die on me, Rafen!" she wheezed.

"It'll take more than the dead to kill me," he grunted. "Bastard thing just winded me."

Glass broke somewhere up above. Coils of black mist coalesced overhead, a boiling mass of snapping teeth, claws and hungry eyes.

Miss Fortune tried to get to her feet, but her limbs burned with exhaustion. She ground her teeth in frustration. Barely a handful of her company remained, and the people sheltering in here weren't fighters.

The dead were getting in.

Miss Fortune looked back at Illaoi.

The priestess was surrounded by her people, all of them still circling the statue and performing their fist-thumping, palm-slapping ritual. It didn't appear to be achieving anything. The strange statue remained unmoving and impotent.

What had she expected, that it would come to life and drive the dead back like some clanking iron golem from Piltover?

"Whatever it is you're doing, do it faster!" shouted Miss Fortune.

A section of the roof ripped loose and spun off into the tempest surrounding the temple. A swirling column of spirits boiled inside and touched down like a tornado. Wraiths and things that defied understanding spun from the unliving vortex to fall upon the living.

Finally the door gave out and exploded inwards, the timbers dry and rotted by the touch of the dead. The skirling blast of a hunting horn filled the temple, and Miss Fortune's hands flew to her ears at its deafening echoes.

Hecarim rode into the temple, crushing the men who'd been bracing the door with their bodies. Their souls were drawn up into the Shadow of War's flaming glaive, and the cold fire of its edge illuminated the temple with loathsome radiance. His death knights rode at his back, and the spirits already within the temple drew back in recognition of Hecarim's terrible glory.

"I said the dead are not welcome here," boomed Illaoi.

Miss Fortune looked up to see the priestess towering over her, stout and majestic. Pale light clung to her limbs and sparkled on the stone tablet she held in trembling hands. Veins stood out like hawsers on her neck, and her jawline was taut with effort. Sweat ran in runnels down her face.

Whatever Illaoi was doing was costing her greatly.

"These mortal souls are mine," said Hecarim, and Miss Fortune felt herself recoil from the iron syllables of his voice.

"They are not," said Illaoi. "This is the house of Nagakabouros, who stands in opposition to the dead."

"The dead will have their due," said Hecarim, lowering his glaive to point at Illaoi's heart.

The priestess shook her head.

"Not today," she said. "Not while I still move."

"You cannot stop me."

"Deaf as well as dead," grinned Illaoi as a swelling radiance built behind her. "I didn't say I was going to stop you."

Miss Fortune turned and saw the spiraling statue bathed in blinding radiance. White light smoked from its surfaces, and shadows fled from its touch. She shielded her eyes as the light

billowed outwards like writhing tentacles and where it met the Black Mist it stripped it bare, exposing the twisted souls within. The sinuous light pulled the dead onwards, purging the baleful magic that cursed them to undeath so very long ago.

She expected screams, but instead the unbound dead wept with joy as their souls were freed to move on. The light spread over the cracked walls of the temple, and as it touched her, Miss Fortune cried out as the deathly numbness in her flesh was banished in a rush of heat and life.

The light of Nagakabouros closed on Hecarim, and Miss Fortune saw his fear at the thought of what transformations it might work upon him.

What could be so awful that it was better to remain cursed?

“You can be free, Hecarim,” said Illaoi, her voice strained to the limits of endurance by what she had unleashed. “You can move on, live in the light as the man you always dreamed of being before his grief and folly remade you.”

Hecarim roared and swept his glaive at Illaoi’s neck.

Miss Fortune’s blade intercepted it in a clashing flare of sparks. She shook her head.

“Get out of my city,” she said.

Hecarim’s blade drew back for another strike, but before the blow could land, the light finally pieced his veil of darkness. He bellowed in pain and fell back from its burning touch. The dark rider’s outline shimmered, like two picture box images wavering in candlelight on the same backcloth.

Miss Fortune caught a fleeting glimpse of a tall rider, armored in silver and gold. A young man, handsome and proud with dark eyes and a future of glory ahead of him.

What happened to him?

Hecarim roared and galloped from the temple.

His death knights and the darkness went with him, a shrieking host of tattered spirits following in their wake.

- V -

The light of Nagakabouros spread over Bilgewater like the coming dawn. None who saw it could ever remember so sweet a sight; the first rays of sunlight after a storm, the first hint of warmth after a bitter winter.

The Black Mist withdrew before it, roiling in a churning maelstrom of panicked spirits. The dead turned on one another in a frenzy, some fighting to return from whence they had come as others actively sought out the light's release.

Silence fell as the Black Mist drew back over the ocean, drawn to the cursed island where it claimed dominion.

True dawn broke over the eastern horizon, and a cleansing wind blew through the city as the people of Bilgewater let out a collective breath.

The Harrowing was over.

- VI -

Silence filled the temple; the utter lack of sound a stark contrast to the mayhem of moments ago.

"It's done," said Miss Fortune.

"Until the next time," said Illaoi wearily. "The Black Mist's hunger burns like a sickness."

"What did you do?"

"What I had to."

"Whatever it was, I thank you."

Illaoi shook her head and put a powerful arm around Miss Fortune's shoulder.

"Thank the goddess," said Illaoi. "Make an offering. Something big."

"I will," said Miss Fortune.

"You better. My god dislikes empty promises."

The veiled threat rankled, and for a moment she thought of putting a bullet through the priestess' skull. Before she could do more than inch her hand to her pistols, Illaoi crumpled like a ripped topsail. Miss Fortune grabbed for her, but the priestess was too enormous to hold upright alone.

