

Bezahltag

by Chris Di Donna

Murich drowned another community of unseen germs within the folds of his gut. He had been downing one Braakbroew after another in quick succession since night had fallen. His sorrows were growing ever more acute by the hour. Life in Marienburg was weighed in coins, not worth. Today's experiences had hammered that home more than ever.

For now, the beer flowed freely as it was Bezahltag, payday. The remainder of his contract pay lay 8 days hence and combined with the abundance of mugs arriving at the table it would make the absence of coin more hard felt over the coming week.

"S'not right, jus kickin a man when his risked so much. S'just not right!". Murich ended his statement with a wet burp.

"Yup, s'right mate. Ya gives yer all an thay kick yer inna gizzard!!".

Gerk, Murich's shorter and somewhat smellier drinking companion, thumped his gut with a meaty paw to demonstrate his point.

The esteemed guild of Stevedores and Teamsters had finally struck a deal with the Directorate for a ten shilling pay rise. The hard fought months of strikes, muggings, petitions, rallies and brawls had finally paid off for the Suiddock. Murich had lost two fingers and taken more than his share of bruising from the black caps over the past month for it, not that it mattered now.

"Yeah, thas wot they'll do to ya! I mean, I work as ard as any man on the dock. So wot I aint got no fammy.fimilli. womma an kids like. I'm stilla man, I still fight fer those gits inna guild house."

"Aye man, Aye. I knooo reet were yer comin from. If I."

"I mean, look at me. I'm a hard working type an I dun lost two o me figgers." Murich butted in, winding up for one of his drunken tirades. "Its not as if those Reik suckers inna Merchan guild would care innit. They not supposed ta. But me own guild. Me own GUILD Gerk mate. It jus ain't right yer hear!"

"Aye laddie I hear, I hear". Gerk's drunken affirmation spurred Murich on.

"Was the world comin too, I mean wot? Nex thing you know the guild ill be like , `ooo eer look ere. We gotta move our big asses over yonder onnna other side a hoobug bridge like. O'er thar we can talk to em Merchan quicker like'. An then ittle be, `ooo eer, we gotta gets more coin from ya te pay the rent like. Ooo boo hoo, we need a bigger house cos we werkin sooo ard to protect yer jobs an.an.. an tomorrow like!". Murich's face had started to acquire a red lustre as he ranted. Even his perpetual five o'clock shadow started to look decidedly bloodshot.

Gerk had started guffawing in earnest at Murich's display. Most of the bar seemed to be interested as well, evidenced by the number of heads that were turning in their direction. Murich was oblivious to it all as his voice rose above the din.

"Yeah, them pansies. I bet they get all like, `ooo eer me deario. Doodkanaal is too low fer the likes a my shite. We is all impertent now we is choofin with tha Merchans now. Why I even reckon we is no better than a bunch a sca.."

"Good evening Murich". The voice smothered out the din of the beerhall. Conversations ground to a halt, words forgotten on slack lips.

Murich's fear clawed up from the heady depths of strong ale and finished the sentence just in time. "...ffolding", he feebly managed.

The hall looked as one at the newcomer. All knew who he was and what he represented. He was a burly head man from the guild, their guild. His name was Herg Prochnow. More commonly known as Herg the Hand.. Ask any scab worker how Herg got the name and they'll tell you how they got their scars.

Murich stepped down off his chair and turned to face the mountain of flesh, cloth and hair behind him. A calm, impassive expression met his own, which was quickly losing its lustre.

"I see your in high spirits lad. Not bad considering, eh?"

"Eh Herg. Wot yer doin here?", Murich felt his throat constricting. His addled mind feverishly rummaged through the last twenty seconds of his life. How far had he gone? He noticed Gerk not taking much interest in Herg. Thinking again Murich decided it wasn't anything he couldn't brush over. Besides, he was the one who had been wronged, not the guild. His alcoholic haze and temper hushed down an inner voice of caution.

Herg paused in order to land an ample buttock on the edge of the long table. The table creaked, yet the noise was like the snapping of trees across the silent hall.

"Oh you know. The usual. Checking in with the patrons and their orders, looking out for muggers", Herg leaned in closer, "watching out for the faithful members, as I am want to do". A smile flickered across the corner of his mouth.

