

BATTLECORPS

THE UNKINDEST CUT OF ALL

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Temporary office of Primus Sharilar Mori
Orestes
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The glass sliver slipped from her hand.

It spun slowly as the moment lingered and the rich, red blood reflected the overhead lights like smooth, tiny rubies churning in the air in a race toward the floor.

The bite of copper in the air, of urine and feces.

Seconds became hours as the glass spun before smashing against the hard wood and skittering across the smooth surface unhindered, unstoppable, taking with it a long swath of a traitor's life.

Is this how Brutus had felt in the halls of the Senate?

She stared at the writhing woman at her feet. Her abrupt and uncontrollable hatred coalesced into a tight knot at the base of her skull and moved behind her eyes, and she wished at that moment that the traitorous Dragon at her feet would burst into flames and burn in the righteous fires of vengeance.

Primus Sharilar Mori grasped at the gaping hole carved with precise anger across her neck, exposing her life's blood to the world.

And the world took it, drop by precious drop, no matter how hard Mori tried to squelch the flow with her left hand, it still streamed between her shaking fingers to the feet of her murderer.

Her most trusted friend and aide.

"Greta—" the Primus choked. The last word she would speak would be the name of her assassin.

The Primus' expression and wild eyes begged for mercy as she moved on her stomach in jerky spasms across the blood-smeared floor. Mori's right hand slipped as it tried to gain purchase on the wet floor, her own blood coating her bare arm and ComStar grays in the viscous fluid.

Blood poured over Mori's lips and gurgled in her throat with each ragged breath.

Die, die!

But Mori didn't die—not quickly.

Greta moved back as Mori angled and tried to make a swipe at her with her right hand and arm. Greta had the grace of footing, and the vengeance of righteousness to move her out of harm's reach.

"Liar!" she hissed as she kept just out of the dying woman's reach. "Betrayer of everything! We all believed you when you said you only wanted what was best for ComStar. I believed you! The truth was you wanted what was best for you and your beloved *Dragon!*"

Spittle flew into the air from Greta's mouth and mingled with the blood just past her feet. Her entire being shook as she watched what she had wrought—at the life she'd taken.

All a lie...

Guilt lingered nearby, ready to take her if she allowed it. Greta had never killed, had never even harmed an insect if she could help it, once a believer in Blake's word, and of mankind's inevitable fall.

No—Greta McGruder had lived by the Word, and hoped that through her actions, through her loyalty, she could forgive all that had trespassed against her and her home in Rasalhague.

And she could forgive most anything.

Anything.

But betrayal. A snake she stupidly allowed so close to her heart, had taken her kindness and twisted it. How long had this viper laughed at her behind her back? How long had Mori bent the will of Blake for the sake of Kurita?

For the demons of unbelievers!

She screamed her rage aloud, no longer caring who heard her, who came to see what she'd done.

Let them come. Let them see what shall become of deceivers!

Greta turned and put her hands to her head. How? What would her father say if he'd lived? Killed so many years ago in the war against the Dragon to gain her people's freedom—to know his

very flesh and blood had allied herself with an agent of the Five Pillars!

Mori had known about Greta's family and the sorrow she'd lived through as a child. She'd known through late-night talks and stories of nightmares that so many of the atrocities in Greta's childhood still brought terror to her sleep.

Greta cringed inwardly as she realized how foolish she had to have appeared to Mori—a member of the very organization that caused those terrors—when she'd cried and broken down and confided her life in Mori's hands.

Not once had she given Greta an inkling of the truth.

She'd laughed at me—a poor helpless child shipped away from Rasalhague for protection—working for a member of the order of murderers.

Liar!

With another scream Greta pulled back her foot and kicked the now unmoving Primus. She kicked, and stomped at Mori's face. And with each strike she yelled again and again. "You filthy traitor! Look what you and your plans have done! Look at the war and the destruction! The Word was right..." Her kicks lessened as her anger spent itself a little more with each well-aimed blow.

And as that anger lost strength, guilt won its freedom and washed over her shoulders, a cooling river that silenced the fires of anger and rage. She fell to her knees, no longer able to lift her feet to kick, no longer caring if the traitor's blood stained her.

