

The Mute, god of: Silence

Travelling Partner, god of: journeys, danger
and misfortune, knives

Ugly Messenger, god of: pennysheets,
handicrafts, dogs

Valiant Glutton, god of: cooking, trade, cattle

Vicious Beginner, god of: milk and nursing,
midnight, ignorance

Weary Governess, god of: schooling, cats

Wide-eyed Inker, god of: tattoos, colour,
sunsets

Withering Fishwife, god of: dusk, chastity,
flooding

Yawning Hawker, god of: dawn, comfort,
grain

Zealous Stitcher, god of: healing and mending

One

Detective Cora Gorderheim had heard many stories that started with death. Now, here was another, set in a barn in East Perlance. Which of the Audience would hear this story's end? The Mute? The Keeper? Or the Widow?

The sour air of the barn hit Cora as soon as she stepped inside. It caught the back of her throat. She swallowed and tasted sinta, but overripe: the point when the fruit had gone bad but there was still no sign on the skin. When it tricked the eater. She spat into the straw at her feet and went over to the bodies.

Four of them.

Only one was a stranger: an older woman in a driver's long coat. She would've held the reins of the prisoner transport that drove this sad party here. Cora had passed the empty coach on her way into the barn.

Two of the dead were constables in uniform – veteran officers Cora recognised.

And the last body, the one Cora knew well. Or had thought she did.

The Casker, Finnuc Dawson.

He was lying a little way from the other three, closer to the door, face down in the straw with his legs stretched out behind him. Perhaps the Casker had realised what was happening and had tried to go for help. Or perhaps he was just trying to escape; that was more like him. Not that he would have got far anyway, what with the shackles at his ankles. It was a mercy she couldn't see his face. Given the state of the others, it wouldn't be pretty.

He'd been strong and handsome, and when he told a story there was a boyishness to his eyes. Now he was ruined. At the thought of it, Cora shuddered. But she forced herself to step around Finnuc's body, glad to have him behind her, out of sight for the moment. She squatted next to the dead driver.

The woman was on her side in the straw. Cora took a handkerchief from her coat and gently pushed the woman's hair from her face. Her lips were blistered, her cheeks dark purple and her eyes all but out of their sockets, the whites thick with red lines. Both these things told a story of forceful purging. And here was evidence of it, all down the woman's coat and in the straw around her face: green liquid shot through with clots of blood. The poor woman looked to have brought up half her lungs along with whatever had poisoned her.

'Widow welcome you, friend,' Cora said, invoking a member of the Audience. But

opening her own mouth was a mistake, given how the sour smell was much worse this near the corpse. She gagged, briefly imagined her own eyes being forced from her skull with the effort of retching, and stepped quickly away.

Something rolled against her foot. She used the handkerchief to free whatever it was from the straw. A bowl. A few spoons' worth of orange liquid sloshed inside. A broth or soup most likely.

She checked the bodies of the constables and found a bowl beside each of them too, the same orange stains inside. The pair were lying together, the woman's arm hanging over the chest of her male companion like a tale for the Devotee. But Cora thought it less romantic than that. The story here was that he'd shown signs first and she'd sought to help, then been taken ill herself and purged her insides all over him before they both choked to death, or their hearts gave out with the effort of breathing.