The bastard, thought Murich. The two faced bastard. Just lost his job and heres this tall tub of shite rubbing in the salt. Murich, to drunk to know any better, decided to show him up.

"Eee, thas good Herg. Jus as well cos I wuz wannin to talk to ya. See I lost me job today. Part o tha.. ", Murich struggled with the words, "Enta-the-prize-bar-gain-agreemen-thingy. See, wot I wanna know Herg is why? What makes me less than you, say?"

Some took their breath in sharply. Others chose not to chance drawing any attention.

A grin split Herg's head in half, like a bearded axe wound. It was the same grin witnessed on hungry ogres blocking the only exit.

"That's simple Murich. You've not followed the rules before. You've hurt Suiddock and even though we were understanding in the past, a payment was figured and taken. Feel lucky you still have all eight of your fingers."

Murich clutched his right hand defensively. "All lies, lies an you know it. How was I too know that Brettie ain't got the right papers?"

Herg's expression dropped like a stone. He brought up his right hand as if to brush off a speck of dirt from his shoulder.

"Are you calling the Guild master a liar Murich?"

Murich's fear finally won its battle and a sudden clarity of thought arrived with it. "N-n-no, all I'm saying is."

Herg the Hand lashed out with speed unbelying of his size. A set of knuckles covered in rough, leathery skin scraped and smacked their way across the side of Murich's head, knocking him to the floor. Lights swam across his vision, he was too dazed and drunken to cry out in pain.

"You would be best told to watch your tongue about the guild Murich". Now the real message was delivered, but not for Murich's sake.

Everyone knew that to expel members from the guild was a delicate matter. Proof and reason were demanded to convince people that wrong had been done to them. In the past, Murich had unwittingly partaken in night labour not approved by the guild, scab work. Though he had been able to demonstrate his innocence, a seed of doubt had remained in the heart of his fellow dockworkers. The recent deal with the Directorate had given the guild its chance to remove those who drew doubt and brought disunity into the guild.

The list was short, but Murich had ended up on it. The fact that he was an ex-patriot Imperial didn't help. Herg leaned in closer, right down to Murich's red and swollen ear.

"Lock your tongue Imperial, you are very close to death".

Murich knew that at this range he could plunge his dagger deep into Herg's eye socket despite his stupor. If it wasn't for the fact that he was sitting on the hilt with his limbs in a tangle, and the fact that he was a stuttering

coward at heart, he would have signed both their death warrants then and there.

Herg stood back and took in the hall with a sweeping glance.

"Who here can say that some didn't have it coming? Eh? Who can say that a scab or outsider deserves to stay over a born and bred Suiddocker with a family and children to support? Who would rather throw out family rather than a stranger? Who?"

The crowd stirred and started voicing its affirmations. Some pointed out Herg's wisdom to each other, others raised their mugs in Herg's direction.

"Why give me the boot?", Gerk had raised his head from his glass at last and addressed Herg directly. His posture had not changed though. He sat unmoving and relaxed in his chair, unafraid.

Herg looked at Gerk and a scowl crept across his face. The sight of Gerk's deadpan expression had halted Herg's words and he had to hide the fact. The tension between the men started to grow. Murich gazed at the scene, his throbbing head forgotten. He had never seen or heard of Herg hesitating at any challenge before.

Herg continued quickly, avoiding Gerk's question. "If we are to keep on supporting ourselves and each other, the guild must expect, no, demand loyalty. Loyalty to the guild is loyalty to Suiddock. And that is all that protects us."

The crowd's mood broke and followed on the heels of Herg's words. Nodding heads and raised voices broke out like a rash among the onlookers. Gerk leant down towards Murich's stricken form.

"Time to go, or we will not escape a brawl."

Murich nodded inside his own world of pain and dizziness. Uneasily he stumbled to his feet. Gerk's hand slipped under his arm to support him, surprisingly steady and strong. Together the pair made for the door. Herg's voice rang out again over the room.

"We cannot let outsiders water down our resolve and our trust. The guild is all that stands between us and the rest of the city. And without us the city cannot survive, we must remind it of that fact every single day."

Cheers and claps complemented Herg's statements as he spoke. Men were standing all over the room, unable to contain the rising fervour.