No...I am stained already. I have betrayed my family. Their love. Their trust...by trusting a dragon.

Sobs tore at her throat as her hands tore at her own hair and tried to pull it from the roots. Shame, disgrace, regret, wrath, outrage... all came to her in a single breath. They were the same fellows that pressed so hard against her sanity and robbed her of who she was.

Footsteps. Greta heard them, felt them vibrate on the polished wooden floors. Someone had heard her screaming. They were coming.

She pushed herself up, her gaze locked onto the now unseeing eyes of the Primus. Mori's mouth remained open, blood smearing her cheeks and chin. Blood. It was everywhere.

And the smell...the metallic bite of copper overwhelmed everything. And as quickly as she'd given herself over to insanity, Greta returned to herself and put her own blood-stained hands to her face, unaware even now that she had smeared the blood of the dead Primus over her like the warriors of old. It touched her lips. Leaked into her mouth.

"Greta!"

A voice in the distance. More people and other voices. Someone screamed—and there was pressure against her. Greta swallowed. She tasted blood—Mori's blood.

The blood of her closest friend.

"Greta, look at me. It's Victoria." Someone grabbed her chin and turned her face. Greta found herself staring into a beautiful pair of starlight blue eyes. "Greta—can you hear me?"

She nodded. She recognized Precentor ROM Parrdeau. Recognized the calm, easy expression. But now lines creased the normally smooth skin between the Precentor's eyebrows. Male voices were behind Greta and Parrdeau was kneeling in front of her. Greta couldn't stop herself from speaking. "A snake! A snake! She lived a lie among us! We were deceived!"

"Greta...you have to tell me what happened."

"Is she dead? Did I kill it?"

"Yes, she's dead. Greta, don't look at Mori. Look at me. What happened?"

"I *killed* her."

"Shhhh..." Precentor Parrdeau shook her head. "Stop that. Tell. Me. What. Happened."

A tense overtone leaked into the Precentor's voice and Greta latched on to that stern countenance. Discipline. The Word required discipline, as had ComStar once. She took in a shaky breath and realized she was still sitting on the floor, her ankles and shoes coated in the Primus' blood. Mori lay still where Greta's final kick had moved her. "We were here...in the office...when the holo-vid..."

No. Greta found she did not want to relive this. But she closed her eyes and allowed the memory of earlier to cascade forward and overwhelm her once more...



She recalled the room's lighting, the multiple towers of boxes hastily evacuated from Tukayyid, stacked about the room like the blocks of a child's playroom. Coffee percolated nearby—Mori had always liked fresh-brewed coffee—so hard to come by since the Blakist attacks.

An INN reporter droned on about a recent attack somewhere in the inner sphere, on some world, by some mysterious force. Greta had tuned it out, as she'd been doing since their arrival on Orestes. She'd put her hand on the framed picture of her father when the Word of Blake interrupted the report, and blared its message over the systems.

Curiosity had pulled her forward, drawn her attention to the hooded visage—to the words spoken in calm relief.

"...truth is always buried in deceit? How easy is it for those unbelievers, those who do not heed the Word of Jerome Blake, to bury their lies in truths? We believe them, for it is easier to believe the lie than the truth! And the truth of the Primus' true identity is harsher than the lie of subservience she so easily gave to our former brethren.

"Hear me now! Sharilar Mori was, and is, an agent of the Five Pillars!"

Greta had lost hold of the framed picture, her muscles locking as the words sunk deep into her mind and took root in her soul. She did not hear the crash of the glass on the floor, did not see the pieces burst outward in an almost familiar starburst pattern on the wood floor.

"This can't be true," she whispered, putting her hand to her mouth. "It's no more than more propaganda..."

And then Mori was in the room, her pistol drawn, her gaze darting from the holo-vid to the shattered glass of the frame on the floor. The Primus had re-holstered her gun and bent down to pick up the larger pieces.

Greta bent down toward her, their heads nearly touching, and she paused to look at Mori, to force her longtime friend to look at her, to tell her it wasn't true. She narrowed her eyes and stopped picking up the pieces until at last the Primus stopped as well, and slowly raised her own head to looked into Greta's eyes.



"But it was true, wasn't it?" Precentor Parrdaeus said.

