

GRIM SOLACE

BY BEN GALLEY

TENETS OF THE BOUND DEAD:

THEY MUST DIE IN TURMOIL.

THEY MUST BE BOUND WITH COPPER HALF-COIN AND WATER OF THE NYX.

THEY MUST BE BOUND WITHIN FORTY DAYS.

THEY SHALL BE BOUND TO WHOMEVER HOLDS THEIR COIN.

THEY ARE SLAVED TO THEIR MASTER'S BIDDING.

THEY MUST BRING THEIR MASTERS NO HARM.

THEY SHALL NOT EXPRESS OPINIONS NOR OWN PROPERTY.

THEY SHALL NEVER KNOW FREEDOM UNLESS IT IS GIFTED TO THEM.

CHAPTER 1

SAME OLD BEGINNINGS

The first shade ever to be bound was a man named Asham, stabbed through the heart by a man who, after founding the Nyxites, would later come to establish the Cult of Sesh. Asham survived four hundred years in service before he was rewarded his half-coin and immediately sought freedom in the void.

FROM 'A REACH HISTORY' BY GAERVIN JUBB

Starting the day with a street awash with blood and gore was sure to demolish any good mood. Fortunately for Scrutiniser Heles, it had been five years, maybe more, since her mood could remotely be classed as “good.” The best she hoped for these days was “mildly disgruntled.”

‘This fucking city,’ she muttered, poking a dismembered finger with her black boot. It looked like an uncooked sausage, one that even a street dog couldn’t stomach more than half of.

A retching sound distracted her, coming from a young man with a face that was swiftly turning green. Milky vomit dribbled from his lips, mixing with the pool of ichor at his feet. Some had made its way onto the lapel of his proctor’s livery.

‘First day?’ she asked the lad.

‘Second.’

‘If you don’t stop vomiting by the tenth day, look for another job.’

‘Mhm,’ he said, before another heave saw him flying into the mouth of a nearby alleyway.

There was no mirth on Heles’ lips; just the downward slant the years had carved into them. She began to pick her way through the blood-drenched streets, counting the pools and smears where bodies and pieces had been dragged. Where the blood had dried, she spotted the hoofmarks of donkeys and the sand-smeared ruts of carts. Beside a scrap of skin, complete with long blond hair still attached, she spotted a dirtied handkerchief. Heles reached for it, eyeing the grin of red across its soft white fibres.

‘Sloppy job, this,’ she said, hearing tentative footsteps behind her. The young man had recovered, and was busy trying to scratch the stain from his black and silver threads with a threadbare handkerchief. Some vomit had made its way onto the Chamber seal. He scrubbed at it furiously.

‘Desperate,’ Heles added.

‘I wouldn’t know, Scrutiniser.’

Heles examined him. He only wore one neck tattoo, given his rank. His trows were baggy, his collar askew. The greenish hue clung to his cheeks. ‘Now you do. Come then, Proctor...?’

‘Jym.’

‘What a peculiar name. Come then, Proctor Jym. Impress me.’

Jym took a shaky breath as he forced himself to survey the grisly scene, as if the vomit might pounce again. ‘Murder on a mass scale. No bodies, which means soulstealers.’

‘Or made to look like soulstealers.’

The man tapped his teeth. ‘But the ruts of carts?’

‘Good.’

‘Perhaps it went wrong? An alarm was raised, and they had to be quick. Hence the... sloppiness.’ His eyes were fixed on the piece of skin and hair, and would not be torn away.

‘How many taken?’

‘Seven?’

‘Nine. Look at the smears on the walls. The gutters have taken their blood. Who were the victims?’

‘City folk, I’d assume?’

‘Then you’d assume wrongly.’ She held up the kerchief. ‘Scatter Isles cotton.’

‘Scatterfolk traders, then?’

‘Or...’

Jym sighed. Heles looked to the sapphire sky while she waited. Orange tendrils of sand streaked the air where a sandstorm had blown in from the south. The factory smokestacks leaned under its duress. The wind was rising slowly, making ripples in the glassy pools of blood, still only half dry.

‘Or refugees from the wars out in the Isles?’