"That is what we have fought for and some have died for in the past weeks. The right to have our value paid in full, right down to the last guild. The right to make an honest and decent living in a city of sin. They won't force us out and we will get the fruits of our labour, or we will burn down the whole cursed city!"

The crowd had erupted into cheers and howls of joy, all too familiar on Suiddock streets of late. The spirit of the Suiddockers could not be broken. They had a firm grip on trade, the lifeblood of the city, and were more than willing to use it to their best advantage. Their wild expressions of brotherhood regularly kept their strength at its peak. Herg and the other headmen of the guild were masters of the art of rabble rousing.

Murich, on the other hand, felt they were best used for covering his escape, as they did now. With Gerk carrying him in tow, they stumbled out into the deserted street. What adrenaline Murich had left from his spurt of fear was running out. The pain in his head was setting in from Herg's blow.

Quickly and quietly, the forlorn duo lurched into an alleyway before the Black Caps rounded them up for breaking the riot curfew.

Murich could still remember the guild headman and toad-in-residence, Jorgen Rijnur, delivering the bad news. Murich and Gerk had been called in for a coach job along with several others. After the workers had stowed their gear and assembled for the work, their severance notice and pay was delivered from the top of the offload dock by a leering and amused Jorgen. The warehouse doors were opened. Outside lay the bleak future of no job and no guild for protection.

Some had stepped up to the dock to protest, but drawn daggers and spears quelled any argument. Jorgen had taken the precaution of a few good men to back him up. A few good, burly, scarred and thoroughly immoral men at that.

Their gear had been dumped into a pile outside, in the street. The small group of twenty men rushed forward and fought each other desperately for whatever they could grab. With his reliable Norse friend Gerk by his side, Murich had managed to shove, kick and knacker his way towards most of his trappings.

Murich recalled the weedy little Tilean with the stilleto. Nicko his name was, a greedy little bastard if ever there was one. He dodged around one of Murich's patent goolie smashers and struck out at Murich's exposed and vulnerable kneecap. Gerk had shoved Murich aside at the last moment then smashed the Tilean square on the jaw. The greasy little bastard was launched bodily out of the fray.

Without the guild to back them they all had a harsh and bleak future as beggars or thieves ahead. Work in other parts of Marienburg could be found easily enough. But the costs to one's self and ideals was often hard to pay. The guild only asked for loyalty, the new collection of rejects had obviously failed to pay that price. In Marienburg, failure to pay was probably the only thing regarded as a true sin. Hand in hand with that was the ultimate virtue, not getting caught.

That seemed an age ago now. There were more immediate matters to focus one's attention on. The Suiddock streets and alleys are not a good place to be at night. The Black Caps, Marienburg guardians of the law, never ventured into the alleyways of the Suiddock warrens. Most are loathe to walk the main streets. But the haze of alcohol and crushed pride distracted Murich and Gerk from the inherent dangers involved.

Four such dangers approached them now, amusedly listening to their drunken slurring.

"Ya know Gerk me old matey, I reckon we'll get new jobs in no time. Yeah, two big lads like you an me be great as advennta. mercanaan. lads wi swords like, a hackin and a slashin all over!"

"Sure is right."

"I mean, even Handjob Harry back there wuz scared of ya. Don't preten I did'na notice matey. What was up with tha anyway?", Murich punctuated his question with a wet and enthusiastic burp.

"Smacked him down a week ago."

Murich waited for his friend to cough up more details. Gerk was not particularly obliging. He noticed the silence and gave Murich a quick, hard look.

"Oh? Tha all. Yeah well, I reckon I could do it if you can. He only got me jus now cos he was dead dishonooorro. dishonouibbbes.. Unfair an all. I wasn't ready ya know."

The effort of his tirade forced Murich to stop and lean against a wall. His breath rushed in and out noisily, drowning out the sound of a mugger scuffing the cobblestones. Gerk seemed unaffected by the brisk evenings exercise. He stood and waited while his friend panted away. Beyond the edge of his vision, two shadows stirred.

"Yep, hes a coward"

"Anyhoo, I take him next time.jus you see!"

The shadows coalesced into four dark shapes. Gerk instantly sharpened up. His back stiffened and he moved his right foot back, slightly bended his knees.