They went to the seashell floor together.

"Rafen, help me get her up," she said.

Together they propped Illaoi up against a broken pew, grunting with the effort of shifting her colossal bulk.

"The Bearded Lady rose from the sea..." said Rafen.

"Don't be stupid all your life," said Illaoi. "I said Nagakabouros doesn't live under the sea."

"So where does she live?" asked Rafen. "In the sky?"

Illaoi shook her head and punched him in the heart. Rafen grunted and winced in pain.

"There is where you find her."

Illaoi grinned at the obliqueness of her answer and her eyes drifted closed.

"Is she dead?" asked Rafen, rubbing his bruised chest.

Illaoi reached up and slapped him.

Then started snoring like a stevedore with lung-blight.

- VII -

Lucian sat on the edge of the bridge and watched the city emerge from Black Mist. He'd hated Bilgewater on first sight, but there was a quality of beauty to it as the sunlight bathed its myriad clay-tiled roofs in a warm amber glow.

A city reborn, like it was every time the Harrowing receded.

An apt name for this dread moment, but one that carried only a fraction of the sorrow of its origins. Did anyone here really understand the real tragedy of the Shadow Isles?

And even if they did, would they care?

He turned as he heard footsteps approaching.

“It’s kind of pretty from up here,” said Miss Fortune.

“But only from up here.”

“Yes, it’s a viper’s nest alright,” said Miss Fortune. “There’s good people and bad people, but I’ve been making sure there’s a lot less of the bad.”

“The way I hear it, you started a war,” said Lucian. “Some might say that’s like burning down your house to kill a rat.”

He saw anger touch her, but it passed quickly.

“I thought I was making things better for everyone,” she said, straddling the parapet, “but they’re only getting worse. I need to do something about that, starting now.”

“Is that why you were out in the Black Mist?”

The woman thought for a moment.

“Maybe not at first,” she said. “I let a razor-eel off the hook when I killed Gangplank, and if I don’t take hold of it and get it back on, it’s going to bite a lot of the good people.”

“A razor-eel?”

“What I mean to say is that when I brought the Pirate King down, I had no idea what would happen when he was gone. I didn’t much care,” she said. “But I’ve seen what’s happening down there without someone in control. The city’s tearing its own throat out. Bilgewater needs someone strong at the top. No reason that someone can’t be me. The war’s just starting, and the only way it’ll end quickly is if I win it.”

The silence between them stretched.

“My answer is no.”

“I didn’t ask anything.”

“You’re going to,” said Lucian. “You want me to stay and help you win your war, but I can’t. Your fight isn’t my fight.”

“It could be,” said Miss Fortune. “The pay’s good and you’d get to kill a lot of bad people. And save a lot of innocent souls.”

“There is only one soul I need to save,” said Lucian. “And I won’t save it in Bilgewater.”

Miss Fortune nodded and held out her hand.

“Then I’ll say farewell and good hunting,” she said, standing and dusting her britches. “I hope you find what you’re looking for. Just know that you can lose yourself to revenge.”

Lucian watched her limp back to the sagging ruins of the temple as the survivors within emerged, blinking, into the daylight. She thought she understood what drove him, but she hadn’t the first clue.

Vengeance? He was far beyond vengeance.

His beloved was held in torment by an undying wraith, a creature from ancient days that understood suffering like no other.

Miss Fortune did not understand even a fraction of his pain.

He rose and lifted his gaze out to sea.

The ocean was calm now, an emerald green expanse.

People were already moving down on the docks, repairing ships and rebuilding their homes. Bilgewater never stopped, even in the aftermath of the Harrowing. He scanned the forest of swaying masts, looking for a ship that wasn’t too badly damaged. Perhaps one desperate captain could be persuaded to take him where he needed to go.

“I am coming, my light,” he said. “And I will free you.”

- VIII -

The fisherman grunted as he worked the stern-windlass to haul the big man from the water and onto his boat. The rope was frayed and he sweated in the cold air as he worked the crank.

“By the bristles of her bearded chin, you’re a big bastard, right sure ye are,” he said, snagging the big man’s armor with a gaffing hook and pulling him around over the rolling deck. He kept a wary eye out for predators, above and below the surface.

No sooner had the Black Mist withdrawn over the horizon than scores of boats put out to sea. The waters were awash with plunder, and if you weren’t fast, you ended up with nothing.

He’d spotted the floating man first and had already fought off six sewer-jacks trying to reach him. Damned if wharf-scum like them were going to steal this ocean bounty from him.

The big man had been drifting on a bed of what looked like the remains of a giant Krakenwurm. Its tentacles were pulped and bloated with noxious gasses, which was all that had kept the big man's armored form afloat.

He dropped his catch to the deck and laid him out along the gunwale before casting an appraising eye over his body.

A heavy iron hauberk of ring and scale, rugged, fur-lined boots and, best of all, a magnificent axe tangled in the straps of his armor.

"Oh, yes, make a few Krakens out of you, me beauty," he said, dancing a happy jig around his boat. "A few Krakens indeed!"

The big man coughed up brackish seawater.

"Am I still alive?" he asked.

The fisherman stopped his happy jig and slid a hand towards the long knife at his belt. He used it to open fish bellies. No reason he couldn't use it to open a throat. Wouldn't be the first time a salvager had helped someone on their way to the Bearded Lady to claim a prize.

The big man opened his eyes.

"Touch that knife again and I'll cut you into more pieces than that damned Krakenwurm."

- THE END -