‘Refugees is right. Thread’s poorly woven, fraying. A trader is more concerned of his or her appearance. And?’ Heles gestured to the lost finger. ‘Callouses. Hard labour. Hardest work a trader does is count silvers, and that isn’t enough for callouses.’

‘I suppose,’ mumbled the proctor.

Heles stood over him, using her height to intimidate him. ‘Who recruited you?’

‘Volunteer, ma’am.’

‘Unusual. Why?’

‘My brother and sister were taken just like this. In Far District.’

‘Outsprawler, then?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘I see.’

Heles swept to the other side of the street, striding carelessly through blood patches and stains. Several onlookers had gathered in the mouth of an alleyway to look at the mess and tut disapprovingly.

‘You gawkers see or hear anything this morning? Or last night?’ she challenged them.

One balding man took offence. ‘Who you calling gawkers? That’s all you lot do. Gawk and rub your chins. Nothing ever comes of it.’

His equally balding wife chimed in. ‘Always getting here after it ’appens, you Scruters.’

Heles shooed them away, not caring for their presence any more. In a city drenched in crime, tongues still refused to wag. It was as infuriating now as it had been when she first pledged herself to the Code twelve years ago.

She was about to turn back to the scene when she caught another flash of red in the alley. Not gore this time, but cloth. A glowing face smiled politely.

Heles approached cautiously. It was at least a year since she had seen the crimson garb of a cultist. ‘You’re taking a risk. I’d wager we’re a street away from the Core Districts.’

‘Then I assume there is no issue me standing here. One street away.’

‘Fine.’

‘Quite the mess,’ the shade sighed.

‘And what would you know about it?’

‘No more than you.’

Heles bared her teeth, like a desert wolf would smile. ‘Don’t your kind excel at gathering information? If so, it’s about time you shared some of it with the Chamber of the Code. Maybe the Cult could do some good for once, instead of lurking in dark alleyways, being unnecessarily mysterious.’

The sister took a moment to adjust her hood. Heles could see the shade’s eyes examining the tattoos on her hands and bare neck, the dark swirls of her office. ‘You are simply jealous we don’t admit your kind. And we prefer *Church* these days.’

‘I’m happy having a beating heart instead, thank you. Maybe that’s what you lot are in dire need of. Now, if your Church isn’t going to be of any help, you should move along, Sister—’

‘*Enlightened* Sister, Scrutiniser Heles. Enlightened Sister Liria.’ The shade smiled as she walked away. ‘We’ll see each other again soon.’

Heles thumbed her nostrils and scowled, wondering, not for the first time, why the royals hadn’t completely eradicated the Cult of Sesh. Only once the shade had disappeared did it dawn on Heles that she hadn’t told the sister her name.

‘Scrutiniser Heles!’ came a shout. A man was waving to her from the other side of the street, where thicker crowds had gathered to gawk, like pigeons around a muddled loaf.

Murder was nothing new for a denizen of the City of Countless Souls, but it was a distraction nonetheless. People could always be relied on to stare at tragedy. It made them feel better about themselves; to still be a breathing bag of skin rather than a pool of blood on a dusty flagstone.

‘Well, Jym,’ Heles said, turning back to the proctor. ‘Shame to hear of your family, but everybody’s got their own dead. Bought, butchered or lost to age, we’ve all got them. You’re not special, Jym, and the quicker you learn that, the easier it’ll be for you here.’

Heles swept away from him, buttoning her black robes about her. She was halfway to the waving man when Jym called after her.

‘Who did you lose?’

Heles didn’t break her stride. ‘Everybody.’

The waving man wore the blue sash and dotted face tattoos of a clerk. A lower rank than her, and he bowed to prove it. ‘Chamberlain Rebene has summoned you.’

‘Can’t he see I’m busy?’

The clerk flapped his mouth as he followed Heles’ gesturing hand to the wash of blood. ‘How could he... I... He would like to see you immediately.’

Heles sighed. ‘Where?’

‘In his offices at the Chamber, naturally.’

‘Where else? It would do you dusty fuckers some good to get out onto the streets once in a while, remember what it is you work for.’

The man’s cheeks twitched as he cycled through a range of expressions, each more unsure than the last. ‘So, is that a yes?’