"Wassup Gerkin miladdio?". Murich glanced up, noticed the muggers, fell to his knees then proceeded to vomit all over the muddy cobblestones. Nerves of steel had never been characteristic of him.

One of their assailants broke the beat of Murich's heaving stomach. "Looks like you got a problem scabbies. Looks like you been drinking all night. You know what that means? You probably out of cash. You probably can't afford the toll. You probably half blind with piss. You probably gunna die now."

Gerk's upper lip peeled back to display the result of many a fist fight. "You probably wrong pillock!"

"Ha, two drunken scabs, one without the guts to talk let alone fight. How you going to get the better of us then?".

Murich looked up, bleary eyed and shivering. The dark shapes were jumping from side to side. Now there seemed to be a whole army of them, dancing back and forth. Murich felt the cold grip of fate on his heart and whimpered, but at least it took away the taste of bile in his mouth.

"You probably gunna find out", Gerk held his ground. Murich tried desperately to drag himself away from Gerk. The beer addled his senses and the world started to spin.

"No, you are, get im boys!"

The talker moved in, two others backing him up. Gerk roared and charged. Murich rolled over at the sound. Fear stabbed at him anew and his vision cleared. Gerk had leapt at his attackers and taken them by surprise. His right foot had planted firmly in the talkers waist and folded him backwards like a snapping twig. The two behind him stepped back quickly, avoiding the flying Norseman.

Murich barely had time to comprehend what he was seeing before a hand grabbed him by the hair. The fourth attacker stood over him, a cudgel held aloft. It swept down and smacked into Murich's belly. It was still taugth from heaving and Murich was not winded, though the pain flashed through his body.

In his drunken state, Murich became oblivious to the pain as adrenaline flushed his veins. He reached up to his head and fumbled around the attackers wrist. The cudgel was raised again set against the moonlight.

Murich searched for the bone desperately with his thumb. The cudgel reached its zenith as he found it. The thumbnail bit in hard and the hand holding his wrist went limp. The attacker cried out in pain tendons shifted and cartiledge stretched.

Murich scrambled back as the cudgel cut through the air where his arm had been. His attacker also backed away, shaking his numb hand back to life.

Looking about, Murich noticed one attacker down and two more set upon at Gerk. Both making quick feints and swings at Gerk, but neither getting in too close. His head started to swim as the adrenaline ran down.

The one with the cudgel had recovered. He cried out and charged. Murich instinctively dove forward, tackling the mugger in midstride. They both fell to the pavement and Murich struck his head on the cobblestones.

The world blinked out.

A thousand dwarven smiths resident in ancient and deep dungeons cracked a thousand mighty hammers against a thousand steel swords. Murich could have sworn his head was like a thousand glass anvils right at that moment. The dream raced from him as he awoke, painfully, in the alleyway.

Around him lay bodies. Four large, one small. Murich sat up, his side felt like ice from the vomit and cobblestones. He looked about groggily, it was still night.

Murich sat there for a time, leaning against a wall. His vision slowly swam back into focus and the dwarves in his head diminished in number.

Murich took stock of the situation. Fear rose. Someone would surely come looking for the muggers and finsh him off. He had to run, had to get away.

But what of Gerk? A small, deep voice in Murich's mind preyed upon his conscience. But I cannot, he is too heavy and I too sick. I'll never escape.

He is your friend, he fought for you, probably even died for you. But if I am caught I will surely die and his sacrifice will be for nothing.

Run away then, like in Bogenhafen boy, run away like the mangy rabbit you are. Murich stood slowly, his head roaring in protest. He turned to pass the remnants of the fray, when he saw it.

A small pouch.

No bigger than a fist.

From it, a small trail of yellow glinted in the moonlight. It beckoned with gilded promises of food and comfort. Murich had none, he had spent all his coin in the Beer Hall.

He won't need it. I'll pay him back if I see him next. If I don't, then surely he didn't need it.

But the voice had not questioned, refused to try again. Murich's desperation bent him over and forced his hand out and around the pouch. Murich could smell and hear Gerks ragged breath this close. He was still alive, but surely, surely not for long?

