

The sleek barrel of Youngblood's lasgun eased without a sound between the cold metallic squares of an iron grate, his middle finger caressing the trigger almost to the point of compression. His head swayed automatically to the right and his eyes narrowed in the practiced targeting squint that had brought death to so many. Three figures moved towards his position, their dark forms illuminated by throbbing colour as the infra-red sight focused. Youngblood smiled. The prey, for once, was prompt.

The ruined alley was illuminated for a millisecond as a laser blast coursed through the acrid air with a super-charged hiss. The figure to the left of the trio flailed backwards wildly, a single wound to his scalp spluttering liquefied tissue as he fell. Already Youngblood's aim had ghosted towards the figure on the right. The second shot scorched the man's arm as he reached over his shoulder for his weapon. Simmering flesh and the white of his elbow gaped from a cavernous wound as he sagged to his knees. A third blast sang and he slumped to the ground, even before the horror of his injury had registered.

"Lose the weapon." Youngblood's deep voice rang out with strangely uncomfortable authority. The tall central figure gently unwrapped the long coat that shrouded his body and slipped his hand down towards the holster at his waist.

"Slowly." Youngblood cautioned with nervous urgency. The man's long-barrelled laspistol slid from its holster, its finely shaped silver grip clattering against the ground as he discarded it.

"Nice shooting," he mused absently as his captor approached. "You do know that it's illegal to kill a Guilder, I assume?"

"You're no Guilder," Youngblood countered, his weapon carefully trained as he strode forwards. "Few Guilders would surround themselves with such inadequate guards, and no Guilder would calmly stand as you have done, in the face of certain death. I know exactly who you are, my friend, and you, and the reward for your capture, are mine."

Fleeting shadows danced about the pale features of the figure, but as Youngblood came to a halt only several feet away he could easily define the sophisticated cheekbones and well conditioned long hair that marked his prisoner out as a wealthy aristocrat, originally from the Spire.

There was a momentary pause as Youngblood searched his pocket. The barrel of his gun wavered. With an almost imperceptible click of his heel the man triggered a mechanism in his right boot and a six-inch blade rasped from his sole to point murderously out from his toe. Punching his leg forward with supreme speed and

fluidity the figure rocked his foe's torso with a vicious kick. The expertly honed steel surged through flesh, tearing and gouging at the base of Youngblood's stomach with savage ease. Flooding lifeblood gushed over the foot of the cold killer as he plunged deeper.

"No-one should know of the Spirit-Seeker," he taunted conspiratorially as he twisted his boot sadistically. Youngblood fought to overcome the immense agony that exploded in his stomach and swung his weapon to loose a wild shot. The Spirit-Seeker grasped the barrel of the lasgun and wrenched it from the dying man's grip. His boot was still deeply imbedded in the guts of his victim as he brought the weapon slowly to bear and slid its muzzle into Youngblood's uncontrollably gaping mouth.

"And please don't ever point this vulgar thing at me again," the assassin cruelly mocked as a muffled blast exploded through the back of his victim's throat in a crimson shower.

As the corpses smouldered the Seeker wiped his hands like a polite dinner guest, collected his prized pistol and sank gently into the shadows. The Underhive beckoned - his own dark domain where the skills of the assassin would always be in demand.

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