

Decimate could feel frost touch her flesh in spite of the brazier's warmth, ice creeping into her bones from the harsh and unforgiving landscape. She swore in Erskirii and pulled her jacket closer. Mald had ever been a cold place, even during the summer. In wintertime, a man could quickly freeze to death if he were caught outside overnight.

She had realised by now her folly in travelling to these frozen highlands. Rooted in the forlorn hope of a restored place within the Brewer's Guild, the journey north had left her more isolated than ever. The land was sparsely populated outside of the cities, and Decimate had no friends here. She spent most days miserable and half frozen, bedding down in dilapidated and empty taverns once the night drew in. Standing on the veranda of such a place now she was as utterly alone as every evening, the silence unbroken but for the gentle creak of the alehouse sign on the wind.

Her nights in such squalid hovels were at an end in any case, the purse at her belt nearly empty. She didn't need to count the handful of copper and silver pieces remaining to know their meagre value. Unable to pay her way, she would need to steal her way onto a ship heading back to the mainland in the morning.

The Exile spat in frustration, watching the phlegm freeze on the hard ground below. After that? Only the roads beckoned her, poverty and death suspended over them like a terrible storm cloud.

Another figure stepped out onto the veranda with her, heavy boots announcing his arrival. For all that he was barrel chested and broad, the Grand Brewer's aura filled the space more than his intimidating presence, his unexpected appearance taking Decimate aback.

'What happened to your mask?' His gruff voice cut unapologetically through the silence.

Decimate felt herself blush, her cheeks growing warmer. A token of her resolve to leave the Union behind her, she had left her mask in the labyrinth - only to discover how conscious she remained of the scarring over her left eye. Even now she hid the old wound behind strands of hair.

She forced a nonchalant shrug. 'Easier to travel this way.'

Tapper nodded, his face not showing whether he believed her or even cared at all. 'You're some long way from home, lass. Rumour is you're here to parley with us.'

Decimate didn't reply at first, searching for the right words. Before she found them, he continued.

'I heard about the bad blood between your kind and the church. We live in unforgiving times, but I'm not so hard as that.' He unclipped a leather flask from his hip and held it in her direction. 'I've never much cared for clever words mind, so I'll speak straight. I expect no less from you.'

He was offering her a black flag, a hand extended in truce.

It was more than she could have hoped for. She had never been one for whisky, but eagerly took a mouthful. The moisture felt good in her throat, the warmth in her belly a blessing.

Tapper nodded in acceptance. 'Are you tired of running, Exile? Searching for a hearth instead?'

She handed back the flask, wiping her fingers across lips turned numb. 'Maybe. Although, I'm not sure that yours suits me. I heard you were weak.' She held her breath. Her words had been a gamble, a risk which sat ill with her precarious position.

The Grand Brewer chuckled. 'I like a strong lass with fire in her belly. Aye, I face a challenge. But we're not talking about me, Exile. I can offer you haven once more. Under my wing you can be returned to the fold.' His eyes fixed her in a hard stare. 'All I ask in return is your loyalty.'

Decimate carefully looked for a trace of treachery, the tell-tale hint of a smirk or an errant blink. After so long amongst the dregs of the world she was all too wary of the signs, deeply untrusting of the intentions of those who would offer her fellowship.

Tapper only returned honesty, his gaze stern but fair.

He offered her the flask of Old Jake's once more. Decimate hesitated for only a second longer before accepting, this time taking a much longer draught with another meaning entirely.