Murich pulled sharply and the drawstrings gave way from the belt. Moving quickly now, he gathered the few remaining coins from the street and hurried off down the alleyway. A single tear escaped his eye, drying to freedom in the cold night air.

His footsteps clopped loudly, but he cared not. He had to be quick or he would get caught. As he neared the main street, a dark shape detached from the wall before him.

Startled, Murich cried out. He slipped and crashed to the ground.

He had tried to run but it was not enough. A mugger, a black cap or much worse had caught him. He cursed himself a dungherd for wasting time worrying over the fallen Gerk as the dark shape moved closer.

Moonlight played over the thing. All Murich could see inside the dark silhouette was those eyes. Those large, round bloodshot eyes boring into his skull like a crazed daemon. Murich whimpered.

"Good eve sir, I see you are a man who likes the coin?", it blinked almost imperceptibly.

"Y..y..yes sir. Please don't hurt me.", Murich sputtered back.

"Good answer! I have work for such a man. I have a business proposition for you, Herr?"

"M..Murich. Murich Pentinbaum".

"Ah, an Imperial are you. Excellent. Come, let me escort you to a more comfortable location to discuss. some business."

The Stranger held out his hand, and Murich took it.

The stranger led a winding path through the Suddock streets. Murich couldn't decide where they were going from one step to the next. Every time he thought he knew, a quick turn and they were heading in the opposite direction. Murich was puffing a lot as well as he kept up the pace. The stranger moved very quickly, though Murich was yet to hear him breath.

Murich's head was beginning to throb again. The night had wound on and the sun was close to rising, the morningstars almost gone. The sun beyond the horizon turned the black night into myriad shades of blue. Murich knew he needed rest or he would surely drop from exhaustion.

"Herr? How far have we to go?"

"The stranger stopped, Murich almost blundered into him. The stranger turned, reached up, and threw back his hood.

The strangers bloodshot eyes appeared so huge because of the large, thick glasses perched on his nose. The lenses were like the bottoms of vodka bottles. The fine silver frame was revealed in the blue morning light. The strangers eyes were baggy, obviously this man had been up as long as Murich. His face was impassive, pale and long. Not a single mark or blemish was evident.

Overall, a much less frightening man than Murich expected. He was slightly disappointed.

"I apologise for the inconvenience of the route I have taken, but the curfew respects no man. I assure you, we are almost there."

"There? Where is there?"

The stranger chuckled in amusement. "Just an inn, a waystop. Nothing more and nothing less. Come now my good fellow, day draws near."

The hood flipped back into place, the stranger moved off twice as fast as before. The brief respite had done Murich's head some good, but it didn't last. Murich was half jogging just to keep up with the stranger's vast stride.

Before long, they were standing outside The Tar Candle. Murich recognised the tavern instantly. A popular place for builders labourers, located in the bowels of Winkelmart. His first job in Marienburg had been with a ship builder a little way to the east. The sign of the black candle above the door was a welcome sight at the end of a hard day's work.

It troubled Murich to think they had arrived in Winkelmart without his noticing, let alone the fact that he could smell the Doodkanal from here. Either that, or the dung in the street was off to an early start. For a brief moment, Murich felt light headed as he recovered his bearings. He looked about at the shopfronts There were lease signs visible all along the street. The old doll shop, closed. The rope maker, closed as well.. He couldn't recall having crossed a bridge on the way here from Suiddock at all.

Murich turned back to see the stranger's head uncovered once more. He was staring straight at him with those distorting lenses, looking strangely malignant again. Murich shuddered.

"When you are quite done purveying the real estate Herr Pentinbaum, I would like to have our little discussion. Yes?"

"Oh, oh yes. Whatever. Sorry, just haven't been here for a while. Things have changed."

The stranger looked about, his eyes focused on some object in the distance. "Yes, changed for the worse I'm afraid. But with your help we may just change all that."

Murich pondered the meaning of his words as the door to the Tar Candle swung open and they both stepped in.

The Tar Candle was as bare as ever. Straw on the floor, simple wooden furniture and the ever present smell of stale ale and lavender. The proprietors wife had her own ideas on how to run a bar. Though she couldn't easily dominate her husband, the lavender bags had been one of her better ideas.