‘He’s my superior, is he not?’

‘Yes, Scrutiniser.’

‘Then lead the way, man. Stop wasting my time.’

‘Yes, Scrutiniser.’

Through the strangled streets they strode; scrutiniser in front, clerk struggling to keep up with her long legs and sweeping gait. Heles remembered when the crowds parted for her black Chamber robes. Now, only her height and practiced scowl moved them aside. And her elbows, for good measure.

The Chamber of the Code was a huge building. Not in height, like the Cloudpiercer, but in width and bulk. A giant pyramid capped with gold stood at its core, with twelve wings peeling off from its square base like the teeth of a cog. Each of those must have stretched ten floors into the sky, studded with windows and arrow slits. History had it the Chamber was once the emperor’s fortress, until the nobles turned to height to prove their worth and status. Now, it was a warren of overlapping corridors and dead ends, of honeycomb rooms and cavern halls full of files and men sneezing at dust.

Heles circled the building until she reached the main entrance. She lost the clerk in the endless queues, full of people clutching scrolls, and shades trying to shield themselves from the sand kicked up by the growing breeze. He no doubt scurried back to his desk, already scorched by his brief outing in the Arctian sun.

Every day, the unfortunates, the slighted and the outraged came to bleat their claims and file their complaints. Every day they formed their cacophonous winding lines, shuffling forwards maybe a dozen yards, maybe two dozen, before sunset shut the Chamber doors. The next day, they came back to queue again, and so on. A few faces she spied had been coming for almost a year now. Such was the backlog of the mighty Chamber of the Code, sole authority on matters of indenturement.

Inside the wide, arched doors, the vacuous atrium was marble cool and full of clamouring voices. Heles wormed through the lines, full of figures in foreign-cut clothes and a spectrum of skin tones, from milky pale to the darkest charcoal. A few desert nomads stood in a group, taller than the crowds even though their backs were as curved as longbows. They looked miserable despite their vibrant cloth wrappings. The nomads chattered away in an unknown dialect, but all Heles paid attention to were the

stubs of short horns poking from their foreheads, and their goatish eyes, the pupils of which looked like slots meant for coins.

At the centre of the atrium was an immense core of marble and steel. Sweeping stairs led up into the Chamber's countless rooms. A seawall of desks parted the crowded marble expanse, dividing the offended from the black-clad officials. Heles caught their broken sentences.

'But I've been waiting for six months!'

'The Code clearly states a three-year wait.'

'Is there nothing you can do?'

'He stole me, curse it! Stole me!'

'Permits for the white feather is the other line, I'm afraid.'

'My children!'

Heles was deaf to it all. She strode past the desks, met the challenges of the guards, and passed into the innards of the grand building. Three flights of stairs took her to a vaulted hall where towering stacks of papyrus rose from every desk. One of several halls within the Chamber, here sat the great pile-up of the city's Code-related crimes. Unfortunately for the Chamber, that was pretty much the city's only brand of crime. Every claim, every complaint, every accusation and petition – all of it entered through these halls and waited years to escape.

To Heles, it looked as if they were recreating the skyline of Araxes in papyrus. A good number of the stacks rose to scratch the marble roof. Here and there, wooden stairs and scaffolding encircled the bigger towers. Clerks and proctors waded through the paper canyons, or wobbled up high, plucking through scrolls piled on lofty, buckled shelves. Others ran wheelbarrows piled high with files through the maze of desks. Their job, like hers, seemed never-ending, and therefore without satisfaction.

At the foot of one tower she passed, a crew of clerks were busy shoring up a desk with bricks. It wasn't unheard of for a desk to crumble under the weight of countless documents, and come crashing down. If there was anything that introduced more clerical work and time to the Chamber's backlog, it was a tower of a thousand files exploding. Not to mention those who had been unfortunate enough to be splattered under their weight.

It took Heles seventeen flights of stairs, a rickety lift and innumerable corridors to reach the offices of the chamberlain. Good silver had been spent on tall doors, drapes and gold leaf, when it could have been spent on scrutinisers, proctors, or perhaps diminishing the soaring piles of claims in the halls below. Heles glowered at the patterned marble as she dug into it with her boot heels.