"Yes," Greta heard herself whisper. "I knew it from the moment she looked at me. I could see it in her eyes."

"Greta," Precentor Parrdaeus said with caution. "You have to remember clearly now—did Mori admit to it? Did she say it was true?"



Greta asked her out loud if it was true. She had to hear it wasn't so—it couldn't be!

Mori stood, her fingers clutched around the sharp shards of glass, and moved gingerly over the remaining pieces, to her desk. A wastebasket of woven silver metal sat beside it, and she tossed the pieces inside with a loud clink.

Greta stepped forward, but the Primus looked away.

Had she looked away because of regret? Because she couldn't face her old friend to whom she'd lied to for so many years?

No...



"She finally answered me when she looked at me, and there was no remorse in her eyes, no guilt hidden in her expression. She nodded once, and said 'yes'."

"She did say yes. She admitted it was the truth."



Greta felt as if someone had knocked the wind from her. She put her hands to her middle and started to breathe quicker, faster. And Mori—Mori moved to sit behind her desk, turned off the vid with a flick of a switch, and returned to her work, as if nothing had happened.



A man's voice spoke near Greta. "Precentor—Focht's men are demanding entrance. They wish to know what's going on. As does Focht."

"How many of our people are here?"

"There are twelve within the room, and another thirty in the corridor watching Victor's Com Guard."

"Keep him out. Greta, did she admit to Focht's killing of Waterly?"

"Victoria—I will hear nothing against Focht, do you understand?" this voice was male, authoritative. Commanding. Yet not familiar. "This is about Mori. Nothing else."

"Yes sir. Greta—why did you kill her?"



Mori was talking now, as Greta stood in front of the desk, her shoulder bent and defeated. Mori spoke about her past, and being a member of the order, and how her loyalties had turned to ComStar—and her smaller victories with the Clans and with Kurita's access to technology.

Greta heard some of it, but made sense of none of it.

And then Mori was beside her, her hands on Greta's shoulders, telling her that no one need know it was all the truth. Greta knew her better than anyone, and could vouch for her.

That it was best to keep everyone believing the Blakists dealt in rhetoric. And then she ordered Greta to keep her tongue. And Greta looked away and caught sight of her father, staring back up at her, smiling from the floor where the framed picture had smashed against the floor.

Mori had ordered her to keep her silence.



"That's when you killed her?"

That simple question brought Greta back to here. To now. She looked up at the faces of her coworkers, her friends, staring down at her. Some of them glanced to the side, and their eyes widened.

They were looking at Mori.

"No."

She could feel them looking around at one another. She also heard banging on the outer doors, and the command of a deep male voice. Someone was trying to break into the makeshift office.

Memory and reality spun together at that moment as she felt she needed to make Precentor Parrdeau her own confessor, and yet she would never order the Precentor silent. But somehow she knew she had little time to tell them what happened, to cleanse her soul before those she trusted—*should have trusted!*

"I nodded in obedience—I had always done what Mori wanted me to do. I was too stunned and she told me to clean up my mess while she wrote letters and gathered her 'noteputers. And then... and then she laughed."

Victoria Parrdeau's expression was more than vexed. She narrowed her eyes as she shifted on her knees. "Laughed?"

Nodding. "Yes. And that's what angered me—and terrified me. She just threw her head back and laughed. And I stood there, transfixed with pieces of the glass I'd broken in one hand and a stack of papers in the other. I—" Greta chewed on her lower lip. "She muttered something about fools and foolishness. She opened her arms wide. She told me she trusted me—me above everyone. And I saw it then—the dark marks on her soul. I saw an incapable woman, a false leader placed as nothing more than a puppet directed by the enemy's hand. And she had laughed at us, ComStar, and called us fools. Yes—fools to have believed her and trusted her..." she looked at Precentor Parrdeau. "I knew she had to die."

Chop off the head, and the body will fall.

They all fall down.

The banging on the door became more persistent. Greta looked away from Parrdeau to the door. To the people standing around. Many of them wore expressions of surprise, others of satisfaction, and still others...

...and there was one...a small, thin-boned man, who stood to the Precentor's left and stared at the body, just out of Greta's sight. "I don't think she was calling us fools. I think—maybe—she thought herself one." The man looked back at Greta. "She often called herself the biggest fool of all."