Times must be tough. A solitary artisan sat in the corner. The cut of his cloth indicated his station, the moth eaten velvet of his sleeves indicated tough times. A collection of labourers sat in another corner, quietly talking and drinking themselves into stupor. There was no raucous behaviour, no energy in their conversation. Murich suspected it was more than early morning tht dampened their spirits.

"Over here Herr Pentinbaum, I would prefer that table in the corner."

"Murich thanks."

"Beg Pardon?"

"Murich, just call me Murich please."

The stranger stared with those bulging lenses. "Two things Herr Pentinbaum. One, be proud of your heritage, as you should be. Two, I do not wish to be so familiar with you."

Murich was slightly befuddled by the strangers statements. If it wasn't for the headache he would have thought up a come back, maybe even a witty one. "Ahh, yes. Whatever. Lets sit, I could use an ale."

The stranger chose a chair near the wall. He turned it before sitting down, the oaken back board covering his gullet. Murich noticed this, he'd known a man who always did the same. A kislevian soldier, more paranoid than a cat in a dog pit. As long as you didn't say the words 'North' or 'Waste' around him he was just bearable.

A serving girl approached as Murich sat. "Good Morn gents. What will you have?"

The stranger raised an eyebrow at Murich. The thought of food raised a vote from his gut.

"What do you have?"

"Pork pies sir. I recommend the pork pies. We still manage to get them in from Guilderveld. We also have some Imperial cheese with Tilean breads, always a favourite. If you need warming up we have toasted grain sir. Very cheap as well."

Murich pondered the choices. Something light and above all cheap.

"The grain, and two ales."

"One ale thank you, bring me some water." The stranger drew odd looks from Murich and the girl.

"As you ask sir. Ten and five sir." She held out a callused hand to Murich."

"Ten and five! That sounds very rich Frau. I'll pay when you serve it, if it isn't swill."

"Begging you pardon sir, we can't get it unless you pay. We have to order from a bakery in the next street who won't prepare it until you pay."

"This is Marienburg Frau. Only idiots pay in advance."

"Then leave sir."

Her tone was frank and quite curt. Clearly this must be one of the few places hereabouts with reliable business, she certainly didn't seem to need his. The food and ale must be worth it then.

"Oh, alright. But don't expect any extras from me." Murich rummaged in his jerkin and pulled out the money pouch. Gerk's money pouch. He pulled out a guilder and passed it to the girl. She walked off without another word.

The stranger shifted forward in his chair, hugging the back board. Murich noticed for the first time how stiff and worn his hair was. A sort of washed out blonde colour. Murich was certain the stranger was one of the oddest looking people he had met.

"Now Herr Pentinbaum, let us get down to business. My name is Amon Ebojager, you may refer to me as Herr Ebojager thank you. I represent a respectable businessman in need of a few good, hard working men. What I propose is some solid, well paid work over the next two weeks. Nothing special, just moving crates and loading cargo."

Murich twigged onto what the stranger was getting at. Was it a test? Surely it wasn't coincidence that led Ebojager to the alley. Murich had to admit, it was very convenient that Ebojager was waiting there when he woke up.

It struck Murich like a bolt of lightning. Ebojager knew the muggers alright. This was a test, the guild was testing him. Murich was pleased that he could see through their tricks so easily.

"Look Herr Ebojager. I don't think I like the sounds of what you are suggesting. I may be hard on my luck, but I'm no scab."

The stranger was put off by the accusation. "Herr Pentinbaum, I don't think you are getting the idea, not a jot at all. I can assure you, this work has been cleared. By Lea Jan Cobbius himself in fact."

Murich caught the lie easily. "You must really take me for a Bretwit. I know, just as every dockworker knows, the esteemed Master Cobbius doesn't deal directly with work markers."

"Yes, well. Maybe I have been misinformed. Nevertheless, I have approval but the guild understands my need for discreet execution of the task at hand."

Murich wasn't so sure now. Ebojager certainly didn't talk like a guild man. He had the rich speak, he used large words all the time. Murich was having difficulty keeping up with the conversation.

"I see I see. So the guild knows. Fair enough. Do you have a marker to show me?"