The ring of guards around Rebene's desk parted to admit her, and she stamped her foot as she halted. Chamberlain Rebene looked up from his papyrus, looking almost surprised. The man was perpetually sweating, even in the cool of the Chamber. His black hair, normally slicked to the side to cover his balding patches, fell in greased curls.

'Scrutiniser Heles, reporting as ordered.'

Rebene placed his writing reed in its inkwell. 'I didn't expect you so soon, Scrutiniser.'

'The clerk did say "immediately," sir.'

'Forgive me. I am not used to such punctuality.'

'This city seems to have forgotten the word, sir. But I have not.'

Rebene leaned back in his grand chair of mahogany and silver palm frond. 'And that is precisely why I summoned you. We have an issue, as I'm sure you're aware.'

'We have many issues, Chamberlain. To which do you refer?'

'The disappearance and possible soulstealing of several nobles. A handful of medium-level tors and tals.'

Heles had no love for noble blood. She couldn't respect those who idly watched the poor and the dead from their lofty windows while drinking from golden goblets. 'Allow me to guess: the Cloud Court have clicked their fingers now it's their kind getting murdered. Funny, that. They don't normally spare a drop of piss when it's commoners or tourists.'

There fell an awkward silence. One of the guards cleared his throat.

‘Careful, Heles. I’ve demoted others for kinder words, but I’ll give you leeway considering the recent death of your colleague, Scrutiniser Damses.’

Heles bit off the end of his sentence. ‘Murder. The recent *murder* of Scrutiniser Damses. Nobody has a knife shoved through their teeth and down their throat by accident.’

‘Fine. Murder.’ Rebene sighed. ‘In any case, he was a good man.’

‘He was a terrible man. A drinker, a cheat, and as faithful to his wife as a vulture is to a corpse. But he was a fine scrutiniser. He believed in the salvation of this city, and that’s hard to find these days.’

‘As do you, I hear?’

‘Passionately, sir.’

‘Well, these recent developments may give you a chance to bring such a fable into existence.’

Heles cocked her head, bringing her eyes down from the back wall to his.

‘In fact, it’s Her Highness the empress-in-waiting who’s asked me to solve this matter. To put a stop to these disappearances... or murders. Find out who’s behind them and hunt them down. Bring them to justice any way we can: subterfuge, bribes, torture, the lot. Paperwork be damned. I’ve decided I want you leading this matter.’

‘Why?’

Rebene templed his fingers. ‘Because, Heles, despite what the rest say about you, nobody has cleared as many claims nor sent as many stealers to the boiling pots as you have in the last ten years.’

‘Twelve. And do you expect me to do this on my own?’

‘Hardly. I have other scrutinisers across the city tackling this as well as you. The princess and the emperor have provided silver.’ He took a moment to wet his lips. ‘And shades for districts outside the Core.’

Heles almost laughed. ‘Shades? Working for the Chamber?’

‘I don’t like it either, but these are dire times—’

‘You’re right about that. I bet Ghoor and the other magistrates jumped at the chance to spend more time on his bloated arses.’

Rebene flushed. ‘Mind your tongue, Scrutiniser!’ The cracking of his voice withered him, and he pressed his sweaty palms together, prayer-like. ‘Do we have an agreement, then? I can leave this important matter in your hands?’

Heles put her fists to his desk and leaned over the sea of papyrus that adorned it. ‘I want independence. Autonomy, I think they call it. And first say over resources.’

‘No scrutiniser has ever—’

‘Autonomy, or you can pass this job onto Scrutiniser Faph and the others and watch the tors and tals disappear one by one. Don’t call me the best and then treat me like the rest.’

‘This is serious, Heles.’

‘Deadly serious, sir.’

Rebene threw up his hands. ‘Fine. You have it.’

An ordinary person might have grinned, or at least smiled, but Heles curled her lip. With a squeak of boot leather on mosaicked marble, she left the chamberlain to his scribbling and headed for the bowels of the great Chamber building. To the torture holes with their white plaster-wall corridors filled with screams. They were a good place to glean some rumours from the underbelly of Araxes. Plus, there was nothing like seeing a criminal suffer to make her feel marginally better about the world.