Something snapped inside of Greta's head. A soft clink, like the breaking of a thin rod of glass. Everything fell into place for Greta. Mori's words—her need to explain what she'd done to her closest friend. How often in private conversations had Mori called herself the foolish fool of all? How many times had she told Greta her beliefs in a united Inner Sphere went against everything her childhood had taught her?

Before, such statements had made no sense.

But now...now, in the end, Mori hadn't called *them* fools.

She had deemed herself one, and before her death, which she had to have seen in her trusted friend's eyes, Primus Mori had confessed her sins.

Greta blinked. "Sh-sharilar?" She put her scarlet fingers to her lips. "Oh...what have I done?"

The Primus didn't move...and there was so much blood. So much.

"Greta, you've got to hold it together. Focht's men are outside. They're going to want to take you into custody for the Primus' death."

"No," Greta shook her head. "No...no, no, no. She wasn't the Primus. She was a pretender, Precentor Parrdeau. A plant. A spy." She swallowed and listened to the banging door, though she no longer felt the strength of those words inside herself. "I failed. I failed ComStar. I failed Blake. I allowed her to pretend to work for the good of us," she looked at the Precentor again. "It's my fault—my fault."

"It's not your fault," the brown-eyed man beside Precentor Parrdeau said. "You didn't know Mori was O5P. But I'm banking on Dow—he knew. I bet he knew and that's why Mori's moved into the background these past two years."

"Now *that*, I can believe," Parrdeau said. "Dow I trust. Nothing gets past that man."

But they weren't paying attention to Greta. No—there was the banging at the door, the voices, the slow gain of voices in the room to keep her invisible to them.

And the smell of blood.

My fault.

It's all my fault. I should have paid attention—I should have watched her better. I'm just as guilty. I tried to set things right—and I have killed my best friend.

Greta moved away and the Precentor stood with a nod to the brown-eyed man, who gave Greta a weak smile before standing to speak quietly with Parrdeau.

The office felt tense, and no one was looking at Mori anymore. They all seemed to be afraid of the door.

Greta moved closer to her former boss—her friend—oblivious to the blood drying in a sticky puddle on the floor. She moved carefully onto her hands and knees and crawled around to the front of the desk, the blanket moving from her back as it trailed on the floor and stuck in the blood.

She tried not to look at what she'd done. At what had to be done. Greta couldn't believe she was capable of such fury. Of such hatred and anger.

With a glance to Mori, she remembered the moment she moved as the Primus turned from her. All the motions had seemed in perfect unison. She'd slashed the jugular in a single blow, tilting the sharp-edged glass shard just right. There had been those few precious seconds when she hadn't been sure if the glass had actually cut.

And Mori has stopped in her tracks, motionless.

She'd turned to look at Greta and the thin, red line appeared seconds before the blood had overflowed.

Greta closed her eyes. Squeezed them shut.

No, no, no. My fault. I should have watched her closer.

There, across the room, against the farthest wall where the holo-vid continued to play on mute, lay the glass. She glanced around, and noticing that no one was watching her, stood on wobbly legs and moved toward it.

The door burst open behind the wall to the office. Greta grabbed at the makeshift weapon. It felt cold in her hand, a piece of permanent ice.