"Yes I do". A small scroll of paper emerged from under Ebojager's fine black cloak. As he took the scrap, Murich noticed how thin the hand was. A skin tight sleeve and glove, also black, covered any trace of flesh. If Amon had had a beard Murich would have walked out right then and there. He had no desire to deal with men who hid themselves away. Too risky and you couldn't trust such people.

Murich examined the marker. It had the bronzed seal. The emblem was properly detailed, a wharf, royal fourmast and a hook. He recognised the signatures of Han Dreke and Solomon Kes Horten, one a foreman the other a headman. The few words present on the paper escaped him. A farmers son in the Empire does not have time for letters. Nor would they be wasted on him. Holding the paper up to the sun now streaming through the window, he could see the water mark. That's why they called them markers, because of the water mark. A clever trick that wasn't readily shared outside the guild.

"It looks good enough. At least I don't have to expect a pair of broken legs from this." He handed back the marker, which vanished with barely a sound under the cloak.

"Now then, coin. What are you paying for this. Also, what are your benefits, what follows on work is there and do I get out of Suiddock?" Murich had been here many times before. Getting out of Suiddock meant working on Wharves in other Wards. The guild liked this, even encouraged it. It lessened the load on Suiddock and any money flowing into Suiddock from other wards was desirable.

"Come come now Herr Pentinbaum, if I pursued a marker I wouldn't be paying benefits now would I? Ten shillings a day flat, which more than makes up for the lack of benefits or further work."

Murich's eyebrows leapt. That sort of price was only heard of in Elfsgemeente, if one was lucky enough. His reply was cut off by the arrival of breakfast. The wholesome scent of warm and popped grain washed over the table. His stomach gave a battle cry as Murich scooped up a spoon and dug in.

The serving girl placed a few coins on the table, two ale mugs were placed on the table as well. Murich paused to drink greedily before turning back to the meal.

He did not speak again until he was finished. He could sense Ebojager's impatience but did not care. He could tell the odd fellow was hiding something, but needed an unscrupulous man for the job. Murich felt his mood drop at that thought.

He wiped at the side of his mouth with his sleeve, which did little to clean his features. "Well, ten shills would definitely do it Herr Ebojager. I'd hate to think what you paid for the marker."

"Quite. So, Can I rely upon your services Herr Pentinbaum?"

"I think I can manage it."

"That's excellent. I knew you'd agree. I suggest you get plenty of rest today and meet me back here at dusk. I can assure you the work will be worth the money I am paying. I have guild backing on that. It should take two weeks to finish this job."

Murich nodded. "Yes Herr Ebojager. Sure is right I'll be with you the whole time."

"I should think so." Ebojager stood. "I shall bid you a Good Morning Herr Pentinbaum."

"Yes, see you tonight Amon."

As the hood came up, Ebojager frowned. "Herr Pentinbaum, whilst I am your employer only refer to me as Herr Ebojager. As I indicated earlier, I wish to keep our relationship a formal one. Farewell."

Amon moved off silently. Murich looked to the table and saw only 4 shillings sitting there. As the front door closed at Ebojager's retreat, Murich called the serving girl over.

She took her time, collecting ale mugs and fiddling with lavender bags on the way. Murich could tell she was deliberately trying to insult him. Judging by the state of business in the street, it was a habit she should learn to break.

She finally arrived. "Yes Herr, may I get you something more?"

Murich's spirit was buoyed by his good fortune at meeting Amon, or should he say Herr Ebojager. He was not about to take any lip from some slip of a girl.

"Yes, seeing as how you have returned my money one shill short, you can put it and the insult towards a room for the night. I don't expect to be paying any more."

"I had to take an extra shill for the water and for my trouble."

"No, I ordered that water with the lot from the start, and the price was ten and five. Don't try to fleece me you little skag."

A heavy hand fell on Murich's shoulder. A gruff voice sounded from behind it.

"Hi Dungherd. Don't talk to my girl like that."

Murich stiffened. He felt the sensation of fear spread out from his heart, his hands started to shake. A panicked look crossed the girl's face and she turned, moving for the bar. Murich wished he had the self control to impress her now. Even if he never saw her again, he was sure to see himself in the mirror.

The hand never left his shoulder as he stood. He hoped, even prayed, that he wasn't about to relive his shame.