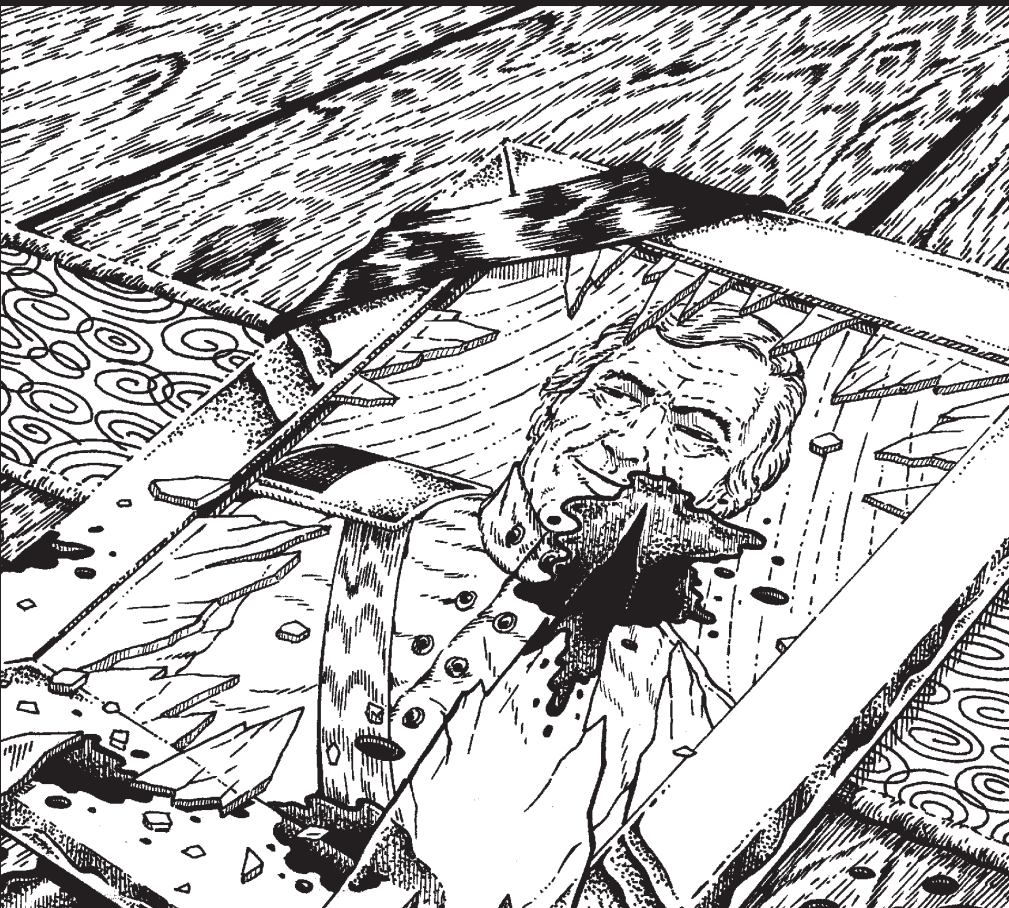
A tiny, pink-tinted glint of death.

She held it in the light and looked at it. Greta thought of her family, all dead on Rasalhague. Killed by O5P as well as ISF agents. She thought of Waterly, and his kind words to her through the years before the schism.

She remembered her father's dying words—to always protect those you loved from the enemy.

But Daddy—what about those you love from themselves? How do you save them then? And when do you know?

Greta sniffed as the armed ComGuard rushed past her to the platform where the desk and the body of Sharilar Mori lay on her right side, her eyes wide and unseeing.



I should have known what you were doing, Mistress. And I should have stopped you. A better friend would have stopped you. She the index finger of her right hand into the sticky, coagulating blood and then slowly—while closing her eyes—brought the gore covered finger to her lips and sucked the blood. The blood of the Dragon. The blood of the betrayer.

The blood of her best and only friend.

And with a deep breath, Greta positioned the sharpest edge of the glass and pressed it against her right jugular.

“Greta! No!” Precentor ROM Parrdeau shouted from across the room. She and her brown-eyed assistant were running then, their actions slow as they tried to stop her.

But Greta yanked the glass down. She heard the flesh pop and tear with the sharp blade and then felt the warmth of the blood, her blood, flow over her fingers.

They were on her then—ComGuards and old friends. So many people. Some she recognized—some she’d never seen before. She was on the floor, looking up at them, with no memory of how she got there. Parrdeau had her hand pressed to Greta’s neck as she attempted to stop the blood.

She tasted blood in the back of her throat.

“Greta...why? Why did you do this? Don’t you realize you’re a hero?” Parrdeau’s voice was soft, and her eyes red-rimmed and brimming with tears. Starlight in a bloodied ocean.

But Greta shook her head as best she could and tried to push the Precentor’s hand away. “No...I’m no hero. Because I’d have to live with the image of her expression on my soul forever. Because I,” she blinked slowly as her life drained from her body and she felt a quick release of cares and worries, “I am Caesar’s Brutus, Victoria. And it wasn’t that I loved Mori less, but that I loved ComStar more.”